



ATS members discuss the credentials, characteristics and accomplishments employers consider when promoting faculty and granting tenure.

Q. What are the two or three most desirable qualities or characteristics for me to have as a candidate for tenure or promotion?

A. “The most important quality is a commitment to excellence in a specific area of interest, be that research, clinical activity, education or service endeavors,” said Mark Geraci, MD, who heads the division of pulmonary sciences and critical care medicine and directs the Translational Medicine Program at the University of Colorado, Denver. “And that commitment should be readily demonstrable through accomplishments.”

When ATS Vice President Patricia Finn, MD, considers candidates, she personally looks for integrity, work ethic and passion. “Promotions committees look for outward manifestations of these traits,” explained Dr. Finn, who directs the Division of Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine at the University of California, San Diego.

Q. Are different institutions looking for different things?

A. The promotion and tenure process can differ quite a bit depending on the “track” you are in, as well as between private and state academic centers. “In some universities, there is a clinical track and a research track,” Dr. Finn said. “In others, there are multiple tracks, including clinician-educator. In most academic settings, you will be reviewed in four areas: clinical work; research/investigation/scholarly activities, including publications and grants; education/teaching; and service. Depending on the institution, each area may be weighted differently.”

Q. Everyone knows the old saying, “publish or perish.” How important is it for me to be published?

A. It’s very important to be published—and the more times, the better. “Ideally, you should choose the best journals in your

scientific area, and write within a year of completing the research,” advised former ATS President Peter D. Wagner, MD, who is distinguished professor of medicine and bioengineering at UCSD in San Diego.

Publications are critical for several reasons: they demonstrate your ability to transmit your knowledge to a wide audience; they validate findings, conclusions and even opinions through a peer-review process; and they form the primary form of communication to other interested parties, either in academia or other professions, Dr. Geraci added.

And while peer-reviewed publications can carry the most weight depending on the track, invited reviews, book chapters and electronic communications can paint an overall picture of an academician communicating their skills, which is seen favorably by promotions committees.

Q. How important is it for my research to bring in grant money?

A. Funding is critical, regardless of track. “Grant dollars allow for freedom and creativity to pursue your scholarly question,” explained Dr. Finn. “Without funding, appointments to research are non-existent.”

The long-term success of your research depends on your ability to perform that research at the highest level for a sustained period of time. “This practice, by necessity, may take considerable resources and money,” added Dr. Geraci. “Grants and contracts alike are two mechanisms to fund research endeavors.”

Q. Especially in the sciences, so-called cutting-edge research attracts a lot of media attention—and perhaps, a lot of research dollars. Does the type of research in which I’m involved play a role in the decision process, or is the decision based solely on quality of research?

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FELLOWS CORNER



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A. “It should be the latter case, but sadly, it can be the former,” said Dr. Wagner. “I would not advise seeking a research domain just because it is ‘sexy.’ You need passion and that comes with genuine interest, not chasing the bandwagon.”

Dr. Finn agrees. “Topic and quality both count, trying to always do the best science possible, regardless of what is considered ‘hot,’” she said. “Stay true to yourself and your scientific passion and this will be evident in your interests, grant funding and reputation.”

The bottom line is that you should immerse yourself in an area of research that is most interesting to you in the long-term. “All areas of original investigation are valued,” said Dr. Geraci. “In the end, your ability to make an impact will be directly proportional to your passion.”

Q. Does teaching play as critical a role as research in most universities’ decisions to grant tenure or approve promotion?

A. Each institution is unique in handling teaching as a criterion. “In some university settings, teaching or education can serve as a major or even exclusive area of focus for promotion and tenure,” said Dr. Geraci. “In other settings, teaching may be important, but not considered as a primary area of focus. Education is always significant, but its value in promotion and tenure varies, often greatly, between institutions.”

Q. I’ve heard that having a wide range of research interests may help me get promoted and ultimately get tenure. Is this true?

A. Diversity can be a good aim, as long as the strength and quality of research in different areas remains high. “Follow your scientific passion,” said Dr. Finn. “So much of science is multidisciplinary, and the NIH encourages multidisciplinary applications. Diversifying your research portfolio, but

not diluting quality, is a strength in terms of career advancement and also maximizes your success for grant applications and meaningful science.”

Navigating the fine line between strong, diverse research interests and “dabbling” can be difficult, especially for younger, unproven faculty. “Remaining focused and establishing one’s research niche and name is critical,” said Dr. Wagner. “I recommend leaving diversification for a later time when administrative duties encroach, and diversity can help you in executing those responsibilities.”

Q. Is it important for me to have other roles in the university aside from research and teaching (i.e., leadership or organizational positions)?

A. Today, service is an important promotion criterion for most institutions, especially when a candidate’s service endeavors align tightly with his or her interests and passions. This is not only a recipe for professional success, but also personal fulfillment.

“At many universities, service is key, which speaks to the universality of an academic mission,” said Dr. Finn. It can mean sitting on fellowship committee, interviewing housestaff, serving on a diversity committee, reviewing manuscripts, or belonging to other local or global communities,” she explained.

Q. How can I measure if I’m being productive enough within the department? Do most universities have a production standard, and how can I learn what that standard is?

A. Nearly every university has promotion standards or rubrics for each level of promotion and “one-on-one” discussions with both formal and informal mentors can offer valuable insight into the promotion process.

“More information is better,” Dr. Finn continued. “Personally, I think we need to establish a standardized mentoring program for junior to mid-level faculty to more effectively retain the best and brightest.”

And while many facilities use average faculty publication rates, this is a blunt metric. “The best advice is to ask your mentor, division chief and department chair

what is expected,” Dr. Wagner advised. “Two to four strong papers in good journals per year is expected of a young faculty member primarily devoted to research. A critical element in this is authorship position. Middle authorship often counts for very little, while first or last authorship is much more convincing.”

Q. All workplaces have an element of politics to them. How important is it to cultivate relationships within the department?

A. Most places advocate integrative, collaborative research, so you must learn to work as a team member instead of as an individual. “Ambition is important, but not at the cost of using people and burning bridges,” said Dr. Wagner. “Yet you have to develop your own ‘brand’ at the same time.”

The key is finding a mentor in your scientific domain who is committed to training and will counsel you about faculty development and how to balance your own advancement while also supporting your team.

“Cultivating relationships that enrich your life and can enrich others is a laudable and successful goal,” said Dr. Finn. “Always seek out others to learn from and teach. This is the essence of academia. And try not to sweat the small stuff.”

Q. Having letters of recommendations from other experts in the field can be critical in getting into medical school or graduate school. How important is it for me to have those recommendations in my file when seeking tenure/promotion?

A. Recommendations are absolutely critical. Other academicians will need to evaluate your accomplishments, paying particular attention to the criteria of your specific institution. Promotion and tenure committees rely heavily on both internal and external evaluators for each candidate.

“Most universities have black and white rules about when outside letters are required,” advised Dr. Wagner. “The key here is to pick your letter writers very carefully. And because most faculty think candidates select only supportive writers, even faintly negative comments in a letter can be devastating.” ■