

‘How Do I Get There From Here?’ Discerning Pathways for Successful Faculty Promotion in Education at a Medical School

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Promotion pathways for clinician educators (CEs) at academic institutions can be unclear, partially due to the specialization of faculty in education and the heterogeneity of their roles. Little specific guidance exists on promotion for CEs; therefore, we examined the lived experiences of recently promoted faculty to identify successful strategies that help early career CEs achieve promotion.

Methods: We conducted a qualitative study utilizing semistructured interviews of 19 associate and full professors to explore their successes, missteps, what they would have done differently, and advice to early-career faculty. Inductive analysis included individual review and group consensus. After generating codes and collapsing them into themes, we used the Social Cognitive Career Theory framework for higher-level analysis.

Results: Themes were organized into 2 categories: (1) advice for new CEs and (2) what institutions should offer. Individual strategies included finding mentors and sponsors, developing scholarship in education, and establishing career direction. Institutional strategies included providing formal or informal training, ensuring protected time, and minimizing nonmeaningful work for early-career faculty.

Discussion: Given the lack of specificity in promotion guidelines for CEs, these themes offer guidance from faculty who successfully navigated promotion. These can inform both early-career faculty and departments seeking to support CE advancement.

Conclusions: Successful promotion for CEs depends on mentorship and sponsorship, scholarship development, career direction, and institutional support. These findings provide actionable strategies for faculty and leadership to improve clarity and equity in promotion processes.

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INTRODUCTION

Many clinician educators (CEs) wrestle with the question: “How can I get promoted?” Criteria for promotion seem clear for research- and clinically focused colleagues but are often opaque for CEs. This lack of clarity stems from variability in position descriptions and expectations for CEs across institutions, whereas the roles of clinician and researcher are better defined. Traditional expectations for promotion—eg, researchers obtaining grants and publishing in journals and clinicians demonstrating volume and quality care—do not apply well for CEs, whose roles are less clearly defined and can be more heterogeneous.¹

According to Sherbino et al,¹ a CE is “a clinician active in health professional practice who applies theory to education practice, engages in education scholarship, and serves as a consultant to other health professionals on education issues.” CEs have been promoted at a slower rate than those on traditional research tracks because of limited

time for scholarly activities, fewer resources to support scholarship, and/or lower rank at the time of hire.²⁻⁴ Additionally while considerable time is spent on training faculty for clinical roles, little time is spent preparing them for academic careers. Publications provide advice on how to succeed as a CE,^{5,6} others define CE roles or identities,^{2,7,8} and one study examined trainees interested in CE careers.⁹ However, the literature does not describe specific steps to promotion, perhaps because academic medical centers provide only general guidance for CEs about this process. Our anecdotal evidence suggests that CEs approaching promotion are uncertain

whether their educational accomplishments are sufficient for promotion at our research-intensive academic medical center. The aim of our qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of CEs, identifying factors contributing to successful promotion, and compare these findings with existing literature on CE success.

METHODS

Participants and Setting

We conducted this study at a large research-intensive public university in a midsized Midwestern city. The school of medicine is 1 of 13 schools and colleges within the university and consists of 27 departments and more than 30 institutes and centers, with over 2000 faculty and 1700 students. The University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health has 6 promotion tracks; the primary CE track under study is the Clinical Health Sciences (CHS) track. Faculty on this track typically spend more than 50% of their time in clinical practice and must be promoted to associate professor by the end of their eighth year. The institution expects faculty to earn an external reputation for their work. Faculty on this track teach learners at all levels, pursue research, and provide service to their department, school, university, and the regional and national medical community.

We primarily studied faculty in the Department of Medicine, which includes approximately 800 faculty members, about 150 of whom are on the CHS track. In the most recent academic year, 8 CHS faculty were promoted to associate professor and 6 to professor. We recruited faculty in the Department of Medicine (n=16) who were promoted to either associate professor or professor on the CHS track within the past 5 years, as well as 1 clinical adjunct faculty member. All participants had substantial roles in education (eg, medical school course director, associate residency or fellowship program director) and were promoted with education as one of their 2 required areas for promotion (the other being clinical care, research, or service). These faculty received a recruitment email describing the project and inviting them to participate in an interview. To validate our findings and explore CE experiences beyond our department, we recruited faculty (n=3) with similar educational roles in the departments of dermatology, pediatrics, and psychiatry.

We did not collect demographic information directly and assumed binary gender identification for reporting purposes. This study was deemed exempt by the University of Wisconsin Institutional Review Board.

Data Collection

All three authors developed a semistructured interview guide from anecdotal discussions with faculty undergoing promotion review, published literature, and our internal expertise with faculty promotions. We structured interview questions to gain an understanding of CEs' successes and missteps throughout their academic careers. We refined questions in 5 areas of inquiry: (1) factors critical to success as a CE and promotion in an area of education, includ-

Current rank	
Professor	5 (25%)
Associate professor	14 (70%)
Primary department	
Medicine	16 (84%)
Other (Pediatrics, Psychiatry, Dermatology)	3 (16%)
Years since promotion	
Professors, Department of Medicine, mean (SD)	3.3 (0.9)
Professors, external to the Department of Medicine, mean (SD)	8.7 (3.0)
All professors, mean (SD)	6 (4.0)
Associate professors, mean (SD)	2.7 (1.7)
Role of education in promotion	
Primary area of promotion	11 (58%)
Secondary area of promotion	8 (42%)
Gender	
Female	8 (42%)
Male	11 (58%)

ing additional training, mentorship or sponsorship, and career development; (2) the extent to which promotion was top of mind during their assistant professor years; (3) what they would have done differently; (4) what else would have been helpful; and (5) advice for current assistant professors. Authors individually interviewed one faculty member at a time. These semistructured virtual interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes each. We recorded and transcribed the interviews for qualitative analysis.

Data Analysis

We used inductive thematic analysis to generate codes and then collapsed them into themes.¹⁰ Our iterative process involved each author generating codes from their interviews and adding them to a shared document. We held several meetings to collapse codes through consensus. We compared our themes to the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) model, which addresses approaches to career decisions to assess how they aligned.¹¹ This model provides a framework for understanding career exploration and decisions from an individual's perspective, considering internal and external factors. We ceased interviewing when we reached conceptual depth, where participant responses started to closely reassemble one another, and then began our analysis.

RESULTS

We interviewed 19 faculty members (Table 1) between June 2021 and June 2022. All were on the CHS track, except the single clinical adjunct faculty member described above. Themes from this interview did not differ from those of CHS track faculty. Similarly, themes from the three interviews with faculty outside our department were consistent with those generated within the department. All faculty described themselves as clinical educators or clinician teachers. Most had started and remained on the CHS track through promotion, but three transferred from a clinical track and one from

a research track. At the time of the interviews, most participants (n = 14) were associate professors and had been promoted an average of 2.7 (SD, 1.7) years earlier. The remaining participants (n = 5) were professors. Department of Medicine professors had been promoted an average of 3.3 (SD, 0.9) years earlier, and those external to the department had been promoted an average of 8.7 years (SD, 3.0) earlier.

We categorized themes into 2 areas: (1) advice for individual actions CEs can take to secure success and (2) assistance institutions should provide for faculty beginning educational roles. These categories aligned with components of the SCCT model:¹¹ self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals. We present themes and associated explanations in Table 2. While we created columns for “what to advise new CEs to do” and “what institutions should offer,” these areas are not mutually exclusive; all stakeholders invested in advancing the careers of CEs should consider all as potential strategies.

Themes related to promotion pathways coalesced into major areas: finding mentors, sponsors, collaborators, and role models; developing scholarship in education; and establishing career direction. Regarding mentorship, participants emphasized the crucial need for mentors who provide accountability, support, and guidance on career direction. Additional themes around sponsorship and role modeling emerged in participant quotes:

Participant 1: “...particularly for medical education that mentor is really critical. I found that medical education is a smaller community than the rest of medicine. Having a senior mentor who has you in mind for opportunities that they either hear about or may be asked to do themselves and getting you involved has really been the most important part that I’ve seen.”

Participant 2: “I had people who were really great in whatever they were doing, and they took me under their wing and kind of showed me the ropes.”

Another important theme concerned developing direction. Early-career meandering was common; participants described gaining direction by initially saying yes to opportunities, identifying gaps to fill, and discovering what they enjoyed. One participant described this as “meandering with purpose”:

Participant 3: “I actually think there is strategic meandering... To not discount immediately, whether [potential opportunities

Table 2. Themes Related to Pathways for Successful Promotion as a Clinician Educator

What to Advise New Clinician Educators to Do	What Institutions Should Offer
<p>Find mentors/sponsors/collaborators/role models/network with purposes of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keeping you accountable • Asking critical questions (How can you continue doing what you enjoy? What can you stop doing?) • Helping you think about direction • Advocating for you/recommending you for opportunities • Providing encouragement and support and advice and direction <p>Additional considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize more than 1 mentor • Find both formal and informal mentors • Find mentors internal and external to institution • Consider gender alignment • Apprentice with an expert/follow their career path 	<p>Encourage formal or informal training opportunities with purposes of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Validating faculty as educators • Formalizing ways to think about scholarship or education • Creating opportunities to develop a network • Providing resources about what to know or read • Developing teaching skills <p>Support a variety of training opportunities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specialty organization conferences • Peer coaching or feedback • Formal education fellowships • Medical school resources • Short courses in education at institutions or through national organizations
<p>Develop scholarship in education:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publish on the everyday work you do • Begin a few projects with the goal of publishing • Develop a workshop/abstract in conjunction with a manuscript • Work in a group • Gather data from everything you do to develop scholarship 	<p>Provide protected time:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be clear about the time needed and allotted for education • Allow time for career development/promotion so it can be accomplished during work hours
<p>Develop direction:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find what gives you joy • Take opportunities that arise to explore interests • Explore where there are gaps/needs; find a unique niche • Emulate your role models, including how they succeeded • Take small steps in the direction you want to go, if known 	<p>Protect faculty from burdensome activities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that work being done in education fits with criteria for promotion • Leverage the requirements of the track for promotion to minimize nonmeaningful work

or interactions] will be useful or helpful or not...That is information gathering, because some of those experiences or interactions end up being incredibly important.”

Participants also recalled the support provided by education leaders, mentors, and division chairs as particularly important. In addition to ensuring protected time and guidance about promotion in education, participants described how opportunities for informal or formal training from various sources contributed to their success. Common themes included learning how to think like an educator, developing teaching skills, identifying key resources, and building networks.

DISCUSSION

Our study offers additional perspectives beyond those reported in the literature, suggesting that promotion success should be considered alongside professional success when advising CEs. In the area of mentoring, participants uniquely noted that mentors can keep CEs accountable and ask critical questions. For CEs working towards promotion, these mentor characteristics are important additions to those previously cited in the literature.¹² When developing direction, participants emphasized the importance of mod-

eling their careers after CEs who have been successfully promoted. Triemstra et al⁸ refers to identification of role models as important to CE success, and our participants confirmed this. Advice for CEs to take small steps toward growth also adds nuance to the general advice found in literature.

Participants contributed substantial insights regarding successful approaches to education scholarship. At our research-intensive academic medical center, promotion success includes motivation to publish. Participant advice on developing scholarship was more detailed than what is provided in the cited literature. While Castiglione et al⁵ and Santhosh et al⁶ noted the importance of gathering data on all projects, our participants added specific recommendations: develop workshops and abstracts alongside manuscripts, collaborate in groups, and to publish on everyday work.

We intentionally divided our themes into actions CEs should take and support institutions should offer. This perspective differs from other publications, which focus primarily on what CEs should do. Chang et al³ is an exception; they describe in detail what chiefs and chairs should do to promote CE success, based on a literature review and their experiences. Our study of lived experiences confirms their recommendations and adds to them by suggesting that chairs and chiefs leverage the promotion requirements to minimize nonmeaningful work.

Our findings align with literature on CE roles and competencies¹ as well as the SCCT framework.¹¹ Themes regarding institutional support correlate well with recommendations for leadership actions.³ Our study expands on prior work^{2,5-8,12} by analyzing perspectives of those who have navigated promotion, rather than focusing solely on guidelines or institutional recommendations. Participants offered numerous impressions and useful advice, underscoring the need to incorporate these insights into promotion guidelines for CEs. While maintaining general guidelines allows for heterogeneity of career paths, it can create uncertainty about meeting promotion criteria. Nebulous guidelines may favor dominant groups and certain faculty activities, limiting equity in promotion—especially when mentorship is less accessible for CEs.^{12,13}

Limitations

Our study had several limitations. We interviewed a small number of faculty from a limited number of departments at a single institution, and we selected individuals who were successfully promoted and remained at our institution after promotion. Retrospective interviews may introduce recall bias, as participants might remember only components that led to success or recall events inaccurately. We primarily interviewed faculty promoted recently to minimize recall bias for long-past occurrences. A few faculty changed promotion tracks, and we did not examine reasons for those changes, focusing instead on their successes after the transition; therefore, we may not have identified factors detrimental to success. Since this analysis, our promotion criteria have

become more specific, and we did not study how that specificity may have influenced individual approaches to promotion or advice to junior faculty.

CONCLUSIONS

Our themes for successful promotion of CEs—mentorship and sponsorship, development of education scholarship, establishing career direction through strategic opportunities, and institutional support such as protected time and clear promotion guidance—add to the literature and can enhance conversations between early-career faculty and their mentors, leaders, and promotion committees. Insights from those who have navigated the path to a successful promotion can provide CEs with clearer expectations for career trajectories and strategies for achieving promotion.

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