

Final Recommendations

Provost's/Academic Senate Task Force on Research-track Faculty (AY2019-20)

In the prior academic year, a joint task force chaired by Professor Kelvin Davies put together recommendations to the Provost and Academic Senate regarding research faculty at USC. Both the Academic Senate and the Provost's Office felt more work was needed on these issues. The current task force continued its work, with some membership changes, during the 2019-2020 academic year. This report summarizes the recommendations for this second Task Force (members listed at the end). In so doing, the group maintained three principles inherited from the prior task force:

1. Clarify the responsibilities of schools, institutes, and centers;
2. Support career development of meritorious research faculty members;
3. Balance faculty security within the constraints of financial risk to schools, institutes, and centers.

The current task force conducted some comparative financial analysis, spoke to University of California faculty and administrators, collected additional data from schools, and convened several meetings. The following recommendations emerged from the deliberations.

R1. [The Provost should clarify the rights and responsibilities for all Research-track Faculty.](#)

Research-track Faculty members at USC contribute significantly to the scientific, educational, and service missions of the university in multiple ways. Some are principal investigators of research grants that vary from one-person projects to large consortia. The majority collaborate with other faculty both within and outside their discipline which helps to secure extramural funding and benefits USC research in general. Most provide mentorship to graduate students, postdoctoral scholars and other research staff and supervise undergraduate research learning and activities. Many also contribute to traditional classroom teaching and/or on-line courses. Several represent the University at national and international conferences, take leadership roles in scholarly associations, and act as editors for journals and referees for granting organizations. Despite these important roles, there are currently limited support mechanisms within the University for maintaining and advancing their careers. Thus, we make the following specific recommendations:

1. The Provost should clarify the rights of Research-track Faculty, some of which are the following:
 - o Enjoy academic freedom;
 - o Dedicate up to 95% FTE effort conducting extramurally funded research and pursuing other research-related or data science-related activity;
 - o Serve as Principal Investigator or (named) Co-Investigator on external grants;
 - o Serve as Principal Investigator or (named) Co-Investigator on internal USC grants;
 - o Dedicate at most 25% FTE effort to teaching to meet department needs and to fill in gaps in research funding;
 - o Mentor undergraduate and graduate students and postdoctoral fellows;
 - o Serve on qualifying exam, thesis guidance, and dissertation committees;
 - o Serve as chair of thesis guidance and dissertation committees; and
 - o Advance along promotion ranks from Assistant to Associate to full Professor of Research in accordance with defined criteria and expected (national) standards for the field.

2. The Provost should clarify the responsibilities of Research-track Faculty, some of which are the following:
 - Participate flexibly in mentoring, academic service and committees, and institution building as part of their research roles and responsibilities;
 - Participate in the life of the home department/school through an agreed minimum amount of expected service activities, including attendance and voting in accordance with University and School governance documents at faculty meetings and participation in school, department, institute, or center committees, including performance reviews, and appointment and promotion cases on matters not involving tenure;
 - Work diligently to secure external (*e.g.*, grants, contracts, endowments, *etc.*) or internal (*e.g.*, core facility, research service provider, data analysis facility, *etc.*) funding to support both salary and research activities in fulfillment of appointment expectations, with possible supplemental support from additional internal funding sources.

R2. The Provost should clarify the distinction between Research-track Faculty and Research Staff and provide a streamlined pathway from faculty to staff positions, as appropriate.

Research-track Faculty contribute to the life of the University in multiple ways. Many are fully independent researchers supported through external funding from grants or contracts or with funds from gifts and endowments. Such individuals may initially be hired with substantial or full salary support from a School, Institute, or Center with the understanding that they must seek external funding within an agreed time frame. A second group of Research-track Faculty may play central roles in running important core facilities or other research-related or data science-related service efforts. Such efforts benefit the broader USC research enterprise and can help fund the faculty member's salary. A third group of Research-track Faculty are far less independent and rely on funding from other faculty for much of their support.

As with Tenure-track Faculty members, not everyone who attempts to become self-supporting, or to sustain a self-supported program, is successful. For example, some academic units recommend a promotional up-or-out deadline for Research-track Faculty at the junior rank. In general, there is an expectation that faculty-level appointees (on any track) will attain a higher level of scholarly and academic accomplishment that meets or exceeds national standards, and a greater degree of fiscal support for their research and salaries than is the norm for staff members.

The word 'Professor' is inextricably associated (both etymologically and historically) with teaching and mentoring. Both Tenure-track and Teaching-track Faculty share a major teaching role throughout the University. Similarly, many Research-track Faculty teach formal classes (up to 25% of their profile) or extensively mentor undergraduate and graduate students, and post-doctoral fellows, in research. Thus, a key differentiating characteristic between Research-Track Faculty and research staff is the expectation for faculty members to contribute to the university's educational mission through teaching and/or mentoring. With this background, the task force makes the following recommendations:

1. Researchers who are not expected to apply for independent funding, or otherwise lead a self-sustaining research enterprise, should be appointed to research staff positions (Research Associate, Senior Research Associate, or Research Scientist) rather than Research-track Faculty positions;
2. Research-track Faculty should be expected to participate in mentoring, academic service and committees, and institution building as part of their research roles and responsibilities. The degree of effort needs to be flexible to accommodate core research activities. Where there is an academic need, limited effort (*i.e.*, up to 25% FTE) may be put towards teaching.
3. Schools should have the option to transition Research-track Faculty who are not self-supporting to an appropriate research staff position. The Provost should provide a streamlined pathway for this transition from faculty to staff.

R3. The Provost should issue guidelines for hiring and promotion within the Research-track.

Research-track Faculty should expect a promotion system that mirrors their Tenure-track and Teaching-track counterparts. These promotions should occur along a similar timeline as (i.e., in parallel with) the promotion system employed for Tenure-track Faculty. They rightly should expect a vote of the senior faculty on their case. Thus, we recommend:

1. The Provost should implement a university-wide appointment and promotional system for newly hired Research-track Faculty, from Assistant to Associate to full Professor of Research, depending on excellence in research and service (and possibly teaching, if applicable) in accordance with national standards suitable for faculty on a research-track. Future appointment and promotion decisions for Research-track Faculty should involve a vote of the faculty of the home school, institute, or department, inclusive of eligible RTPC Faculty (e.g., of equal or higher rank as the promotion rank);
2. The guidelines, benchmarks, and criteria to be used in appointment and promotion decisions for Research-track Faculty should be contained in an RTPC Faculty Appointments & Promotion Manual, which the USC administration and the Academic Senate are encouraged to develop possibly as part of the UCAPT Manual. Schools should have their own RTPC Faculty Appointments & Promotion Manuals reviewed and approved by USC administration and the cognizant Academic Senate consultative body, to guide faculty through processes, criteria, and nuances particular to each School; and
3. A decision for promotion from Research Assistant Professor to Research Associate Professor should normally be made within a six- to seven-year period following initial appointment.

R4. Schools need to clarify and, in some cases, enhance their strategies to mentor, review, and provide career development opportunities to Research-track faculty.

There is significant variation between schools in how they handle performance evaluation and promotion of Research-track Faculty. Additionally, it became quite clear in discussions that not all schools at USC are adhering to the mandate for inclusion of RTPC Faculty in all relevant aspects of academic life. In particular, the Task Force is concerned that RTPC Faculty are not always included or represented in faculty meetings and committees, in faculty votes (as permitted and appropriate), and in annual performance reviews. In some cases, departments limit access to graduate students with policies that appear 'ad hoc.' Similarly, in departments with small numbers of research faculty, mentorship and review is conducted or led by faculty unfamiliar with the Research-track and its processes. Thus, we recommend:

1. All units adhere to the "parallel tracks" philosophy for promotion noted in the prior recommendation; and
2. Schools allow Research-track Faculty to flexibly participate in mentoring, academic service and committees, and institution building as part of their research roles and responsibilities. Where there is academic need, limited effort (i.e., up to 25% FTE) may be put towards teaching.
3. Schools ensure that department chairs, search committees, and faculty reviewers understand and develop policies surrounding hiring, mentorship, and review of Research-track faculty and their role in academic life.

- R5. The Provost should clarify the conditions under which a Research-track faculty could be ‘fast-tracked’ for hiring—e.g., spousal recruitment. Research-track faculty should be given full consideration for Tenure-track positions without jeopardizing their current standing. Opportunities for career advancement should be enhanced.

Some schools appear to use the Research-track as a testing ground for the Tenure-track. Others have the opposite view; that Research-track Faculty cannot be considered for Tenure-track positions. Often these points get conveyed during the hiring process, either implicitly or explicitly. The Provost and Schools should inform new Research-track Faculty that there is no expectation of transitioning from one track to the other but also that there are no obstacles for competing and being considered for Tenure-track positions.

When Tenure-track positions become available, Research-track Faculty members should be able to freely apply and be fully considered in an open competition, without penalty or higher expectations as an internal candidate. There is a legitimate perception that current Research-track Faculty are disadvantaged because their hiring would not bring someone new. The task force felt that Tenure-track hiring committees should not penalize internal candidates from the Research-track, as they should be given full consideration. Thus, we recommend:

1. Research-track Faculty positions should be advertised and competed for on an open basis, as specified by University policy, and should not be considered a guaranteed ‘promotional path’ for existing postdoctoral fellows or research staff;
2. The Provost should clarify special exceptions where it is appropriate to fast-track a search—e.g., in the case of spousal hires or other extenuating circumstances;
3. Existing post-doctoral fellows, Research-track faculty, and research staff should be allowed to compete for Tenure-track positions on an open and equal basis;
4. The Provost should consider expanding access to sabbatical opportunities for Research-track Faculty—along the lines of Advancing Scholarship in the Humanities and Social Sciences sabbatical program; and
5. The Provost should provide more opportunities to recognize the accomplishments of Research-track faculty at the university level (e.g., through awards)—and also expand Provost-organized mentoring and faculty development workshops.

- R6. Schools should have flexibility around their policies for financial support for Research-track Faculty, but these should be clearly articulated to new and existing faculty.

The Task Force was concerned that Research-track Faculty members may not be assured sufficient job security and financial stability. Many (maybe most) Research-track Faculty are dependent on external funding (mostly grants and some contracts and endowments) for up to 95% of their remuneration, with the remaining 5% from non-soft funding sources. When funding is lost, University rules allow for as little as a 30-90 day notice of reduction of salary coverage, or termination period for the affected faculty member. The Task Force members unanimously concurred that this is an undesirable situation that exposes Research-track Faculty to stress and anxiety, is counterproductive to professional growth, and can hinder recruitment of talented candidates.

The prior task force recommended the implementation of two-year rolling contracts for all Research-track Faculty at USC. These would include a non-performance termination clause and a termination ‘for-cause’ clause to protect the institution. Effectively, this proposal would ensure that all Research-track Faculty would have two years of protected salary at each annual renewal. This approach, would need careful consideration (beyond the scope of this Task Force) in light of other faculty tracks with no such guarantee. The Task Force also noted that the various Schools, Institutes, and Centers differ in the financial commitments they can make, putting a significant strain on already limited financial resources.

A second mechanism considered by the Task Force would ensure that faculty who lose grant funding in any contract period, or whose core facility or other service-based activities fail to cover salary costs, would still have a guarantee for up to one-year or more additional salary within the appointment period, during which time it would be expected that new funding would be obtained. Schools would not be obligated to extend the guarantee of full salary support beyond this time in any appointment period, although they would be free to do so. Termination for non-performance or 'for cause' would apply.

A third proposal discussed by the Task Force involved a rewards structure in which Research-track Faculty members could accumulate credits toward future salary based on prior funding. In this scenario, a faculty member might, for example, be able to accumulate one month of future salary for every year of previous funding received, up to some limit. The accumulated credit could be used to support the faculty member's salary when other sources are not available. A 'cap' of one year's salary credit or more was felt reasonable. Termination for non-performance or 'for cause' would also apply. Again, it would be expected that new funding would be obtained during this period for further contract extensions to be considered.

A fourth option discussed involved various hybrids of the above three scenarios, with the additional possibility that individual Schools, Institutes, or Centers might apply 'individualized' solutions, with appropriate approvals, that better suit their special needs or responsibilities. Again, termination for non-performance or 'for cause' would also apply.

In all four cases, there would be the possibility of increasing the length of faculty contracts with increasing years of service, thus further improving the employment and financial security of Research-track faculty.

In the event that full or partial funding is lost, and the school must make up the shortfall, Research-track Faculty members could be assigned other administrative, teaching, or service responsibilities of value to the school. In some cases, this may require permission from the Provost's office for a profile of activities that exceeds the normal and accepted teaching/administration/service limits for the Research-track Faculty. Alternatively, the administration, working with the Academic Senate, could sanction a blanket permission for all cases that meet certain minimal criteria. Salary commitments tied to indirect cost recoveries were also discussed but seemed unnecessarily complex and could possibly contravene funding agencies' regulations.

In the end, the Task Force felt that Schools must have flexibility. We recommend implementation of at least one-year employment and salary security for Research-Track Faculty members, such as through one or more of the mechanisms proposed above and as deemed appropriate by the School, Institute or Center:

- We recommend that contracts for all Research-track Faculty members should include a non-performance clause to protect the institution that should be signed by the relevant deans, with dismissal otherwise allowed only for cause;
- We recommend that effort profiles (sometimes called Faculty Profiles of Activity) should accurately reflect the percentage of a Research-track Faculty member's actual effort in research, teaching, proposal preparation, administration, and service. In some cases, the traditional 5% time allocated to teaching, proposal preparation, administration, and service may not be sufficient, and the Task Force urges all Schools carefully to review the effort profiles of existing research faculty to ensure that they are both accurate and reasonable; and
- We recommend that for Research-track Faculty whose support (either external or internal) has lapsed, the USC administration and the Academic Senate should permit greater latitude for schools to modify standard effort profiles to make up missing research financial support from additional administrative, teaching, or service activities for limited periods of time consistent with the extension of salary support.

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