PROMOTION & TENURE SYMPOSIUM

DR. NICHOLAS P. JONES

“A Conversation with the Provost”

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2015

9:45 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.

FOSTER AUDITORIUM, PATERNO LIBRARY
Good morning! Thank you for the kind introduction, Kathy, and for inviting me to speak today. I’d like to thank the President’s Commissions for Equity and the University Libraries for your hard work in organizing, sponsoring, and hosting this important event.

It’s a genuine pleasure to engage with all of you, first of all, regarding equity and inclusion. At Penn State, we are committed to being a unified and welcoming community. To fulfill our land-grant mission, the University must be a place of equity and opportunity for all faculty, staff, and students.

Diversity is a priority here; an institutional imperative. It’s not done to be trendy or politically correct, or to satisfy external regulations. It’s something that we celebrate every day.

So, to faculty who identify with our Equity Commissions and who are interested in joining our diversity efforts, I’m thrilled that you’re at Penn State. You’re important to me, as is your success in teaching and research and your subsequent pursuit of promotion and tenure.

In our forthcoming university strategic plan for the five years comprising 2016 through 2020, we focus throughout the document on equity and inclusion. And in my work with the University Strategic Planning Council, we’ve identified six institutional values that are critical to Penn State’s mission and vision.

First, Integrity: We act with integrity in accordance with the highest academic, professional, and ethical standards.
Then, Respect: We respect and honor the dignity of each person, embrace civil discourse, and foster a diverse and inclusive community.

Next, Responsibility: We act responsibly and hold ourselves accountable for our decisions, actions, and their consequences.

Then, Discovery: We seek and create new knowledge and understanding, and foster creativity and innovation, for the benefit of our communities, society, and the environment.

Next, Excellence: We strive for excellence in all of our endeavors as individuals, an institution, and a leader in higher education.

Finally, Community: We work together for the betterment of our University, the communities we serve, and the world.

All six core values support our long-term vision: That Penn State will be a global leader in learning, discovery, and engagement that fosters innovation, embraces diversity in all its forms, and inspires achievement that will impact the world in positive and enduring ways.

You all will play a role in supporting this strategic plan and living these values through your work.
You can look forward to taking a sneak peek at the strategic plan and providing personal feedback about it later this month, so watch for email communication about that opportunity.

Beyond your support of and interest in equity and inclusion, you are here to better understand the promotion and tenure process at Penn State. During this symposium, you’ll learn a great deal about the ins and outs of pursuing promotion and tenure, classroom teaching strategies, and funding and publishing your research. I hope you leave here later today motivated and inspired to excel in all of your teaching- and research-related endeavors. In short, I hope your work in all areas makes a positive impact.

Throughout higher education, the narrative regarding the comparative value of research and teaching continues to evolve. We all know both are important, but how do we prioritize them? How and where do we allocate vital but limited resources, such as time and money? When it comes to you, our University’s professors, and your teaching and research, what does success look like for you—and do your perspectives on this subject align with what other University stakeholders would expect or consider appropriate? Does it even matter if they do or don’t? These aren’t easy questions to answer, but it’s still important to ask them.

An article in Faculty Focus, an online publication focused on higher education teaching strategies, asked several key questions that many universities, including Penn State, face today:
“How do you expand research capacity while still preserving an institution’s traditional emphasis on effective teaching?”

“How is it possible to improve your reputation in one of these areas without abandoning your reputation in the other?”

“How can you expand your mission in an environment of increasingly strained budgets, greater competition among institutions – including public, private, for-profit, and virtual universities – and rigorous accountability?”

“And how do you balance the expectation of so many legislatures and governing boards that you demonstrate student success with their simultaneous expectation that you obtain more and more external funding from sponsored research and the frequent pursuit of grants?”

According to the author, Dr. Jeffrey Buller, Dean of the Wilkes Honors College at Florida Atlantic University, the answers to these questions at many colleges have consisted principally of modest adjustments in existing practices – for instance, modifying the formulas used in establishing faculty teaching requirements; rewriting tenure and promotion procedures so that they include a “teaching track” and a “research track, each with different criteria; or sponsoring workshops on the scholarship of teaching.

I think all of these efforts can have a positive impact, but we must explore even further how universities such as Penn State can encourage substantive research while
still promoting and facilitating excellence in teaching. It’s imperative to Penn State’s short- and long-term success, and to understanding how both endeavors drive the pursuit of promotion and tenure.

I believe the ways in which faculty roles are defined, evaluated, and rewarded sometimes contribute to a false impression that teaching and research are distinct — to the point that some may think achieving tenure is based much more on “getting published” and doing meaningful research than in being an excellent professor. If that’s what our faculty members believe, then our perceived institutional incentives are probably compromising classroom instruction to some degree.

I’ve heard some Penn State professors refer to their “teaching loads” and how they inhibit the time and energy they need to do research. Implicit in this complaint is that research is more important than teaching, which is positioned as a burden. I’ve yet to hear a professor express concern to me about his or her “research load.”

An anonymous author on a blog called New Faculty wrote that, as a professor at a so-called “Big Box University,” she knows “plenty of other faculty who love teaching like I do, but once you look at a tenure packet and realize that teaching is not the priority, it really begins to shape your future, and very quickly.”

And consider this recent commentary, from an undergraduate student at UCLA, writing for the Daily Bruin newspaper: “One day last week, I went to three different classes in which each professor relayed the same exact message: ‘Read my book.’ It was then that I questioned whether some professors value their responsibilities as
researchers more than as teachers.”

I hope it wasn’t a Penn State professor chiming in on that blog, but what if it was? And sure, that undergraduate was from UCLA, but he easily could have been a Penn State student.

I share these stories with you because I believe we need to reconsider this narrative in constructive ways. Research and teaching are complementary. Each in some synergistic way builds upon and supports the other. In turn, we can move past what some see as a roadblock and consider these related, but also different parts of a faculty member’s job that contribute to achieving promotion and tenure.

Two authors of a recent article in the *Journal of Engineering Education* articulated this idea of “related-but-different disciplines” better than I could, so I’ll quote them now. They wrote: “The primary goal of research is to advance knowledge, while that of teaching is to develop and enhance abilities. Researchers are valued mainly for what they discover and for the problems they solve, and teachers for what they enable their students to discover and solve.”

At Penn State, can we hope for, or even expect, our faculty to excel in research and teaching? YES. To promote research while advancing instruction? YES. To contribute to their fields through scholarly and creative means, but not receive tenure unless he or she also demonstrates outstanding teaching? YES. To have these expectations, however, we must examine how we look at the nexus of teaching and research and our structures for rewarding success in both areas.
We must lay the groundwork for a more evolved dialogue on this topic and understand that we’re all about impact – both in research and teaching. How can we restore a meaningful balance between these two complementary endeavors?

Last year, Penn State President Eric Barron introduced six imperatives: excellence; student engagement; demographics and diversity; student career success and economic development; accessibility; and technology. Their importance to the future of higher education elevates them from mere goals to the level of imperatives, and these are reflected in Penn State’s new strategic plan.

Understanding that teaching and research are not unrelated, competing endeavors – and putting that understanding into practice – is essential to delivering positive results for our University and all of its stakeholders. And both matter substantively when it comes to the pursuit of promotion and tenure.

For promotion and tenure, it’s often about reputation – which is built on the impact you’re able to have as a scholar and educator. It’s not about checking boxes in a list, such as citing the number of papers, conferences attended, or the amount of research funding brought in. That’s not what we’re about here. We want to empower people – empower all of you – to achieve meaningful impacts with whatever contributions they make.

At key points in the promotion and tenure process, Penn State seeks an objective evaluation of impact. We request feedback from external referees, and we have a rigorous and robust internal process to consider their perspectives. We make
sure that the process is fair and equitable. And, ultimately, we must decide if we’ll extend a lifetime contract.

The stakes are high for both you and the University. If either of us makes a mistake, it’s a big deal.

So, what is my advice to you?

• First, do great work, and live our core institutional values in doing so.

• Make sure you understand the promotion and tenure process, which is why you’re here today. Because the stakes are so high, don’t leave anything to chance. Know what happens when, why, and how. Position your case strategically to meet institutional expectations.

• Manage and balance your vitae. Start on day one, and continue to revisit and update it. Balance it across all three areas of teaching, research, and service. You don’t need to achieve an A+ in every category, but having a strong passing grade in each is an important goal.

• Periodically, step back and ask yourself: “Am I doing the types of things that enable me to have a positive and meaningful impact in teaching, research, and service? What do I need to do to ensure that my referees can see that I’m making an impact?”
• Be passionate. Care about what you do, and do it with a sense of excitement. It’s infectious.

It’s not just about style – you obviously need substance, too – but do your work with enthusiasm. You’ll be more engaged, and your students will be, too.

Penn State is one of the world’s greatest research universities. It’s an exciting time to be here – with motivated leadership, new strategic planning priorities, changes in teaching and technology, the potential to address serious societal issues, and the opportunity to mentor and inspire our undergraduate and graduate students. Seize this opportunity to make a difference.

Now, I’d be happy to take some questions or hear your comments. Thank you.