

Decreasing Barriers to Academic Rank for Advanced Practice Providers

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to reduce barriers to achieving academic promotion among advanced practice providers. Educational sessions, an online tutorial, and mentoring sessions were implemented. A survey was administered to all advanced providers after the interventions. Of the 168 surveys sent out, 117 (67%) were returned. Subsequently, 32% achieved academic rank (a 52% improvement), and 35% were active in the process. Reporting of the most frequently identified barriers “lack of mentorship” and “difficulty understanding the process” was reduced by 100% and 71%. Strategies to decrease barriers can be beneficial in improving the processes and achievement of academic promotion.

Keywords: academic promotion, academic rank, nurse practitioner, physician assistant

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In academic organizations, 1 way to recognize staff achievements and scholarly activities in education, research, and practice is through 4 levels of academic rank. Nurse practitioners (NPs) and physician assistants (PAs) frequently participate in a spectrum of professional activities that include clinical practice, education, research, administration, and mentorship of novice clinicians. Over the past 30 years, NPs and PAs have become an established presence in the primary health care workforce.^{1,2} In academic medical centers, scholarly activities (education and research) are requirements for academic appointment (instructor, assistant professor, associate professor, or professor) and often promotion. Barriers to achieving academic rank have been studied; among the most commonly mentioned are 1) fewer resources at the beginning of the career, 2) deficient mentoring, 3) a less supportive academic environment, and 4) child-rearing responsibilities.^{3,4}

A thorough literature review revealed a lack of information on the frequency of NP/PA achievement of academic rank within teaching institutions.⁵ The paucity of literature on this topic led the authors to conduct a survey of NP/PAs employed at a large geographically separated (the Midwest, Southwest,

and Southeast) academic medical enterprise to investigate perceived barriers to achieving an academic appointment or promotion.⁶ The results showed that the majority of respondents desired obtaining an academic appointment, but most did not have one. Additionally, 86% of the respondents of the survey stated that they would try to achieve academic rank if they knew that they could, and 70% felt that it was an important career goal. Three primary perceived barriers were identified: 1) lack of time, 2) lack of understanding of the process, and 3) lack of support.⁶

Given the high value respondents to the previously described survey placed on having an academic appointment, it was noted that strategies needed to be developed to assist NP/PAs with the achievement of this goal. Therefore, interventions were developed with the aims of increasing NP/PA knowledge and awareness of the academic appointment and advancement processes and decreasing the most commonly identified barriers by creating improved work through processes.

METHODS

Description of the Academic Enterprise

The enterprise for this project location consists of 3 separate campuses in the Midwest, Southwest, and

Southeast. In addition to clinical training programs (residencies and fellowships), the organization has separate accredited colleges of medicine, graduate medical education, and allied health that confer a number of clinical and basic science degrees. Students from across the enterprise participate in educational programs, and a single governing authority provides oversight of accreditation and standards. Academic appointment between all 3 sites is based on identical standards maintained by this single governing authority, and all advanced practice providers regardless of doctoral degree can achieve academic advancement based on the specified criteria identified by the enterprise.

Project Planning

Members from the NP/PA leadership society from the Southwest campus organized to provide leadership and overview of this project in conjunction with physician support. Of the 6 previously identified promotion barriers (lack of time, don't understand the process, not emphasized, lack of mentorship, too difficult, and other) to achieving academic rank, the team chose to develop interventions targeting "don't understand the process" and "lack of mentorship." These barriers were of highest concern identified in the previous survey and could most easily be targeted through educational and mentoring programs in a timely fashion.

Overview of Academic Appointment and Advancement Process

The process to achieve academic appointment and promotion is a criteria-based review process provided by the Academic Appointments and Promotions Committee (AAPC). The AAPC is currently comprised of clinical-based scientists; however, no NP/PAs are listed. When deciding on an individual's candidacy for academic rank appointment, the committee examines the candidate's contributions to education, research, and clinical activities with the realization that he or she may be more heavily weighted in one area over another. Criteria become more stringent with higher rank advancement.

Briefly, the process first requires the candidate to identify his or her interest in applying for academic rank to his or her divisional/departmental leader so

that together they can develop a plan for advancement. Together, the applicant and the departmental leader discuss the current depth of the applicant's publications, presentations, awards, and contributions as an educator to his or her area of expertise. Next, if approved, the application is endorsed by the divisional/department chair and submitted to the appropriate rank section of the institution's AAPC. If accepted, the application is sent to the education committee and then the board of governors for final approval.

Overview of Interventions

The interventions chosen for this project were composed of a number of components (Figure 1). The team chose a wide variety of educational modalities in order to gain as much attention and attendance for the topic as possible and to address different styles of learning. All eligible NP/PAs within the Southwest campus, including the local satellite clinic settings, were invited to participate. The interactive educational sessions were advertised through e-mail and mail-out invites.

As a first step toward providing information to NP/PAs on the academic advancement and promotion process, the NP/PA leadership group analyzed the institution's existing process for rank application. The group met with a representative from systems and procedures, analyzed the current process, and developed a process map (Figure 2). This swim lane diagram outlines the approximate 3-month internal process and highlights the roles and responsibilities of all those involved from initial application to the granting or denial of academic rank.

Accuracy in creating the diagram was maintained and verified by the systems and procedures division

Figure 1. Timeline of project interventions.

Intervention	Timing of Intervention
Academic Rank Swim Lane Diagram	Jan-15
Academic Rank Educational Brochure	Feb-15
Seminar One: What is needed for Academic Rank	Feb-15
Seminar 2: Preparing Submission for Academic Rank	May-15
Academic Rank Mentoring Sessions	Nov-15 Dec-15
Seminar 3: Focus Group	Dec-15

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