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Making Tracks

Using nontenure faculty tracks to attract skilled professionals and boost job satisfaction

By: Carol Patton

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Tenure-track positions at higher ed institutions are not always the most sought-after jobs on campus. At least, not lately.

Highly skilled scientists, researchers, and other professionals are opting for nontenure track positions, which enable them to focus on research instead of teaching and avoid the “publish or perish” lifestyle stresses. These positions carry titles like assistant or associate professor and boost their status with peers, while offering life balance and expanding their abilities to obtain top research grants. Some universities are only too happy to oblige.



Back in June 2008, the University of Iowa implemented a nontenure track for research scientists, says Tom Rice, associate provost for faculty. The estimated 30 researchers in the track can't teach a class or chair a graduate dissertation. But they can guest lecture in their area of expertise or work side-by-side with graduate students. Just as important, their new titles carry weight with funding agencies and open doors to win prestigious grants.

“This track is available to our 11 colleges,” explains Rice, adding that the colleges of medicine, dentistry, and pharmacy voted to offer it. “There was some opposition to the track in our faculty senate. They had a natural concern about the growing number of nontenured track faculty ... that the influence of tenured faculty on campus would diminish.”

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Officials tackled those concerns by implementing new policies. For example, Rice shares, each track is capped at 10 percent of the tenured faculty in the college. Since these faculty can't teach, there aren't any more fears about them snatching classes away from tenured professors. What hasn't changed is the need for strong academic credentials. Whether tenured or nontenured, job requirements are the same. “We're taking this step by step,” he

says. A recent questionnaire found that most are happy with the track but want job expectations to be further defined. “There really are no significant downsides. ... It makes [them] more competitive for outside [grant] money and gives them prestige in their lab that they were lacking as research scientists.”

Strong Evidence

Over the past several years, the American Council on Education conducted a series of surveys with 158 different U.S. colleges and universities. More than half of respondents wanted flexibility with their career path, adding that their school is trying to better integrate nontenure faculty into department life by involving them in curriculum development and various committees that govern their institutions.

Likewise, the Association of American Medical Colleges has seen enormous growth in this area, partially fueled by budget concerns. “Investing in tenure-track faculty is very expensive,” explains R. Kevin Grisby, a psychiatry professor for 26 years who is now

senior director of leadership and talent development at AAMC. “There has been less willingness to bring people in and agree to support them for the rest of their lives.”

Although nontenure track faculty positions are fairly exclusive to science and medicine, he believes they will eventually spill over into other disciplines. Meanwhile, he says such positions offer younger generations more freedom to spend time with their families without being encumbered by classroom lectures or introductory coursework assignments.

Years ago, Grisby turned down a tenure track job at Yale in favor of a nontenure track appointment. He wrote his own research grants that supported his salary for six years. At that time, he says it was called a “junior faculty” position.

The concept has been around for decades, he says, adding that nontenure tracks have simplified the process for bringing skilled professionals on board. “[These individuals] are highly trained and competent researchers,” Grisby says. “They’re not guaranteed a job for life or evaluated after six years and told it’s either up or out. For a long time, they were typically appointed on a year-by-year basis. But I’ve seen some growth in multiyear appointments.”

Mix ‘n Match

Not every institution supports nontenure faculty tracks. But some of them make similar accommodations for research scientists. Vanderbilt University (Tenn.) is a good example.

It offers positions that help expand the number of its research projects without swelling the ranks of its teaching faculty, explains Dennis Hall, vice provost for research and dean of the graduate school. He points to two research institutes within the school of engineering that employ research scientists and engineers as either research assistant or associate professors. They conduct their own research and supervise students’ research, and salaries are supported by external grants.

For many people, nontenure faculty tracks haven’t been an appealing path, says Hall. “It’s used on an ad hoc or as needed basis.”

The University of Michigan started making such appointments as far back as the 1960s. Initially, each school or college proposed and observed its own guidelines for its nontenure research scientist track. Then in 2003, a nontenure research professor track was added, says Curt Smitka, director of administration and finance for the office of vice president of research.

But by 2007, he says, an overhaul was needed. “There was some dissatisfaction across the campus on how they were working and being managed,” he says. “We recalibrated what it meant to be in the research scientist track and research professor track. We built in that the schools and colleges do a three-year review, just like they do for the tenure track, so they can provide guidance if they’re not making progress or conducting enough additional mentoring.” Currently, 14 out of the university’s 19 colleges on the main campus support a nontenure research track.

A mentoring guideline was also developed and distributed to all new faculty. Likewise, those in the research professor track must meet the same academic standards as those who are tenured.

So far, so good. There haven’t been many grumblings, he says. With more than 1,000 people in these tracks, Smitka says there aren’t any plans to create new tracks, just to monitor and tweak the existing ones.

Changing Climate

For the past decade, Washington University in St. Louis supported a research faculty track for its school of medicine. About six years ago, it added a research professorship track to attract people outside the field of medicine.

What’s unusual about this professorship track is that the university is obligated to give participants a year’s notice if things aren’t working out or their position is going to be discontinued, says Ann Prenatt, vice chancellor for HR.

She says people get involved in this track because the rigors of the tenure probationary process can be really daunting. She believes there may have been some individuals who started down the tenure track but later chose this professorship track as an alternative.

“[The track] has allowed us to sell positions in a variety of ways and get research that needs to be done,” Prenatt says. “The whole tenure process, while many thrive on it and are driven to have broader roles and responsibilities, is not for everyone. This track is really a way to be able to take advantage of individuals who have a lot of skills but want to focus a little more narrowly than is required by a tenure track.”

Whether such tracks are effective recruiting tools, no one really knows. But they have changed school culture and attitudes. Consider the University of Missouri System. For years, it supported several nontenure faculty tracks that included a teaching, research, clinical, and professional practice, plus an extension track, says Steve Graham, senior associate vice president of academic affairs. About six years ago, system leaders noticed discrepancies about how people in these tracks were treated and a lack of clarity about their rights and responsibilities.

Through open forums, officials developed guidelines stating opportunities for advancement, rights, and responsibilities, and included these individuals as eligible candidates for prestigious university awards. However, not every college or unit on its campuses adopted the same guidelines. Each determined its own qualifications for such tracks, such as defining its own hiring and promotion criteria.

Despite the lack of consistency, the changes underscored a cultural shift occurring in higher education. “It shows how the culture was being reshaped by implementing these kinds of systemwide policies,” Graham says. “In the past, awards were only held for tenure track faculty. A number of these [nontenure track] individuals were doing very valuable work, but in a haphazard way. They didn’t get the respect they duly deserved.”

The catalyst behind the university choosing to change its culture was to provide these individuals with opportunities for recognition and promotion, and for developing long-term relationships in the same way that tenured faculty can, adds Ken Dean, deputy provost at the university’s Columbia, Mo., campus.

He says some colleges now grant them full voting rights—except when hiring or promoting tenured track faculty—enabling them to participate in most aspects of the department’s life. For now, Dean believes the institution has enough tracks. “Our tent is big enough to fit almost anyone,” he says. That’s a good policy for any university to establish, considering the significant contributions that come from nontenure track positions.

What about your school? Is there room for such skilled professionals who can help pave new directions and boost the institution’s status?

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