

College of Science Promotion Guidelines for Research Faculty

Last Reviewed September 2022

The College of Science Promotion Guidelines for Research Faculty supplement the latest published guidelines in the Faculty Handbook (see Chapter 6) and on the websites maintained by the Provost (www.provost.vt.edu/faculty_affairs/promotion_tenure.html) and the Office of the Vice-President for Research and Innovation (www.research.vt.edu/ovpr-hr/research-faculty/promotion-guidelines). These guidelines are written to help ensure that all candidates for promotion are treated equally and fairly by the participating parties at each level of the process.

This document addresses promotion expectations and procedures for three categories of research faculty: research associate, research scientist, and those in the research professor ranks. While these categories involve varying levels of responsibility and some differences in duties, they all share the primary responsibility of conducting research and contributing to Virginia Tech's research mission through the acquisition and successful implementation of sponsored grants and contracts.

Expectations and Procedures for Promotion of Research Associates

The research associate rank is an entry faculty rank for researchers involved in sponsored projects. It requires a master's degree in a relevant field as minimal qualification. Research associates work with direct supervision from more senior researchers, and may have limited responsibilities in areas such as supervision of student workers and in proposal preparation. Research associates may not serve as principal investigators unless granted an exception by the OVPRI. Duties and responsibilities of research associates are primarily, and typically only, in support of sponsored research.

Promotion of a research associate to senior research associate requires that (i) the candidate holds a PhD in a relevant field, (ii) the candidate has established a record of performance excellence in those projects pursued in the current rank, and (iii) the department has a demonstrable need for the higher level of responsibility, commensurate with the senior rank, in support of its sponsored research mission. Research associates will only rarely have even limited involvement in the department's teaching mission, and this will not be a consideration in the promotion process.

Recommendation for promotion typically occurs during the department's annual evaluation of faculty, though promotion may occur at any time throughout the year. The promotion process is internal to VT; external letters of evaluation are not required. If the department judges that promotion is warranted, the department head will write a letter of recommendation addressing, in detail, items (i)-(iii) above. This letter, along with the candidate's CV, recent FARs, and other supporting material as deemed appropriate by the head, is forwarded to the dean of the college. If the dean also recommends promotion, then the request is forwarded to the Office of the Vice President for Research and Innovation, where final approval must be granted before the promotion is offered.

Unlike the promotion process for tenure-track faculty, there is no mandatory year by which promotion must be considered, and there is no formal appeal procedure associated with the process. Consideration for promotion may be initiated by the department head or may be requested by a research associate; in either case, discussion between the department head and candidate on the merits of the case will precede any action. The case will not be forwarded from the department if not supported by the department head.

Expectations and Procedures for Promotion of Research Scientists

The research scientist rank is a faculty rank for researchers carrying out independent, sponsored research under limited supervision. It requires a doctoral degree in a relevant field and significant experience. Research scientists can be principal investigators and co-PIs on sponsored research projects. Duties and responsibilities of research scientists are primarily, and typically only, in support of sponsored research. There is no expectation of involvement in the department's teaching mission.

Promotion of a research scientist to senior research scientist requires amassing a considerable research record, with strong performance in procuring and completing sponsored research projects, and excellent promise of continuing to achieve and grow along these lines. The elevation in rank is appropriate for those ready to provide leadership to a research team, and who have clearly demonstrated the capacity to conduct sponsored research related to their own expertise. Research scientists are not to serve on graduate student committees or supervise graduate student research, this being a key distinction from the Research Professor series addressed below.

Recommendation for promotion typically occurs during the department's annual evaluation of faculty, though promotion may occur at any time throughout the year. The promotion process is internal to VT; external letters of evaluation are not required, though may be solicited at the department head's option. If the department judges that promotion is warranted, the department head will write a letter of recommendation addressing, in detail, the candidate's research achievements and expected research arc moving forward. This letter, along with the candidate's CV, recent FARs, and other supporting material as deemed appropriate by the head, is forwarded to the dean of the college. If the dean also recommends promotion, then the request is forwarded to the Office of the Vice President for Research and Innovation, where final approval must be granted before the promotion is offered.

Unlike the promotion process for tenure-track faculty, there is no mandatory year by which promotion must be considered, and there is no formal appeal procedure associated with the process. Consideration for promotion may be initiated by the department head or may be requested by a research scientist; in either case, discussion between the department head and candidate on the merits of the case will precede any action. The case will not be forwarded from the department if not supported by the department head.

Expectations and Procedures for Promotion in the Research Professor Ranks

The research professor ranks are designed for research faculty holding credentials similar to those of tenure-track faculty of similar rank. Thus, for instance, an assistant research professor will possess qualifications similar to that of a tenure-track assistant professor, and promotion to associate research professor requires research accomplishment at least at the level required for promotion to tenured associate professor. Those in the research professor ranks are ordinarily restricted to teaching at most one course per year (or two courses in a two year period), this being a lighter teaching load than carried by most track faculty.

As with both research faculty categories discussed above, appointments in any of the research professor ranks are indefinitely renewable, and there is no mandatory deadline for consideration of promotion. The promotion process for those in the research professor ranks otherwise follows the same progression as for tenured and tenure-track faculty (T/T faculty), beginning with the departmental committee and up through deliberations by the college committee and the dean. Preparation of the candidate's dossier is according to the guidelines and template provided on the Provost's website (link provided above). The COS rules for obtaining external evaluation letters are the same as those for T/T faculty; candidates are referred to the college's annually posted documents for T/T promotions for details. An assistant or associate research professor seeking promotion should notify their department head no later than the April preceding the academic year in which the promotion will be pursued, so that the annually posted timeline for this process can be observed.

If both the department committee and the department head fail to recommend promotion, then the case ends and is not forwarded to the college level. If either the department committee or the department head recommends promotion, the case is forwarded for review by the COS P&T Committee, which makes its recommendation to the Dean. Cases making it to the college level and approved by the Dean are forwarded to the Office of the Vice President for Research and Innovation for final determination.

Promotion from assistant to associate research professor requires amassing a research record on par with that of candidates for promotion to tenured associate professor, with excellent promise of continuing to achieve and grow along these lines. Promotion from associate research professor to research professor requires amassing a research record on par with that of candidates for promotion to full professor, with compelling evidence that the candidate has become an acknowledged research leader in his or her field. Necessarily these judgements are relative to the standards for the research field in question. If teaching and/or guiding graduate students is a part of the candidate's duties, then that will be taken into account. Service to the profession, especially as related to research activities (including but not limited to refereeing, editorships, conference organization and participation), will also be weighed. However, relative to the T/T ranks, and in accord with the distinction between research professor ranks and track ranks, greater emphasis will be placed on research accomplishments, with special attention given to funded research. Success in the Research Professor series requires consistent external funding adequate to maintain the faculty member's research program at a high level.