

Campus Discussions: Implementation of Achievement Relative to Opportunity

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1. Introduction

The University of California (UC) system's merit and promotion process is designed to incentivize faculty productivity. However, this framework may not fully account for disruptions that affect career trajectories. The COVID-19 pandemic led to significant challenges for faculty, prompting the establishment of two systemwide working groups. These groups recommended a broader evaluative concept known as "Achievement Relative to Opportunity" (ARO), encouraging each UC campus to consider this approach. The need for this consideration has gained new urgency in light of recent federal challenges.

In the 2024–2025 academic year, UCR leadership initiated a series of six Faculty Think Tank Luncheons to engage Senate faculty in discussions about ARO. These luncheons were organized by the campus Provost and Vice Provost for Academic Personnel. The primary objectives of these sessions were to explore the motivations behind ARO, to communicate the necessity for campus-wide conversations on the topic, and to evaluate alternative approaches for its implementation. Each 90-minute luncheon created an open dialogue among approximately 20 faculty members, encouraging a free-form exchange of ideas. The sessions were structured as follows:

- Full Professors: November 5, 2024, and January 7, 2025
- Associate Professors: February 13, 2025, and March 4, 2025
- Assistant Professors: April 8, 2025, and May 19, 2025

Sarah Nightingale, Assistant Director, Content & Publications, University Relations, attended each luncheon to document the discussions, capturing key themes and insights. This report seeks to consolidate the discussions and highlight key ideas regarding the future direction of ARO at UCR. While it does not present a final conclusion or recommendation, it serves as a foundation for broader campus-wide conversations that can inform and shape future policies.

2. Overview of Approaches to ARO

2.1 Adjusting Expectations Based on Available Time to Achieve

This approach involves modifying productivity expectations in proportion to the time available during the review period to work on achievements. For instance, if a faculty member took a one-year medical leave during a three-year review period, the expectations would be adjusted

to reflect expectations for a two-year period. Monash University in Australia employs this method, applying it over the extended review periods associated with promotions.

Determining the precise amount of time a faculty member had available to work on achievements during a review period can be challenging, especially if disruptions were partial or varied in nature. Faculty may be reluctant to share specifics around the extenuating circumstance, and peers may resist being put in a position to judge the merit of the explanation. Adjusting expectations downward might inadvertently lower academic standards, potentially affecting UCR's reputation and the perceived rigor of its programs. If adjustments are not uniformly applied, disparities may arise among faculty members, leading to perceptions of unfairness or bias in the evaluation process. Implementing and tracking these adjustments require additional administrative resources and careful documentation to ensure consistency and fairness.

2.2 Maintaining Expectations but with Extended Timelines or Retroactive Adjustments

Alternatively, standard expectations could be maintained while offering faculty additional time to meet them, acknowledging partial progress amid extenuating circumstances, and implementing retroactive measures to compensate for delays caused by such circumstances. At UCR, current accommodations of this type include the "stop the clock" option, COVID-impacted outcomes, Life Event outcomes, and retroactive promotion pay.

Allowing more time to meet expectations can delay tenure and promotion decisions, potentially affecting faculty career trajectories and institutional planning. Providing retroactive pay adjustments or extended support may strain institutional budgets. Faculty who do not utilize these options might feel disadvantaged, especially if they perceive that colleagues who do are receiving special treatment. Managing retroactive adjustments and extended timelines requires meticulous record-keeping and clear communication to ensure all faculty are treated equitably.

3. Summary of Feedback from Thinktank Luncheons

3.1 Specific to ARO that Adjusts Expectations

Implementing a uniform approach to reducing expectations in academic merit and promotion reviews presents a significant challenge due to the considerable variability in disciplinary norms. For instance, applying a standard adjustment such as multiplying the typical expectations by the fraction of time a faculty member had the opportunity to achieve during the review period may be more suitable for disciplines where rapid publication is common. In contrast, this method may not accurately reflect the timelines of disciplines that require longer periods to develop scholarship or creative activities. Therefore, a uniform approach may not adequately account for the diverse timeframes and processes inherent in different academic disciplines.

Evaluating individuals within the context of their personal circumstances necessitates a degree of self-advocacy, and certain groups of faculty are more adept at self-advocating. This disparity can impact the fairness of evaluations, as those less skilled in self-promotion may not have their circumstances fully considered, potentially affecting their advancement opportunities.

UC Davis has implemented a half-step merit review system, allowing for proportional acknowledgment of achievements that fall short of the criteria for a full step. This approach differs from ARO, which specifically addresses situations where individuals have had fewer opportunities to achieve due to personal circumstances, rather than offering the option to intentionally progress more slowly through merit steps. Additionally, UC Berkeley permits a one-time merit advancement within each academic rank when a faculty member's scholarship or creative activities fall short of expectations, provided their teaching and service are exemplary. This policy offers an indirect means to address ARO, as it potentially addresses the impact of external circumstances on scholarly productivity. However, it might also signal a faculty member is not progressing as expected and could inadvertently encourage complacency by reducing the perceived need for continuous scholarly engagement.

In regard to the impact of reduced opportunity to win grants, the inclusion of unfunded proposals in merit and promotion files can provide valuable context for evaluators, illustrating the faculty member's efforts and the potential impact of their research ideas. Departmental commentary can further clarify the circumstances surrounding the funding decision, helping to differentiate between external funding limitations and the perceived quality of the proposal.

To uphold standards while maintaining flexibility, the idea of implementing a mandatory career review following an ARO accommodation was discussed. This review would assess whether faculty members have regained their career trajectory after a period of reduced expectations. However, determining appropriate actions if a faculty member is not perceived as getting back on track may present challenges.

3.2 Specific to ARO that Maintains Expectations

Granting additional time without penalty received widespread support. Currently, retroactive promotion pay is exclusively available for promotions and is applicable only to delays associated with the pandemic. Extending this provision to merit increases and making it applicable to life events and external circumstances was broadly supported. The use of teaching relief and the acknowledgment of pragmatic shifts in research direction were also endorsed.

An approach to implementing ARO in this way could be based upon the LEO model. In this model, eligibility for a LEO review is approved by the Academic Personnel Office (APO), with the justification remaining confidential between the candidate and APO. Review bodies are instructed to award the LEO outcome if teaching and service meet expectations, and if

scholarship and creative activity, while short of expectations, at least make significant progress. LEO functions as a variant of ARO implementation, distinguished primarily by the absence of rank or step progression that might often be part of an ARO implementation.

3.3 Applicable to Both Types of ARO

The concept of allowing faculty to submit optional statements in their personnel files to initiate an ARO review was discussed. However, concerns were raised that faculty might be reluctant to disclose personal challenges in writing, and departmental colleagues may feel uncomfortable assessing such sensitive information.

Faculty engaged in research areas such as DEI, climate science, or vaccine research may encounter challenges in securing funding under the current US administration. In the short term, merit and promotion evaluations may place greater emphasis on teaching and service contributions during periods when research funding is limited. During these times, faculty could explore alternative funding avenues, including partnerships with industry and philanthropic organizations. In the longer term, faculty may contemplate strategic adjustments in their research focus to align with areas that offer more accessible funding opportunities.

Alternatively, they might consider pivots toward research in other directions, on pedagogy, or toward writing review papers, all of which may require less funding and enable scholarly productivity during periods of financial constraint.

A participant inquired whether teaching assistant (TA) and postdoctoral (post-doc) strikes could be considered external circumstances under the ARO framework. The prevailing view is that the duration and impact of such events are critical factors in determining their relevance to ARO evaluations. For instance, the 2022 academic workers' strike, which lasted about 40 days, led to significant disruptions in teaching and research activities, potentially affecting faculty members' productivity during that period. However, the relatively short duration of the strike limited its perceived impact on long-term academic achievements.

A participant focused on the term “opportunity,” noting that structural inequalities affect people’s productivity. For example, a study has shown discrepancies in funding rates across ethnicity groups. Notwithstanding the complexity of the issue, it was suggested it is important to consider such structural inequalities in ARO discussions if UCR wants a diverse faculty.

It was suggested that departments should have the autonomy to develop their own ARO implementations. However, challenges were acknowledged, particularly the difficulty for department chairs to achieve a consensus on implementation approaches and the potential complications for higher-level review bodies in adapting to customized ARO implementations.

Effectively communicating how ARO is implemented will be important when engaging external letter writers. Faculty can facilitate this communication by providing their department’s

research and creative activity statements to these reviewers. Currently, the option to provide these statements is at the discretion of the departments and is decided by vote. These statements typically outline the department's criteria for meritorious achievement and may highlight areas where flexibility is applied, offering reviewers a clearer understanding of the context in which faculty accomplishments are evaluated.

3.4 Synergistic Comments on M/P Process

Faculty offered contrasting views on whether standards for academic advancement have intensified. Some junior faculty members noted an increase in publication requirements, while others observed a decline in grant acceptance rates. Conversely, advancements in research tools such as digital libraries, online search tools, archival platforms, and Zoom conferencing have simplified the research process. Additionally, the expansion of acceptable publication outlets and the increasing recognition of collaborative work have made academic advancement more attainable. However, some departments remain entrenched in traditional criteria for scholarly contributions, potentially hindering progress. Furthermore, discussions emerged regarding the perception that faculty members with higher academic ranks and those without caregiving responsibilities experienced accelerated career advancement during the pandemic, leading to heightened expectations for achievement.

A participant observed that teaching evaluations are primarily based on student feedback, expressing concern that students are becoming increasingly difficult to satisfy. It was noted that teaching effectiveness encompasses more than just student evaluations. In particular, mentoring also plays a significant role. Faculty members have the opportunity to address any negative comments in student evaluations through their self-statements, allowing reviewers to consider context and explanations. Additionally, mentorship statements provide faculty with a platform to elaborate on their mentoring efforts in detail. Furthermore, changes are set to take effect in Fall 2025 that introduce five additional measures of teaching effectiveness that faculty can include in their evaluation files. A participant observed that an emerging classroom practice involves students articulating what they gain from their learning experiences. They suggested that a similar approach could be applied to faculty evaluations to introduce greater flexibility. However, it was pointed out that faculty self-statements already provide a platform for such reflective input.

A participant observed that faculty members may opt to publish in journals outside the "top tier" due to ethical concerns. For instance, there are apprehensions regarding the historical exploitation and extraction of Indigenous knowledge by certain publications. Such concerns arise from past instances where Indigenous knowledge was utilized without proper acknowledgment or consent, leading to a lack of trust in specific academic platforms. It was suggested that authors could clarify their motivations for selecting specific journal outlets by

providing explanations in the author contribution statement. This approach aligns with practices in many academic journals, where authors are encouraged to detail their specific roles and decisions related to the research and publication process.

Assistant professors who utilized "stop the clock" provisions during the COVID-19 pandemic are now approaching tenure review. Given the extended duration of the pandemic, the additional time granted did not fully compensate for the lost opportunities to achieve the same publication output as previous cohorts. Consequently, it was recommended that tenure reviewers focus on the current achievements of these faculty members rather than evaluating their productivity during the pandemic period.

A participant emphasized the importance of public outreach, stating that while it doesn't replace research, it should be acknowledged for its impact. Another participant, familiar with the UK system, appreciated that public-facing work was recognized there. It was noted that in recent years, the University of California system has made efforts to formally recognize the value of public and community scholarship, incorporating this recognition into both the Academic Personnel Manual and the CALL.

4. Other Suggestions

Providing the campus community with data that highlights which areas have been most affected by funding cuts, along with the extent of these reductions, can offer reviewers valuable insights into the challenges faculty are currently facing.

A participant suggested that department chairs receive more targeted training on merit and promotion reviews, as there is considerable variation in their understanding of the CALL.

It was suggested that the campus could provide bridge funding to faculty affected by federal funding cuts. However, the precarious state of the campus budget precludes any substantial initiative in this area.

It was proposed to add an optional checkbox to the safeguard statement, allowing faculty to confirm their understanding of available options such as the LEO process and, depending on the finalization of ARO procedures, those as well.

It was suggested that analyzing data on faculty deferrals could provide valuable insights into whether certain groups of faculty are deferring more frequently than others and thereby inform targeted support strategies.

One participant noted that their department already provides significant flexibility in defining meritorious achievement, while another observed a lack of such flexibility. These differing viewpoints highlight the need for comprehensive campus-wide communication to ensure a unified understanding flexibility when defining meritorious achievement.

5. Conclusions

The discussions surrounding the implementation of ARO at UCR underscored several key considerations. One prominent challenge identified was the difficulty in adjusting expectations on an individual basis, highlighting the complexity of tailoring assessments to individual circumstances. The preferred approach is to maintain rigorous academic standards while ensuring that faculty members are supported and not disadvantaged by personal or professional challenges. Toward that end, expanding upon accommodations introduced during the pandemic such as COVID-Impacted outcomes, Life Event outcomes, and retroactive promotion pay was viewed as a promising direction. A pivotal decision that requires careful consideration is whether retroactive pay can be extended to merit steps. Such an extension could entail significant budgetary consequences and intensify the review process.

A critical area that would require attention is the communication of any forthcoming ARO accommodations across the campus. Discussions revealed that some faculty members are not fully informed about merit and review procedures. Therefore, it is essential to enhance efforts to ensure that ARO implementation measures are effectively communicated to all faculty. Additionally, it is important to provide clear explanations of UCR's practices in this area to external letter writers.

Finally, emphasis must be placed on promoting flexibility and balance within and across review areas during the merit and promotion process. There is a growing concern that, in certain disciplines, the academic standards for progression have become outdated. The institution needs to take proactive steps to ensure that review criteria accurately reflect the evolving nature of disciplinary areas and, furthermore, acknowledge the value brought by innovative approaches to the research process.