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Systemic Improvement for Teaching Faculty and Expansion of Tenure for Teaching at Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI)

2021 Winner of the Delphi Award

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From the Delphi Project database of

Example Best Practices to Support Non-Tenure-Track Faculty

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In 2012, Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI), a private research university in Massachusetts, made systemic change to better respect, recognize and support faculty off the tenure track. Motivated by the realization that teaching faculty and other contingent faculty were becoming more numerous at and more critical to the institution, WPI established regular titles and promotional lines for the NTTF. These changes were proposed and adopted by the faculty with approval and support from the administration. However, a tenure track for teaching faculty was unthinkable at the time. Short-term, at-will contracts for contingent faculty remained unchanged. And without tenure, secure employment contracts, and protections of academic freedom and free expression, the contingent faculty remained outside the faculty governance system.

In fall 2018, WPI formed a task force to consider bold changes to the status of the teaching faculty, then worked through faculty governance in collaboration with the administration and Board of Trustees to formalize these changes. In the spring of 2021, WPI formally established a teaching track to tenure and an institutional goal to place 40 percent of its current full-time teaching faculty on the tenure track between August 2021 and August 2023. Other changes included secure longer-term contracts for the remaining full-time NTTF with clear conditions for reappointment and protections against retaliation, as well as full inclusion in faculty governance for all secured full-time NTTF. At WPI, the design and implementation of a tenure track for teaching faculty and the other changes for remaining NTTF began to resolve some intractable problems in higher education, such as the erosion of tenure and academic freedom, the precarious status of contingent faculty, and the weakening of faculty governance. These systemic improvements grant teaching faculty at WPI the professional identity and esteem currently missing in many institutions across the country.

Task Force Formation

Many Delphi winners and finalists began their track to create better supports for NTTF with the creation of a task force, and WPI was no different. In September 2018, both the outgoing and incoming secretaries of the faculty (the highest-ranking

elected faculty representatives at WPI) worked together to assemble a task force to reimagine the status and culture of non-tenure-track faculty life. The task force comprised equal numbers of tenure-track/tenured and non-tenure-track faculty, while no administrators held seats on the task force. The absence of administrators from the task force was deliberate. The secretaries of the faculty wanted to ensure the space was open and unguarded, and that the task force meetings were a space where possibilities could freely surface without the fear of administrators striking ideas down.

The task force also undertook extensive community outreach, identifying and meeting with a diverse group of stakeholders including deans, department heads, and groups of tenure-track/tenured and non-tenure-track faculty. The task force worked for a year before reporting its initial recommendations to the full faculty.

Creation of Tenure-Track Roles and Job Security for Teaching Faculty

Recognizing that job security and academic freedom are at the heart of tenure, the task force, the provost, and other supporting faculty and faculty committees that continued the work over the following two years arrived at a solution centered around a tenure path designed for outstanding teachers. The proposed tenure criteria for professors of teaching are based on “teaching practice” focusing on the quality and impact of one’s interactions with students, as well as “professional growth and currency” as it relates to teaching, teaching innovation and remaining active in professional communities (see Berubé and Ruth, 2015, *The Humanities, Higher Education and Academic Freedom* for more details of a proposed teaching-intensive tenure track). WPI’s tenure criteria are realistic, rigorous and aspirational, account for the teaching faculty’s heavier teaching loads and provide more exacting standards for teaching excellence. Furthermore, the criteria aim to push teaching faculty to do innovative work in the classroom that fosters a stronger learning environment for all students. Teaching faculty who secure tenure are entitled to the affordances that come with academic freedom. For many of those faculty members, that means freedom in the classroom in discussing controversial topics without fear of reprimand.

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Teaching faculty interested in starting on the new tenure track had to first complete an individual self-assessment. After, they were tasked to have discussions with their department heads. Then, deans completed reviews of the request and final consideration was given by the provost. In September 2021, the first cohort was announced. The cohort included 15 teaching faculty members from a wide range of disciplines and years employed at the institution. WPI has an institutional goal of placing 40 percent of the full-time teaching faculty on the newly established tenure track by August 2023.

Conversion of NTTF from Short-Term to Multi-Year Appointments

WPI also created a policy to provide secure contracts for NTTF who cannot or choose not to pursue the new tenure line. After a one-year probationary term and subsequent performance review, WPI offers NTTF a three-year appointment. In some cases, the department head and/or program director can allow NTTF members to skip the probationary period



and start the three-year appointment immediately. After the first three-year term, NTTF can be granted a second three-year term, followed by terms of no fewer than five years each. These contracts offer more stability through clear conditions for reappointment and protection against retaliation.

Participation in Faculty Governance for Tenure-Track Teaching Faculty and Full-Time NTTF

These new tenure-line teaching appointments expanded faculty governance as these faculty were now afforded all the rights of other tenure-track faculty. However, WPI did not stop there. The systemic improvements also included full participation for all full-time NTTF who had secured contracts. Expanded participation in governance allows both teaching faculty and NTTF the opportunity to engage in leadership at the institutional level.

Expanded participation in governance also symbolizes WPI's commitment to the unity of the faculty by acknowledging and affirming that faculty members, regardless of rank or role, are equal partners in enhancing the educational environment and setting the direction of the institution.

Learn more about Worcester Polytechnic Institute's efforts to support all faculty through their **Systemic Improvement for Teaching Faculty and Expansion of Tenure for Teaching** at: <https://www.wpi.edu/offices/faculty-governance>

Visit The Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success for more example practices and a wide range of resources and toolkits to better support faculty off the tenure track at: pullias.usc.edu/delphi.

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