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Tenure and Promotion After the Covid-19 Pandemic

How should candidates for tenure and promotion be evaluated in the wake of covid-19? In recognition of the declines in productivity induced by stay-at-home orders, many universities have taken the preliminary step of automatically extending tenure clocks by one year.

This move is necessary but not sufficient. In the past, tenure clock extensions put certain groups at a disadvantage. A [study](#) of 50 economics departments, for example, found that women on longer clocks due to parental leave were less likely than men to get tenure, perhaps because recovery from childbirth and breastfeeding made them less able to produce articles while on leave. Many men, by contrast, used parental leave time to shore up their research records, and tenure committees failed to take into account differences in how leave time was spent.

The covid-19 pandemic will exacerbate existing inequalities and produce new forms of disadvantage. Stay-at-home and public safety orders are precluding some forms of research, such as work involving human subjects and laboratory research, while creating an opportunity for other research, such as work based on digital data. The pandemic's disparate effects on people's research record will likely go on for many years.

The fact is, scholars use the extra time on their tenure clocks in different ways, based on their social roles and the nature of their research, among other reasons. It would be unfair to evaluate and compare candidates' records during their years spent on lockdown, recovering from the pandemic, or on parental leave.

How can external reviewers and tenure and promotion committees conduct fair and equitable evaluations? The challenge is to uphold standards of excellence while recognizing, and not penalizing, the diverse circumstances and time frames of research, teaching, and service. I propose two strategies to guide tenure and promotion evaluations that could work together or separately:

- Instruct all candidates for tenure and promotion to pick the six best years of their record and require that external evaluators and tenure committee assess only the quality and impact of research, teaching, and service from those six years, not the total number of years post-PhD or in the case of full professor, post-tenure.
- Require that everyone going up for tenure and promotion submit a "covid-19 impact statement." The statement should explain how the pandemic affected the candidate's career, including the types of research, teaching, and service they were able or unable to do, infrastructural or financial constraints, and other obligations including child and elder care. Tenure committees must conduct an unbiased assessment not just of the candidate's record but also the conditions of its production.

In addition, *qualitative* and *holistic* assessments of a candidate's record are more important than ever, since quantitative assessments—of number of publications, citation counts, journal impact factors, research expenditures, and teaching scores—will carry even more biases in the wake of the unequal effects of covid-19. Let's treat the pandemic as an opportunity to adopt new standards for tenure and promotion that are fair to people with diverse research agendas and to parents and caregivers.