

Suggestions for Clarifying the Promotion and Tenure Process to Improve Faculty Success

June 2025

Promotion and tenure play critical roles in the progression of a faculty career, yet approximately one-third of faculty report lack of clarity around promotion criteria and believe that the criteria are inconsistently applied across all faculty.¹

To better understand this concern, we analyzed responses to an AAMC StandPoint™ Faculty Engagement Survey question that asked faculty members how their medical schools could improve the clarity of promotion and tenure processes and requirements. By better understanding the common challenges faculty face in this area, medical schools can identify opportunities for improvement that enhance transparency, support, and fairness in the promotion and tenure processes.

Methods

The StandPoint Faculty Engagement Survey is a research-validated instrument developed by experts to assess the drivers of faculty engagement and retention in academic health education. The survey includes a series of five-point Likert scale questions, as well as open-ended questions. This data snapshot examines data from the open-ended question, “Please provide feedback on how the medical school can improve the clarity of the promotion and tenure process and requirements.”

Between 2021 and 2024, 23,236 full- and part-time faculty members from 21 medical schools were invited to participate in the survey; of those invited, 63% (n = 14,511) individuals responded to the survey, and 16% (n = 2,377) responded to the open-ended question included in these analyses. Responses were coded based on the emergent themes identified and agreed upon by both snapshot authors. All responses were coded by a primary coder, and 10% of the responses were coded by

a secondary coder to ensure interrater reliability. Except for the “Other” category, themes were not mutually exclusive, and responses could be coded as multiple themes.

Differences among the frequencies of the themes were also examined based on the respondents' characteristics, including gender, academic rank, length of appointment, department type (i.e., basic science or clinical), tenure track appointment (i.e., tenured or on tenure track versus not on tenure track), and whether the respondent had a formal mentor. Chi-square tests were used to assess these differences, with significance defined as equal to or less than 0.05.



Key Findings

Through qualitative analysis of the data, 10 key themes emerged, reflecting the most common suggestions given for how medical schools can improve the clarity of their promotion and tenure processes. Although the survey question asked for areas for improvement, some respondents answered only positively, complimenting their current system; these responses were coded in a separate category, labeled “positive feedback.” Excluding the positive feedback and “Not Applicable” responses (e.g., “I am not eligible for tenure”), the respondents who provided suggestions in their answers to this question reported having significantly less clarity about promotion criteria across other quantitative survey items, compared to the respondents who did not provide suggestions ($p < 0.001$ across all items). Additionally, those with suggestions reported a lower percentage agreement that their schools were consistent in applying promotion and tenure criteria (39% vs. 65%, $p < 0.001$). Table 1 displays the 10 themes that the authors identified based on the respondents' suggestions; descriptions of the themes follow Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of Responses by Identified Theme

Theme	Number of Responses by Theme	Percentage of Responses by Theme
Well-Defined, Objective Criteria and Guidelines	690	29%
Expanding Criteria and Faculty Tracks	358	15%
Communication and Transparency	329	14%
Consistent Application of Process and Standards	283	12%
Department-Level Issues	256	11%
Mentoring and Support	254	11%
Misalignment of Position Expectations and Criteria	152	6%
Workshops and Trainings	136	6%
Administrative Burden	111	5%
Discrimination and Bias	67	3%
Positive Feedback	276	12%
Not Applicable (exclusive category)	150	6%
Other (exclusive category)	158	7%

Suggestions for Clarifying the Promotion and Tenure Process to Improve Faculty Success

Well-Defined, Objective Criteria and Guidelines: Twenty-nine percent of respondents (n = 690) emphasized a need for more transparent and well-defined criteria and guidelines for the promotion and tenure processes, including the requirements for promotion and the amount of evidence or accomplishments in a particular mission area that sufficiently meet the criteria. While many of the responses stated that the requirements were vague or ambiguous, others provided specific suggestions, such as recommending the use and dissemination of defined benchmarks, quantitative metrics, or other objective criteria to evaluate individual progress toward promotion and tenure.

Expanding Criteria and Faculty Tracks: Fifteen percent of respondents (n = 358) suggested expanding the criteria for promotion and tenure or creating additional faculty tracks to recognize the diverse ways in which faculty contribute to the missions of their medical schools. Many of these responses argued that some contributions are overvalued (often research and publications), while others are undervalued, such as teaching, curriculum development, clinical work, and leadership responsibilities.

Communication and Transparency: Fourteen percent of respondents (n = 329) advocated for improved communication and transparency regarding the promotion and tenure process. Suggestions included providing more information via emails and newsletters, updating websites to include more comprehensive information, ensuring there are handbooks or resources outlining the process, and having a responsive Faculty Affairs contact to answer questions. In addition, some comments mentioned key time periods when it is critical for faculty to receive this information, such as during onboarding, so they can establish career goals and timelines.

Consistent Application of Process and Standards: Twelve percent of respondents (n = 283) cited a need for the promotion and tenure processes and standards to be applied consistently and to adhere to the processes and standards of their schools. This included perceptions of “unwritten rules,” inconsistent application of standards and criteria, different standards and criteria across departments, faculty being promoted without meeting the stated criteria, and criteria being perceived as a moving target overtime.

Department-Level Issues: Eleven percent of respondents (n = 256) mentioned department-level issues. These responses frequently aligned with the general themes (e.g., communication, consistent application, mentoring, etc.), but respondents indicated the issues were within their department so should be addressed at that level. These responses were coded both as a department-level issue and as the specific issue that was mentioned.

Mentoring and Support: Eleven percent of respondents (n = 254) indicated a need for additional mentoring and support. These responses included suggestions to provide general mentoring and support and mentoring and support specific to the promotion and tenure process. In addition to establishing formal mentoring programs, others suggested informally encouraging senior faculty to connect with junior faculty, establishing a support person or committee in each department, providing opportunities for one-on-one meetings to discuss progress, and incorporating feedback on progress toward promotion in annual evaluations.

Misalignment of Position Expectations and Criteria: Six percent of respondents (n = 152) cited a lack of alignment between their weekly responsibilities and the promotion and tenure criteria, noting that this misalignment creates barriers for faculty, making it difficult to advance. These responses were distinct from the “Expanding Criteria and Faculty Tracks” theme, in that the respondents were not critical of the criteria but expressed that the criteria were difficult to meet due to the way they are expected to spend their time. Often these respondents were clinical faculty for whom the clinical and educational demands of their positions made it difficult to meet the research and scholarship requirements for tenure.

Workshops and Trainings: Six percent of respondents (n = 136) indicated that additional workshops and trainings would help improve the promotion and tenure process. Respondents suggested that promotion- and tenure-related training be included in new faculty orientation and that the frequency of workshops be increased, including topic-specific workshops (e.g., preparing a CV, writing a personal statement). They also recommended making workshops and trainings more accessible by offering them virtually or at different times of the day or recording them to make them available asynchronously.

Administrative Burden: Five percent of respondents (n = 111) noted a need to reduce the administrative tasks and bureaucratic hurdles associated with the promotion and tenure process. These responses ranged from general

Suggestions for Clarifying the Promotion and Tenure Process to Improve Faculty Success

comments regarding the amount of time it takes to complete the promotion and tenure packet, to more specific suggestions for providing administrative support, changing software platforms, and reducing formatting requirements and redundancies within portfolios.

Discrimination and Bias: Three percent of respondents (n = 67) commented on perceived discrimination and bias in the promotion and tenure process. This theme included comments stating that criteria and policies are too rigid and biased against faculty with children or with other caregiving responsibilities, and the application of promotion and tenure policies is biased such that different groups were held to different standards. Respondents also noted that there are inequitable opportunities to participate in activities that contribute to the promotion and tenure criteria, such that certain groups are asked to take on more service and administrative roles not accounted for in the process.

Positive Feedback: Although the survey asked for feedback on how to improve the promotion and tenure process, 12% (n = 276) of responses included a positive statement supporting the current process. These statements ranged from general responses, such as, “None, they are doing a great job at this,” to complimentary statements regarding a specific office, department, administrator, program, or initiative.

Other and Not Applicable: Six percent of responses were coded as not applicable, due to the respondent saying the question does not apply to them (e.g., they had earned tenure several years ago). An additional 7% of responses were coded as “Other” because they did not fit into one of the identified themes

Comparisons Across Faculty Groups

There were statistically significant differences across faculty groups for several of the themes (Table 2); for example, women were more likely than men to cite the need for expanding criteria and faculty tracks. Assistant professors were also less likely than associate and full professors to share feedback about the consistency in the application of the process across the institution.

Table 2. Statistically Significant Differences in Frequency of Themes by Group

Theme	Women (vs Men)	Assistant Professors (vs. Associate or Full Professors)	Employed Five Years or Less (vs. 6 or More Years)	Basic Science (vs. Clinical)	Tenure Track or Tenured (vs. Not Tenured)	Formal Mentor (vs. No Formal Mentor)
Well-Defined, Objective Criteria and Guidelines			+	+		
Expanding Criteria and Faculty Tracks	+		—			
Communication and Transparency			+			
Consistent Application of Process and Standards	—	—			+	—

Note: The plus sign indicates that the group was statistically significantly ($p < 0.05$) more likely than the comparison group to suggest improvements related to the theme; the minus sign indicates that they were significantly less likely. Blank cells indicate that there was no significant difference.

Suggestions for Clarifying the Promotion and Tenure Process to Improve Faculty Success

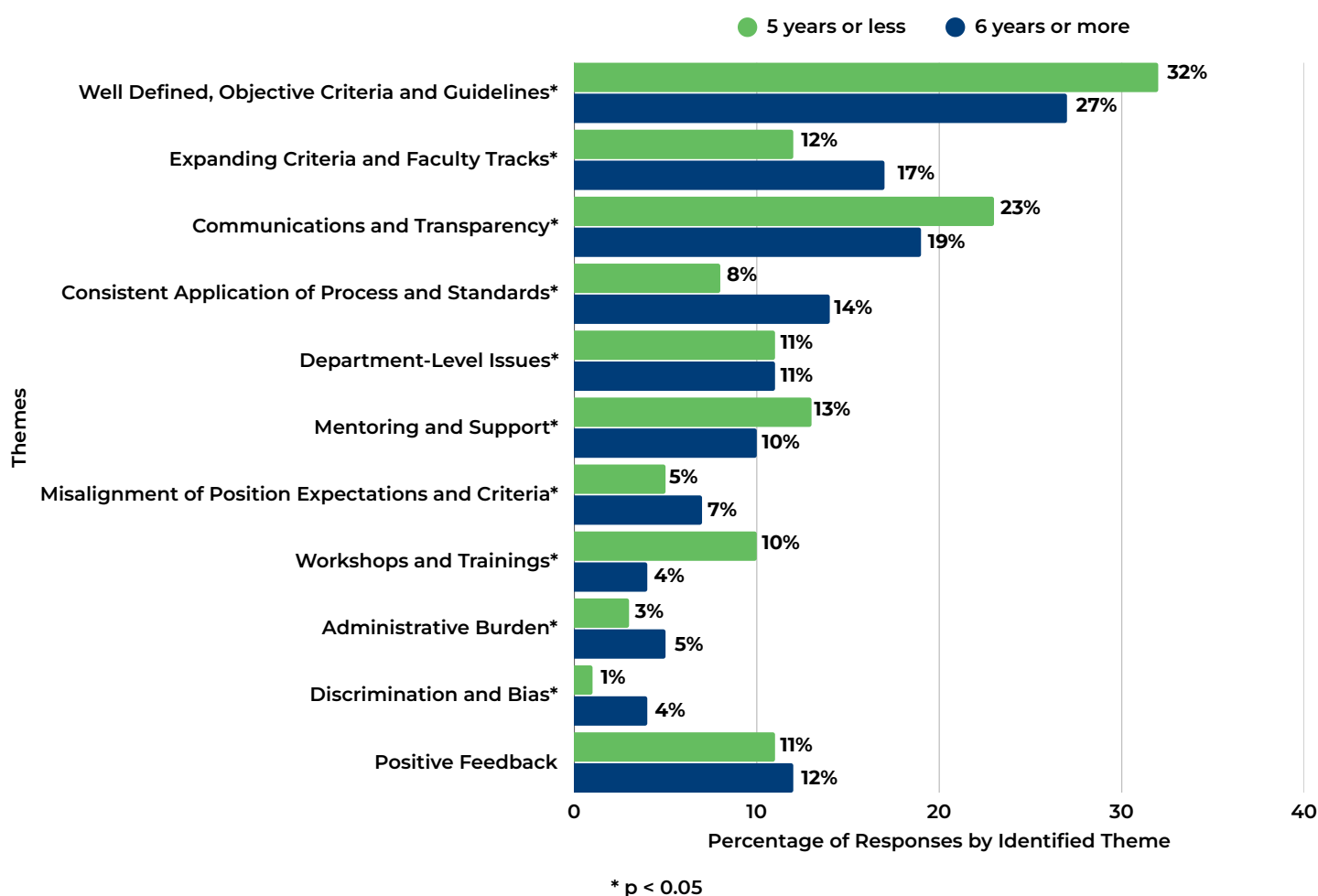
Theme	Women (vs Men)	Assistant Professors (vs. Associate or Full Professors)	Employed Five Years or Less (vs. 6 or More Years)	Basic Science (vs. Clinical)	Tenure Track or Tenured (vs. Not Tenured)	Formal Mentor (vs. No Formal Mentor)
Department-Level Issues					+	
Mentoring and Support			+		-	-
Misalignment of Position Expectations and Criteria		+	-	-		
Workshops and Trainings	+	+	+			
Administrative Burden			-			+
Discrimination and Bias	+		-		-	
Positive Feedback		-				+

Note: The plus sign indicates that the group was statistically significantly ($p < 0.05$) more likely than the comparison group to suggest improvements related to the theme; the minus sign indicates that they were significantly less likely. Blank cells indicate that there was no significant difference.

Most notably, there were many significant differences in the frequencies at which faculty mentioned themes, based on how long they had been at their institution (Figure 1). Newer faculty (those employed five years or less at their current institutions) more often offered suggestions related to promotion and tenure process information and learning (e.g., improving or increasing clarity, communication, mentoring, and workshops). In contrast, faculty who had been employed more than five years at their current institutions more often mentioned improvements related to the process and structure of promotion and tenure.

Suggestions for Clarifying the Promotion and Tenure Process to Improve Faculty Success

Figure 1. Frequency of themes by respondents' length of medical school appointment.



Conclusion

Data from the StandPoint Faculty Engagement Survey show that there are opportunities for improvement in the promotion and tenure process, specifically in the areas of improving clarity; expanding criteria; increasing communication; ensuring consistent application of the process and standards; aligning faculty expectations with the criteria; and providing mentoring, workshops, and trainings. The survey results indicate differences in how frequently different groups suggest improvements related to the themes, which can be useful in thinking of how to target particular faculty groups for interventions. While each school will have its own set of needs and challenges, the themes identified in this data snapshot can inform leadership about key faculty concerns in the promotion and tenure process. By addressing these common challenges, schools can refine their policies to be more clear, efficient, and fair for their faculty members.

Contact

For more information, please contact Amy Smith or Valerie Dandar at medicalschooloroperations@aamc.org.

Reference

1. Dandar V, Field J, Balas K, Dutterer J, Kim J. AAMC StandPoint Surveys: 2023 State of Medical School Faculty Engagement. AAMC; 2023.