Women's Perceptions of Explicit and Implicit Criteria for Promotion to Full Professor

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How can colleges and universities increase the number of women full professors? Criteria and expectations for promotion need more scholarly scrutiny. Through a game-based study, women associate professors from arts, humanities, social science, and STEM fields at a public urban research-1 university categorized different aspects of promotion criteria as either implicit or explicit and reflected on these categories in discussions and feedback forms. Making criteria more explicit was not always preferred, especially if they became more restrictive or institutionalized gendered service burdens, but participants advocated making expectations clearer and more inclusive in areas of common concern: timelines, dossiers, and service.

THE UNDERREPRESENTATION of women at the rank of full professor is a global problem (Heijstra et al., 2015; Shen, 2013; Nakagawa, 2015; Winchester & Browning, 2015). In the United States, "across all academic disciplines, women constitute 24% of full professors, 38% of associates, 46% of assistants, and 56% of lecturers/ instructors" (Monroe et al., 2014, p. 419). One policy change that could encourage or increase promotions is improving the criteria. Murky expectations could be an impediment to promotion. But are more explicit criteria necessarily better?

To better understand women's perceptions of criteria and expectations for promotion, this study used a modified version of a card game about academic promotion entitled "Implicit/Explicit" created by the Alliance for the Arts in Research Universities (a2ru) (Gioia & Stanich, 2018). Women associate professors from arts, humanities, social sciences, and STEM fields at the University of Cincinnati categorized different expectations about promotion featured on the cards as either explicit or implicit and then reflected on promotion to the rank of full professor in discussions and feedback forms.[1]

The University of Cincinnati has a unionized faculty, and academic departments must have written criteria for promotion that are updated every five years (known as Reappointment, Promotion,

and Tenure—or RPT—documents). Even in this promising setting for explicit criteria, a majority of the 39 women in this study found only 8 aspects out of 52 to be explicit. While some women in the study wanted more explicit codification of certain criteria, such as service, that disproportionately burden women, others noted the advantages of keeping some promotion norms—like the timeline for applying for full professor—implicit. This study builds on the literatures on implicit promotion expectations and gendered promotion criteria by generating data about women associate professors' perceptions of and major concerns about promotion.

Literature Review

The proportion of women declines at each level of the academic hierarchy. The literature on promotions reveals the possible role of implicit criteria, and the literature on women in academia presents several ways that criteria may impact women's advancement adversely.

Implicit Promotion Criteria and Expectations

In studies related to promotion, most focusing on tenure, uncertainties recur surrounding criteria and expectations, even when not the focus of the study. For instance, historically marginalized faculty

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[1] Associate professors and similar ranks, including associate senior librarians, will be shortened to "associate professors" for the remainder of this article.

wanted more discussion of "navigating promotion," evoking the uncertain terrain of ambiguous, unwritten, or unspoken promotion criteria and processes (Sotto-Santiago, Tuitt & Saelua 2019, p. 91). A study of junior faculty called for providing "opportunities to address real or apparent inconsistencies that may exist in the expectations that will be brought to bear by their chairs, by their deans, and by others who are involved" in evaluations for promotions (Virick & Strage, 2016, p. 55). "Senior faculty members conveyed their knowledge of promotion criteria and processes" in one effective mentoring program to increase promotions of women (Ockene et al., 2017, p. 11). Some aspects of promotion are implicit, necessitating guidance to navigate, opportunities to address inconsistencies, and the insights of more experienced faculty. Our study adds to this literature by detailing *which* aspects of promotion are often perceived as implicit, and the implications of this at the *associate* level, particularly for women on the path to full professor.

Gender and Promotion Criteria

Prior research on gender inequality in academia suggests that promotion expectations need more scrutiny. Implicit ideas about research that "counts" in the dossier can disadvantage women and people of color, who are more likely to be involved in non-traditional, socially engaged, or collaborative research that may be undervalued by their departments (Monroe et al., 2014; Gonzales, 2018). Cramer, Alexander-Floyd, and Means (all women professors, two of color) argue for transparent standards and recognition of methods outside disciplinary traditions, which often are essential for research on under-researched topics or marginalized communities (2019, p. 35, 37).

Women face more service demands from students, senior colleagues, and administrators, who disproportionately tap women for "institutional housekeeping," such as status of women reports (Flaherty, 2017, 2018, 2019; O'Meara et al., 2017; Hart, 2016; Bird et al., 2004). Even women's leadership opportunities tend to be uncompensated, low level, and service oriented (Skarupski et al., 2019, p. 12; Broido et al., 2015). Thus, gendered service burdens can be an impediment to promotion, as criteria often explicitly or implicitly prioritize research and teaching, with service as an afterthought.

The literatures on faculty development and gender inequality raise puzzles that are important to women's advancement: Are *implicit* promotion criteria a particular threat to women, due to gender biases unchecked by explicit standards? Are *explicit* criteria also problematic because they privilege established models and priorities of research, teaching, or service that traditionally benefit men? Our research questions and results begin to address these broader concerns.

Research Questions

Which aspects of promotion did most women in our study perceive as explicit, and which were most often perceived as implicit? What were major concerns voiced by women at the associate rank about implicit and explicit promotion criteria and expectations?

Methods

Our study used a game-based research methodology to interact with women associate professors about their perceptions of promotion criteria and expectations. Data for our study came from three sources: Card classification at the end of each game provided quantitative data, and both post-game discussions and feedback forms provided narrative data.

Research Setting and Participants

Many studies focus on the lagging academic promotion rate for women in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields (Bystydzienski & Bird, 2006; Goulden et al., 2011; Wright et al., 2003; Hill, 2019; Hart, 2016), but social sciences and humanities fields also have this problem (Ginther & Hayes, 2003; Hesli & Burrell, 1995; Monroe et al., 2014). Our study's sample thus included women who were associate professors in STEM, social science, arts, and humanities fields.

The University of Cincinnati is an "urban public comprehensive university" of over 40 thousand students and includes a wide range of disciplines and colleges. Because the university has a unionized faculty, transparency in promotion processes, and rules that promotion criteria should be written and updated every five years, this setting would seem to promise more explicit promotion criteria. Despite its written criteria and transparency, however, the

study setting was a rich forum to examine both implicit and explicit criteria. "Urban public comprehensive universities" do not fall neatly into either research-intensive or teaching-intensive categories, and community engagement is frequently part of their mission; therefore, at such institutions "the mandate is more complex, more nuanced and less clear cut" for professors trying to advance through the faculty ranks (Virick & Strage 2016, p. 47).

Women faculty who held the rank of associate professor (or near equivalent) from thirteen colleges at the University of Cincinnati were invited via university email to attend one of three game and discussion sessions on the issue of promoting women to the rank of full professor. Using a list, provided by the faculty union, of current full-time associate professors, we identified likely women by name and web searches to create our email invitation list of 236 faculty members.[2] These sessions were held at different campuses and different times of day to facilitate recruiting a wider range of participants. The 39 study participants were self-identified women, included several women of color, and were from seven different colleges.[3]

Game-Based Method

Adapting a card deck developed by the Alliance for the Arts in Research Universities (a2ru) (Gioia et al., 2018), the research team developed a game specific to associate-to-full promotions, selecting 52 relevant cards, with one question per card. Participants completed an informed consent document and introduced themselves to the group.[4] Each faculty member received a deck of cards. They were verbally instructed to read the cards and decide if the answer to the question was explicit (defined as written in a policy or department document) or implicit (defined as part of the unwritten culture of the department). The research team collected and recorded the contents of the implicit and explicit piles after each session.

Participants and research team members engaged in a recorded discussion of the results of the game and questions on the cards. The recordings were transcribed and de-identified. Two members of the research team independently coded the transcripts and identified major themes, then cross referenced their codes to develop unified themes.

After the discussions, participants completed anonymous feedback forms about their concerns and suggestions related to promotion, their experience playing the game, and its potential utility within their departments. Ninety-two percent of game participants completed the form at the end of their session. A research team member analyzed the feedback forms, calculated question response totals, and highlighted frequent themes.

Limitations and Strengths

The results reflect participants' understandings, not whether or not information actually exists in a document or policy. Although some participants made comparative statements, our research design was not intended to compare women's perceptions with men's. In introducing the game, we assigned no value to explicit over implicit or vice versa. Further studies could compare promotion documents, include men in discussion groups, or generate data to support a more explicit or implicit approach to promotion. Our study's strengths, in contrast, include its focus on women's perceptions, its creation of a women-only space, and its agnosticism about whether implicit or explicit criteria are better.

A game format provides a unique way to facilitate conversations about potentially sensitive issues like gender equality in academia. This is in part because games provide an "alibi" for interaction, an excuse that allows participants to behave and connect with each other differently than they would in everyday situations (Montola, 2010; Stark, 2019). The implicit/explicit game—played among peers, most from outside their own departments—provided a way for women associate professors to voice their concerns about promotion without facing censure. Hierarchies based on factors other than gender and academic rank, such as race or age, can also impact who says what. Nevertheless, the impetus of a game, the composition of the group (all women professors, including the research team), and the anonymized results created

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[2] This list included both dues-paying and non-dues-paying members of the bargaining unit.

[3] The disciplines represented at the seven colleges include the arts and sciences, art, architecture, criminal justice, design, education, human services, information technology, library sciences, music, medicine, and planning.

[4] This research protocol was approved by the University of Cincinnati IRB.

Table 1. Promotion Criteria and Expectations Most often Perceived as Explicit

QUESTIONS FROM THE CARD DECK	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS OUT OF 39 (AND %) WHO CATEGORIZED THE ANSWER TO THIS QUESTION AS EXPLICIT
• How do the research, teaching, and service expectations for promotion to Full differ from earlier levels of review? • How will promotion to Full change my compensation?	30 (77%)
• Is scholarly activity limited to publications, or will grants, community-based projects, or other forms be recognized in promotion to Full?	28 (72%)
• What happens if the RPT criteria for promotion to Full are not enforced?	26 (67%)
• Does my unit or college RPT criteria line up to the expectations of the university for promotion to Full? • How are different types of contributions valued in considering candidates for promotion to Full? • Does my unit recognize collaborative, interdisciplinary, community-based, and/or non-traditional work in promotion to Full decisions?	24 (62%)
• Will there be external reviewers for my case who understand the nature of my collaborative, interdisciplinary, community-based, and/or non-traditional work or will they be disciplinarily-focused?	22 (56%)

Table 2. Promotion Criteria and Expectations Most Often Perceived as Implicit

QUESTIONS FROM THE CARD DECK	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS OUT OF 39 (AND %) WHO CATEGORIZED THE ANSWER TO THIS QUESTION AS EXPLICIT
• What is the right balance of self-promotion and humility in my written materials in my dossier for promotion for Full?	0 (0%)
• How will my reputation be affected if I apply for promotion for Full and am denied? • What impact does my personality and/or perceived collegiality have on my candidacy? • I speak my mind and am perceived as confident. How will this affect my candidacy?	1 (3%)
• Are politics and relationships more important in the promotion to Full process than in previous levels of review? • My unit has pressing needs that require me to either take on significant service responsibilities (e.g., headship) or retrain in an area (e.g., teaching courses outside of my area) to meet the university's mission. How would this affect my candidacy for promotion to Full?	2 (5%)
• How long is too long to wait for promotion to Full? • How often do people get denied promotion to Full here? • If I am denied promotion to Full, how long should I wait to reapply? • I prefer to work by myself, rather than in groups or collaboratively; Would my lack of networking impact my candidacy?	4 (10%)

a relatively safe space to generate interactions.

The game allowed us to examine whether certain types of criteria or expectations are widely perceived as unclear or unfair, shedding light on prevalent concerns. The post-game discussion and feedback prevented a simplistic reading of game results. Rather than advocating a quick fix—simply making promotion criteria and expectations more explicit—participants elucidated advantages and disadvantages of that approach.

Results

Of the 52 aspects of promotion specified in the cards, only 8 were considered by a majority of participants to be explicit.

Common Concerns about Promotion Related to Implicit or Explicit Expectations

Discussions and feedback forms frequently mentioned concerns about timelines, dossiers, and service.

Timeline

The questions "how long is too long to wait?" and "how long should I wait to reapply?" were among of those most frequently categorized as implicit (Table 2). Several associate professors noted the contrast between different promotion levels, with tenure having a more explicit timeline than promotion to full professor:

> I think what makes full harder than associate is that there seems to be a standardized timeline for tenure… you go up for tenure in your sixth year, and you know that coming in. And my sense is that there's no minimum, there's no maximum, no number of years before you can go up for full. (Faculty Discussion [FD])[5]

Faculty members worried that timeline, independent of dossier content, mattered to those who would review their file. One respondent wondered if even the most impressive accomplishments would be undermined by a too-short window between promotions because of a need to show "sustained" research productivity:

> Well, what if you published this book right after you become an associate professor? You publish a book that gets you awards and a MacArthur Fellowship and you're not allowed to be full yet? (FD)

In two separate discussions, a participant raised an example of a promotion case that had been rejected explicitly on the rationale of insufficient time, one by the Provost's office and the other at the College level: "We had someone in our department and she made it through at the college, but then the Provost said 'not enough time at rank' and put it back" (FD). In one of those discussions, participants also noted that candidates often held back from applying for full based on their perception of how their colleagues would react:

> There's this kind of bias against you because maybe the other people didn't do it. They just waited beyond the six years and they think you should too because they did. And I see that, hear that a lot too, not just within my own department… people are expressing that "Well, this person in my department, they're going to be on my committee and they waited ten years, and so for me to go up in six, it's problematic." (FD)

Participants also described concerns about how long was too long, and if waiting longer raised the bar:

> When is too soon, when is too late, and how much do I need to accomplish in order to justify the time… So then you start to wonder, "Well do I need to do so many more committees, so much more international work?" So all these other moving parts and pieces come into play. (FD)

In these discussions, participants noted that institutional gatekeepers at different levels could bring different perceptions of the appropriate timeline. Additionally, since most colleges required external review for these cases, some participants also felt they had to manage the expectations of reviewers at other institutions: one noted that her colleagues were googling the CVs of scholars at other institutions to try to identify disciplinary norms in timing.

While participants expressed a great deal of uncertainty about normative timelines, they also seemed to feel that a one-size-fits-all timeline could be problematic. One participant noted that a strict timeline could put "pressure on people," and that promotion "might come at different times for different people" (FD). Although participants felt that more explicit *guidance* for when to apply for promotion to full would be helpful, they did not want to replicate the inflexible pre-tenure schedule.

Dossier

In addition to timing, the content of the application, or dossier, for full professor had some implicit aspects in the view of many respondents. Thirty-eight percent categorized as implicit, "How are different types of contributions valued?" and "Does my unit or college RPT criteria line up to the expectations of the university for promotion to Full?" (Table 1).

Some participants noted that their departments had recently or were currently in the process of revising their criteria documents to be both more explicit and more inclusive of various types of scholarship:

> Our RPT criteria on… going up for full, are actually quite clear, and they're very limited at this point… you have to have a second book. And so what we are now doing is… keeping a sort of standard, and, at the

same time, introducing flexibility but also the wording of excellence… I mean there are other projects now that might be an equivalent to a book… [such as] an installation, or a digital project. (FD)

As in discussions of timelines, some participants observed that if explicit meant specific, it could be a double-edged sword: "I understand that we don't want to be too specific in our criteria because we don't want to cause limitations where they aren't necessary" (FD).

Also echoing the timelines discussion, the different levels of review heightened uncertainty about what was required to become a full professor, as this exchange illustrates:

> Participant 1: We tried to establish some kind of agreement in the department of what we want to see, but… the step to full is in some sense more mysterious than the tenure step, I think.
>
> Participant 2: It's vaguer.
>
> Participant 1: Well, it's vaguer because it's both a contract with the university, but it's also a contract with… the discipline. And those two don't always align very well…
>
> Participant 3: …it's a contract with the discipline through the outside reviewers—
>
> Participant 1: Yeah, yeah, yeah.
>
> Participant 3: At both stages.
>
> Participant 1: Yeah, it's the same for us, but it still seems muddier for the full stage because you've done so much more work for the university at that point. (FD)

One of the questions most often categorized as implicit captures this struggle to balance the pursuit of disciplinary research excellence and university administrators' expectations that associate professors take on more administrative, teaching, or service roles: "My unit has pressing needs… to meet the university's mission. How would this affect my candidacy for promotion to Full?" (Table 2).

Service

A common theme in discussions was the observation that women served on more committees, were disproportionately represented on "onerous" committees, did more of the work on those committees, and "cared more" about the impact of the committees than men did (FD, FF). This perception led several to argue that service should be more explicitly and thoroughly measured:

If women are primarily burdened with service requirements, is it in our best interests to articulate that in… policy?… it's kind of the unwritten rule, but if we're the ones that are doing it and not getting recognized for it, is it in our best interests to have that written out in terms of… service to the community, service to the department, service to the university, service to my students?... and have that documented appropriately so that is considered in the same way that research is for our male colleagues.… service needs to be recognized as opposed to duly noted… because it does take up so much time and energy, and takes you away from your research. (FD)

Participants also felt that much of women's service was not valued by the university or external reviewers, especially since so much of it was, as several participants described it, "secretarial" work:

> There just should be more recognition of service because it's a bigger part of our lives… It does need to be recognized on a committee level in the criteria that more and more, because there's less staff—we don't use secretaries, haven't had any for a long time—.... it takes that much more time to do the role of being department head because you don't have the support. Or to be on some of these committees where you're actually doing the work. (FD)

These participants felt that their work was not counted in ways that reflected the burden; others feared that making service more explicit in promotions could institutionalize a bifurcated system in which men get promoted through more research and women through more service.

Discussion

The path to promoting more women to the highest academic rank is not necessarily to make criteria more specific, which can be a double-edged sword. One broader takeaway from associate professors discussing three common concerns about promotion is that explicit should not be conflated with specific. For instance, mixed messages and confusion about the timing of promotion means more explicit discussions of expectations are needed at all levels of the promotion process but not a specific timetable. Flexibility in promotion timing can benefit women, who often face onerous challenges balancing work and family. Some women in our study wanted to apply earlier or later than others in their departments.

The discussion of a department recognizing

new forms of scholarship shows it is possible to be both more explicit and more inclusive, rather than restrictive, about what counts as research in promotion dossiers. This would benefit women, and particularly women of color, who are more likely to do non-traditional, collaborative, or community engaged scholarship (Monroe et al., 2014; Gonzales, 2018). The challenge of balancing scholarship with other university expectations raised another common concern—service—and competing perspectives about whether making service criteria more explicit would benefit women or further entrench them in service roles. Recognizing service more explicitly as a route to promotion could backfire for women associate professors.

Our data suggest several concrete solutions to challenges around the distribution of service and leadership, which emerged as particular obstacles to associate professors' application and candidacy for full professor. These solutions must be implemented well before review for promotion. Participants attributed a growth in secretarial-type service work to structural issues that are really beyond the candidate's and tenure and promotion committee's control (shrinking budgets, fewer tenure lines, administrative bloat, etc.); this work burdens all faculty but particularly women. Most participants did not want to weigh secretarial service more than their research or teaching (thereby creating two paths to promotion); they wanted structural changes to better protect their research time and to expand what counts as research beyond traditional forms. Many participants also said they did not want the onus to be put on them to say no, but on others to say yes, leading to a more equitable institutional culture.

In addition, participants expressed desire for more leadership opportunities, which are needed to fulfill promotion criteria at some institutions. Our recommendations to address the imbalance of service and leadership roles for mid-career women faculty are twofold. First, tenure and promotion committees should account for the current realities of university work when revising or applying criteria that assume a radically different time. Discussion of such issues around COVID-19 (e.g., how the one-year pause in tenure clocks for assistant professors is not going to be enough without adjusting expectations) may offer an opportunity to open broader discussions about discrepancies between criteria and current institutional realities. Second, we recommend training for mentors and department chairs on the needs of mid-career women. Such additional training will benefit mentors and department chairs, of course. Even more importantly, department chairs and mentors must learn to encourage women to take leadership roles over secretarial service. Likewise, they need to encourage men to share more of the secretarial tasks in order to lessen the burden on female faculty and to distribute service and leadership more equitably.

Other authors, including those in this special issue, examine how women can rise in the academy through structural reforms or campus-wide programs including equal pay, anti-harassment policies, high quality leadership and mentorship programs, and more women in leadership roles (Skarupski et al., 2019, p. 7, 12; Monroe et al., 2014). Improving—and openly discussing—promotion criteria and expectations can help academic departments hone one more tool in this policy tool chest. Conversations to elucidate implicit aspects of promotion proved important even at an institution with mandated, written criteria; such discussions are even more vital at institutions without them. Because it is resource neutral and can be initiated at the department level, discussing and updating promotion criteria with women's voices at the table is a faculty development initiative that departments can pursue immediately to advance women in higher education.

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