

Adaptations to Promotion and/or Tenure Processes Due to COVID-19

The impacts of COVID-19 have varied across colleges, departments, and careers, creating opportunities for some and challenges for others. The purpose of this document is to present strategies for mitigating the possible negative effects of COVID-19 on faculty advancement, due to factors such as an increase in the amount of time devoted to instruction, unexpected care obligations, delays in research program development, scholarly, creative, or extension opportunities, changes in the areas of research emphasis by federal agencies and other research sponsors, damage to reputation building due to reduced professional opportunities (e.g., conferences, invitations to give a colloquium, domestic and international travel bans), among others. These circumstances are particularly stressful for faculty working toward promotion and/or tenure, even more so for faculty with dependent care obligations, faculty with disabilities, and faculty who are members of groups that have historically faced greater obstacles to advancement due to racism, sexism, and other discriminatory factors. While tenure clock extensions offer relief from some of these circumstances and will continue to be made available (see below), their application over a period of years may impede the professional and financial advancement of a number of our colleagues, particularly faculty dealing with multiple historical and structural impediments. If we are to maintain progress toward our strategic goals of advancing our regional, national, and global impact while also increasing our percentage of female and underrepresented minority faculty, it is critical that we work with faculty to maintain the arc of their careers even as we navigate the new academic environment resulting from COVID-19.

Though this document focuses on the P & T process for tenure-track faculty, both tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty have had to adapt their teaching to the constraints imposed by COVID-19, and any faculty member engaged in research may have experienced negative impacts on their academic work and outreach. Regardless of the stage of their career or employment classification, any faculty member may choose to include a faculty COVID-19 statement (see #1 below) in their FAR, and unit administrators and committees that evaluate FARs or participate in making promotion and/or tenure recommendations are expected to take these statements into account. Any faculty member may also apply for work assignment adjustments (see #5 below) and departments are encouraged to look for ways to provide relief to all faculty. However, given the potential career and economic impact of delays to the tenure process, the “up or out” constraint inherent to the tenure system, the central importance of research to the mission of Virginia Tech, and the limited financial resources available to provide relief to faculty, Faculty Senate and the Provost’s Office believe that departments should prioritize work assignment adjustments for tenure-track faculty. In doing so, the demands placed on non-tenure-track faculty cannot be increased beyond that considered reasonable for their appointments.

The following adaptations will be applied:

- 1) **Faculty COVID-19 statements.** To help internal and external evaluators understand the issues that candidates for promotion and/or tenure were dealing with during COVID-19 impacted years, candidates may choose to write a faculty COVID-19 statement that highlights changes in circumstances attributable to COVID-19 that had a demonstrably

negative impact on their ability to conduct research, scholarly, creative, or outreach activities and/or publish their results. Lab closures, changes in the focus of granting agencies, the cancellation of book contracts due to the closure of university or other presses, the shuttering of performance spaces – these and other kinds of professional issues should be included. This statement will be sent to external evaluators and added to the candidate’s dossier.

As noted above, any faculty member may elect to include a COVID-19 statement as part of their annual FAR. For tenure-track faculty who write a COVID-19 statement, that statement will be included in their progress reviews.

- 2) **Evaluation of research, scholarly, creative, or outreach activity during COVID-19.** The standard for “Research and Creative Activities” as expressed in the Virginia Tech Guidelines for Promotion and Tenure Dossiers for 2020-2021 is as follows:

“While both the quality and quantity of a candidate’s achievements should be examined, quality should be the primary consideration. Quality should be defined largely in terms of the work’s importance in the progress or redefinition of a field or discipline, the establishment of relationships among disciplines, the improvement of practitioner performance, or in terms of the creativity of the thought and methods behind it. Original achievements in conceptual frameworks, conclusions, and methods should be regarded more highly than work making minor variations in or repeating familiar themes in the literature or the candidate’s previous work. Determination of excellence is difficult and requires informed professional judgment.”

In the application of this standard, evaluators are asked to take COVID-19 statements into account.

- 3) **Evaluation of instruction.** The Provost’s Office has issued guidance that allows all faculty to use their discretion in reporting SPOT evaluation scores in annual reports or promotion dossiers for all courses taught in calendar year 2020 (spring, summer, and fall).
- 4) **Work assignment adjustments.** Faculty working toward promotion and/or tenure who have been severely impacted by COVID-19 may apply for work assignment adjustments, including teaching load reductions, instructional adaptations such as team teaching, GA assistance, research leave or stipends, and service reductions or service sabbaticals. Faculty should expect that adjustments will be difficult to grant due to their financial impact and the need to consider the workload of all faculty. As noted above, work assignment accommodations should be prioritized for tenure-track faculty.

Since university service (service related to the governance and operation of departments, colleges, and the university) is generally the most adjustable component of faculty assignments, departments are asked to allow untenured and associate professors dealing with particularly acute physical and mental health issues, care obligations, and/or research impediments to set aside some or all university service obligations. To facilitate this option, departments should review their committee structure and membership, and where possible, eliminate, postpone, or increase the time allotted for tasks; combine committees or reallocate the work of committees; and/or reduce the size of committees. The same approach to service should be taken by the Provost's Office and colleges.

Faculty can apply for work assignment adjustments by providing a statement to their unit administrator that details the professional and personal matters related to COVID-19 that have negatively impacted their ability to carry out their work. Work assignment adjustments must be approved by the dean. If an adjustment is granted, this will be conveyed to all faculty and administrators involved in P & T decisions, progress reviews, and annual FAR evaluations, though not the reason(s) why. Only unit administrators, deans, and the vice provost for faculty affairs are allowed to read these personal statements.

- 5) **Tenure clock extension policy.** Upon application, pre-tenure faculty were automatically granted COVID-related tenure clock extensions in 2019-20 and 2020-21. Additional extensions may be requested via the standard tenure clock extension process, including approval by the faculty member's department head, chair or school director, their college dean, and the Provost's Office. Although the Provost's Office appreciate the ongoing impacts from the pandemic, requests for further COVID-related extensions will require details of the specific impacts to the faculty member's progress as a result of the pandemic. COVID-19 extensions are in addition to extensions granted for other reasons.

Regardless of when a faculty member granted a COVID-19 extension or extensions would like to apply for tenure—prior to their original mandatory year, in their original mandatory year, or in an extension year—they must follow their department's usual process of consultation with the unit administrator and/or unit P & T committee prior to application. If a faculty member applies for tenure in or prior to their original mandatory year and is turned down, they should use all of their extensions before applying a second time.

- 6) **Letters from external evaluators.** Given the use of extensions and the possibility that some faculty affected by COVID-19 may apply for tenure more than once, at the unit administrator's discretion, positive letters from external evaluators can be updated and reused.
- 7) **Inclusion of cancelled/postponed and virtual presentations.** Presentations scheduled prior to but cancelled due to COVID-19 can be included on CVs, annual faculty activity reports, and promotion dossiers. Virtual presentations, readings, and performances should be treated as the equivalent of in-person events. Style guides such as APA have added formatting for including this information.