

Improving Promotion and Tenure Reviews by using a Deliberative Decision-Making Model

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Abstract:

By participating in university promotion and tenure reviews, faculty are making the most consequential decisions they will ever have to engage in on behalf of their colleagues. Without adequate training and preparation, university departments often have a reputation of unfair decisions, power dynamics, and lack of transparency that taint the process going forward and impact culture and morale. Among the many challenges in re-envisioning what this process could look like is the fact that expectations are often vague, women and people of color tend to go up for promotion and tenure less and at slower rates than their white, male colleagues, and what is considered “satisfactory” or “unsatisfactory” in one unit could mean something totally different in another.

In this poster session, we share the design and results of a large-scale initiative we have undertaken at the University of Denver to change how department and college committees deliberate in these review processes.

Our approach is called Deliberative Decision-Making (DDM). DDM has three key design features: (1) training faculty on key decision-making norms; in particular the differences between consensus and convergence, which is to say that decisions may be supported by a plurality of reasons rather than unanimous agreement on the same reasons, as well as the differences between deliberation and adjudication, which allow faculty to treat questions of fact, value and policy as distinct, thereby, decreasing the chances of incommensurability; (2) pre-case discussion of criteria for decisions, which reduces the arbitrary application of criteria on a case-by-case basis; and (3) interactional rules that ensure that all members speak for equal amounts of time, and uses randomized speaking order (as well as randomized topical order), to eliminate forms of interactional domination, which ensures that everyone has an equal opportunity to influence a decision and that everyone believes that the decision that was made was fair, regardless of the actual decision and who was on the review committee.

DDM has been used in several departments and colleges throughout the University of Denver. In our assessments of DDM, we have found that this approach led faculty to perceive the process as more fair, more authentic, and more legitimate. Moreover, we have found that increasing faculty member’s perceptions of the authenticity of decision-making processes is associated with increased levels of job satisfaction, more interdepartmental collaboration, and a greater level of commitment to university-wide diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. We will conclude the poster presentation with the qualitative and quantitative results of our assessments of the DDM approach.

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