Should Applied Research Count Toward Tenure and Promotion?

The issue of applied research has been a frequent topic of conversation lately. Like many on campus, we believe that applied research is a meaningful activity for university faculty anywhere, but it has particular relevance at regional comprehensive institutions, such as ours. As applied research becomes more prevalent, it will be important to develop strategies for evaluating and rewarding this type of scholarship in the tenure and promotion process.

Some on campus have suggested that applied research needs to be refereed to count toward tenure and promotion. We believe that counting only refereed work is too narrow of a definition for applied research. Realistically, we think that any respected refereed article, applied or traditional, should (and does) count at Western. Refereed articles, therefore, are already accounted for in the current tenure process. The problem arises with how Western should recognize work that is applied, but not refereed.

We think that applied research should be a rigorous application of a scholar’s skills and it should contribute to the well-being of an external agency. For example, we are conducting a “Citizen Satisfaction Survey” for the City of Asheville. To date, we have designed the survey and we will randomly sample Asheville residents. We plan to write up the results and present them to the Asheville City Council. In our opinion, a project like this, although not refereed, could count as applied research at Western if it meets certain standards. The challenge for Western is to develop specific ways to evaluate applied research.

We offer two criteria for judging the merit of applied research. First, the rigor of the project must be evaluated. The methodological rigor of a project can be evaluated by an external evaluator or by a department head through the Annual Faculty Evaluation process. Second, the merit of an applied project should be judged on its use and influence. For example, if the City of Asheville considers our findings when crafting policy, and we show evidence of the study’s influence, then our project would meet this second test. As another example, if one of our colleagues wrote a policy paper on the lottery and her paper was a primary study cited by state legislators as they debated the lottery, then the second criterion would be met. In the absence of a traditional referee process, both of these criteria must be met for applied research to count.
What proportion of a tenure-candidate’s scholarly portfolio should consist of applied research? Although the specific answer undoubtedly varies from department to department, we believe that with very few exceptions, applied research should not make up the entirety of the research portion of a tenure-candidate’s file. Indeed, any tenure-candidate at Western should be able to demonstrate the ability to produce high-quality refereed research. This will improve the institution’s academic profile and enhance the credibility of Western’s instructors in the classroom. In our opinion, ideal tenure-candidates will be able to write for multiple groups—simultaneously reaching applied and academic audiences.

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