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Development and Implementation of a Points-Based Merit System (Professional Achievement Award)

Ken Hawkinson, Western Illinois University

Western Illinois University (WIU) and the University Professionals of Illinois (UPI), established a unique and innovative points-based merit system during negotiations for a successor contract in 2007. The Professional Achievement Award (PAA) points system is an organizational reward system designed to offer monetary incentive for strong tenured/tenure-track faculty performance across the three areas of responsibility: Teaching/Primary Duties; Scholarly/Professional Activities; and Service Activities. The mechanism for obtaining this monetary reward is an objectively scored points system. Points accumulate across years of service until the faculty member exceeds a threshold of total number of points required to earn a PAA.

Historical Perspective

Over the past 40 years, Western Illinois University has attempted a number of merit-based reward systems, none of which satisfied the needs or interests of the faculty, union, or administration. In the early 1970s a merit system/pay distribution system was put in place wherein department chairs, working with committees, ranked faculty in a department and distributed merit/salary based on these rankings. This system brought about major discontent that largely resulted in the unionization of the faculty in 1976 (the UPI signed a common contract representing the five state universities under the Board of Governors at that time). A new merit system was put into place in the 1980s wherein a Faculty Excellence Award (eventually $1,200 with half going into salary base) was created wherein faculty could choose to submit an application to a university-wide merit committee. These yearly awards were limited to 15% of the total number of faculty (roughly 50 awards per year). This award became increasingly unpopular because of the inconsistencies in criteria from year to year, a perceived bias in favor

1 Ken Hawkinson, Ph.D., is Associate Provost at Western Illinois University.
2 An IFT, AFT affiliated union representing Western Illinois University tenured/tenure-track faculty since 1976 and non-tenure track associate faculty and academic support professionals since 1995.
3 The PAA was developed by the following administrators and union members who served on the negotiating team for the 2007-11 Agreement at WIU: Alvin Goldfarb, WIU President; Karen Sears, UPI Chapter President; and team members Barbara Baily, Earl Bracey, Julie DeWees, Holly Garbo, Ken Hawkinson, Martha Klems, Kathleen Neumann, Joseph Rallo, Michael Romano, and William Thompson. Also acknowledged is Jack Thomas, WIU Provost and Academic Vice President, who supervised the implementation of this new program, as well as John Miller, current UPI Chapter President, who recently negotiated some adjustments to the PAA.
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of certain individuals and disciplines, and because faculty could not carry over accomplishments from one year to the next.

Additionally, in the late 1980s, tenured faculty could choose to apply for a Professional Advancement Increment (PAI) wherein the previous five years of activity was evaluated in a portfolio submitted by the applicant and $105/month would be awarded and added to the base salary for those who met the criteria.

In 1996, state law abolished the Board of Governors and established WIU’s own Board of Trustees (110 ILCS 690/35-35) which, in turn, negotiated a new contract with the UPI separate from other state universities. Faculty Excellence Awards were discontinued, and the PAI became what is now known as the “old” Professional Achievement Award. The Administration became increasingly dissatisfied with the PAI for the following reasons:

1. Faculty submitted only in Teaching/Primary Duties and either Research or Service. It was felt that to earn merit, faculty should show activity and accomplishment in all three areas.
2. The old PAA required many of the same materials and the same process as someone going up for tenure. Evaluation materials went through numerous evaluators and committees. The criteria established to earn the award were vague and, for the most part, easily attained. While some faculty, for ideological reasons or as a result of a lack of activity, did not apply for the award, virtually all faculty members who did apply received the award.
3. Only the previous four years of activities and accomplishments could be submitted in earning an award and none of these activities could be carried forward into a new four year cycle.
4. Faculty members were not eligible to apply for the award until their tenth year of service (four years after tenure). Therefore, newer faculty who often are the most energetic and engaged in research and other activities, had no opportunity to earn a merit increase.

The New Professional Achievement Award

In light of these concerns, and past history with merit-based reward systems, WIU and UPI went into contract negotiations in 2006 with the intent of creating a completely new system. Working cooperatively, the parties developed the new PAA with the following characteristics:

1. Reward faculty members for strong performance in Teaching/Primary Duties, Scholarly/Professional (Research) Activity, and Service.
2. Establish eligibility to apply after one year of service in a tenured/tenure-track position.
3. Specify a flexible timeline for earning the award in that one can earn the award every year or two or every decade or two with the faculty member choosing how quickly to accomplish the activities leading to the award.

4. Create a manageable application process consisting of turning in the PAA Activities Document (see Appendix) with “minimal supporting materials” and a simple sign-off by the department chair, department personnel committee chair, and dean.

5. Reward faculty who teach or perform primary duties at the upper end of the workload range. Faculty members could also replace overload pay with PAA points if they choose.

6. Provide incentive to faculty members to perform challenging activities that need to be done.

The PAA point system was developed so that a typical faculty member could reasonably earn enough points for the award every four years (though, some faculty members could earn the award sooner, and some over a longer period of time). To earn a PAA, a faculty member is required to fulfill one of the following conditions: 1) meet or exceed 35 total points with a minimum of eight points in Teaching/Primary Duties; eight points in Scholarly/Professional Activities; and eight points in Service; or 2) meet or exceed 55 points, regardless of the number of points in each category. A faculty member’s points continue to accumulate from one year to the next until one of the two conditions above are met. In the following year, the faculty member’s pool of points would be set back to zero, and the process toward earning a PAA would begin again.

**The Professional Achievement Award Template: Development and Approval of Activities**

Each department was responsible for identifying the particular faculty activities that would count in the various categories in each of the three areas of responsibility: Teaching/Primary Duties, Scholarly/Professional Activities, and Service Activities. There was also a “bonus points” category for awards, honors, and unique activities that cover all three activity areas. A template was developed listing common activities across all departments and submitted to the departments for their consideration. It was agreed that approval of the final PAA list of activities submitted by departments would rest with the Academic Vice President (Provost), after discussion with the appropriate deans and with the UPI Chapter President (the Provost also visited with every department to discuss their draft PAA activities list). The Provost considered any activity that was submitted and tended to support activities that accomplish the following:

1. Recognize strong performance and high achievement such as nationally or regionally recognized publications, presentations, or performances.
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2. Recognize strong commitment to service with points going to those activities that are time-consuming and require substantial effort. Service activities that affect the university as a whole, generally speaking, should be awarded more than activities that effect fewer individuals.

3. In the Teaching/Primary Duties area, award points for work on thesis and dissertation committees, independent studies, new course development, innovations in technology, and other activities above and beyond a faculty member’s normal teaching duties. In addition, award points for “exceptional teaching,” defined as performance above and beyond that required for tenure. Examples of activities that would denote exceptional teaching are those that have been tied to the goals of the university in supporting graduate programs, honors teaching, course development, development of web-based courses, technology innovation, first-year experience mentoring, service learning, and undergraduate and graduate research.

4. Generally, limit points to those activities that are time or labor intensive, that require engagement at a level beyond normally assigned duties, and that result in a definable high-quality outcome.

5. Avoid awarding for activities that are performed as a part of a faculty member’s normal, everyday responsibilities, or for activities that require minimal effort.

6. With a few exceptions, avoid awarding points for activities for which faculty members are already receiving workload credits.

7. Consider items not formally listed under “equivalent activity” listed under the appropriate categories. Equivalent activities should be “equivalent” in time and effort devoted to the activity as compared to other activities on the list, and/or prestige earned by the activity.

8. Consider fairness and consistency such that two departments submitting the same activity should receive the same number of points.

In addition, faculty members needed to submit documentation that demonstrates a performance level commensurate with that required for tenure in the Teaching/Primary Duties area. Student, chair, and peer evaluations generally are sufficient to demonstrate achievement of this threshold.

Results

The PAA activity documents were approved and went into effect in the summer of 2008, with the first awards being approved in the 2008-09 school year (earning a PAA results in $1,530/year added to a faculty member’s base salary). Of 508 tenure/tenure-track faculty, and this first year resulted in 46 awards were earned in the first year. In the second year, 166 awards
were earned. It is important to note that in the transition to the new PAA, several prior years of research were grandfathered in and allowed to earn points which accounted for many faculty earning the award the first year and second year. It is anticipated that around 150 awards will be earned each year (approximately 30% of the faculty), but there is no quota or limit to the number of awards in a given year. Twenty-two faculty members earned a PAA in both of the two years it has been in existence. These individuals earned a very large number of points through numerous publications, an extremely high level of service activities, or winning university-level awards.

In addition, nearly all the faculty members have chosen to participate in this program. It was anticipated that a higher number of faculty would opt out but with the provision that no points can be earned unless a form is turned in for that year, faculty are motivated to participate each year so as not to lose points.

**Special Considerations**

The process of developing the department PPA lists of acceptable activities was much more difficult than anticipated, and the process had to be done a second time because objections were raised by a number of the departments. Some faculty members wanted points for activities that the administration considered a part of normal responsibilities. It was a struggle to come to a reasonable consensus. A method of assigning points need to be found that was consistent with the principle that a typically engaged faculty member would, on average, earn a PAA every four years. Now in its third year, a reasonable balance has been achieved and PAAs are being earned at a reasonable rate. The fact that nearly every faculty member participates in this program speaks to the program's success.

**Lessons Learned**

A university considering a points-based merit award should (1) develop a template at the university-level early in the process that all parties can accept, (2) ensure that when the template goes to individual departments that only discipline-specific activities are added, and (3) not approve activities that are not consistent with the university-level template. All stakeholders should be involved in developing the template and the individual department documents, but ultimately it is essential that the Academic Vice President have final approval over all activities listed on the template and in the document.

Another consideration is that evaluators need to be well trained and vigilant. The department chair, department personnel committee chair, and dean (and college personnel committee chair if there are disagreements) need to be fair, yet firm and consistent in the awarding of points. If there is a question about a submission, adequate documentation needs to be provided. There will be great resentment among faculty members if the awarding of points is
not consistent across all departments. An appeal process was instituted to allow faculty denied points to petition the provost for reconsideration.

In addition, since PAA points replaced overload in many cases, WIU saved significant amounts of money that helped fund the PAA.

**Conclusion**

The development of a point-based merit award (PAA) by the administration and union turned out to be far more difficult and work-intensive than anticipated. However, in the third year of the program there appears to be wide acceptance of the system and satisfaction with the results. The program has “found its legs” and with several years of past practice, it has become much easier for faculty to know what activities to submit and for evaluators to know what activities to accept. There were 18 appeals in the first year of the program and four appeals last year.

WIU and the UPI recently agreed to a five-year extension of the contract wherein the administration agreed to the union’s proposal to develop similar points-based merit awards for non-tenure-track employees and for academic support professionals. The expansion of a points-based merit system speaks well to its acceptance and the benefits coming from this experiment in developing a system wherein significant activities receive a specific point value that leads to financial reward.
References

Appendix A-1

**TEMPLATE**

**Professional Achievement Award**

**Department PAA Activities Document**

Name_____________________________________________________________                Year_________________

Department__________________________________________________________

There are two options for receiving a PAA:

1. A total of 35 points with a minimum of:
   - 8 points in Teaching/Primary Duties
   - 8 points in Scholarly/Professional Activities
   - 8 points in Service

2. A total of 55 points with no minima.

**Teaching/Primary Duties** (minimum of 8 points required for PAA, if seeking 35 point option)

Faculty must have received a rating (on the most recent retention, promotion, tenure, or four-year appraisal evaluation) that meets tenure requirements in Teaching/Primary Duties in order to be eligible to apply for a PAA.

**Assigned Duties (duties for which one receives ACEs)**

- 1 pt. earned for each ACE over 18 in an academic year

**Note:** Teaching assignments over 18 ACEs and any non-teaching or other Primary Duties for which one receives ACEs will fall under this area.

**Unassigned Duties (duties for which one doesn’t receive ACEs)**

- Departmental Independent Study/Readings - 1 point per 7 sh hours completed
- Undergraduate research supervision of projects presented and completed (URD) – 1 point
- Honor’s thesis advised and completed – 1 point
- Student research advised and presented off campus – 1 point
- For serving on a graduate thesis or project - .5 point
- Graduate Thesis/Project advised and completed – 2 points
- For serving on a doctoral dissertation committee – 1 points
- Development of an online course (in addition to ACEs) – 5 points
- FYE faculty who work with peer mentors receive .5 points for every two peer mentors supervised
- Development of a fully approved and fully delivered course (not online) – 1 point
- Major innovation in use of Technology – 1 point
- Exceptional Teaching Performance – 1 point

Total ………………………………………………………………………………………………………   _____

**Note:** If activities overlap, the faculty member shall receive points in only one area.

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Scholarly/Professional Activities (minimum of 8 points required for PAA, if seeking 35 point option)

### Category A: Higher-level contributions (2.5 to 3.0 pts. each)

- Publication of a Book by a university press, national publisher which is scholarly and peer reviewed – 3 points [underline]
- Publication of a peer-reviewed journal article in a national/equivalent venue – 3 points [underline]
- Publication of a college level textbook by recognized publisher – 3 points [underline]
- Recipient of national/international scholarly/professional/creative activities award – 3 points [underline]
- Competitive, major, Sponsored Projects approved external grant award (above $25,000) – 2.5 points [underline]
- An equivalent scholarly/professional activity [underline]

### Category B: Moderate-level contributions (1.5 to 2.0 pts. each)

- Delivery of a peer reviewed presentation (international, national or regional) – 2 points [underline]
- Invited performance or peer-reviewed show wherein performance or artistic work is accepted – 2 points [underline]
- Publication of a chapter(s) in a book – 2 points [underline]
- Editor of a scholarly book – 2 points [underline]
- Publication of a monograph by a reputable publisher or professional organization – 1.5 points [underline]
- Publication of a peer reviewed journal article in a regional venue (does not include conference proceedings) – 2 points [underline]
- Competitive, minor, Sponsored Projects approved external grant award (10 – 25k) – 1.5 points [underline]
- Editor of a regional/national, peer-reviewed journal -- 2 points [underline]
- An equivalent professional or scholarly activity [underline]

### Category C: Lower-level contributions (.5 to 1.0 pt. each)

- Publication in a peer reviewed state-level journal – 1 point [underline]
- Publication of a Book Review -- .5 point [underline]
- Delivery of a peer-reviewed, state-level conference paper – 1 point [underline]
- Editor of state/regional journal – 1 point [underline]
- Membership and major contribution on an editorial board -- .5 point [underline]
- Submission of an unfunded Sponsored Projects approved, external grant --1 point [underline]
- Awarded internal university level competitive grant – 1 point [underline]
- Summer stipend awarded – 1 point [underline]
- Officially assigned and actively engaged as a faculty mentor [underline]
- Professional Development -- .5 per 5 workshops [underline]
- An equivalent professional or scholarly activity [underline]

Total ………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………… [underline]

Note: Scholarly/Professional Activity that is performed with others, such as a co-written publication, may be awarded pro-rated points. The faculty member shall propose the appropriate number of points and justify it to the DPC chair, department chair, and dean who will make the final determination.

Service Activities (minimum of 8 points required if seeking 35 point option)

### Category A: (2.5 to 3.0 pts. each)

- Chair of a major University Council/Committee that meets one-to-two times per month (examples: Graduate Council, CGE, etc.) -- 3 points [underline]
- Vice-Chair or Secretary of Faculty Senate or Vice-Chair of CAGAS -- 2.5 points [underline]
Appendix

- Significant leadership position in one’s professional organization – 3 points
- Equivalent service activity

Category B: (1.5 to 2.0 pts. each)

- Member of Faculty Senate -- 2 points
- Member of a major University Council that meets at least one-to-two times a month (Graduate Council, CAGAS, CCPI, UPC, or CGE) -- 2 points
- Chair of search committee – 2 points
- Chair, Department Personnel Committee -- 2 points
- Chair, active department/college committee (meets at least one-to-two times a month) – 2 points
- Equivalent service activity

Category C: (.5 to 1.0 pt. each)

- Member, UPI Negotiating Team or UPI Executive Committee (if not already receiving ACEs) -- 1 point
- Member, Search Committee for University President or Provost/Academic Vice President -- 1 point
- Member of Faculty Senate ad-hoc committee if meets at least once a month for full year (examples: Distance Learning ad-hoc committee, Foreign Language/Global Issues Committee, GERC, Online Course Information Implementation Committee, etc.) -- 1 point
- Member of other standing Faculty Senate Committees/Councils (or University Committees) that meet less regularly than one-or-two times a month (examples: WID, CIA, CCPU CIE, COC, Committee on President and Provost Performance, etc.) -- .5 point
- Chair of standing department committee – 1 point
- Chair, College Personnel Committee – 1 point
- Officially assigned and actively engaged as faculty mentor – 1 point
- Advisor, student organization -- .5 point
- Member, standing/active, time intensive department or college committee that meets regularly -- .5 to 1 point
- Non-juried presentation or workshop -- .5 point
- Classroom Observations of Peer Teaching -- .5 per 5 observations
- Recruiting that requires effort throughout the entire year (if not receiving ACEs) – 1 point
- Equivalent service activity

Total……………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

Note:

- All points listed are “per year” and should be pro-rated for semester activity
- Every department, college, and university committee cannot be listed and so “equivalent service activity” allows the faculty member to request points for such service. It is expected that chairs of committees receive credit however members should only receive points if the service was time intensive (ex. service on a grade appeal committee that doesn’t meet or meets once or twice a year should not result in the awarding of points).
- With the exception of the CPC chair, Curriculum College Committee chair, and Grade Appeals College Committee Chair, service activities that overlap shall receive points in only one area.

**Bonus Points**

Points earned for activities listed in the Bonus Points category may be applied to meet the minimum number of points required in the appropriate area(s) of responsibility (teaching/primary duties, scholarly/professional activities, or service activities). So, bonus points for activities performed in the appropriate area (as determined by the faculty member, department chair, and DPC chair) may be used to meet or exceed the 8-point requirement in any of the three areas of responsibility listed above. These points may be awarded for an activity not listed under teaching/primary duties, scholarly/professional activities, or service activities, or they may be additional.
points given for extraordinary performance. Under Bonus Points a faculty member who receives ACEs may also receive points based on the level of responsibility or for a major contribution.

Bonus points can be earned for exceptional performance in the following areas:

- Additional points for the publication of major book or exceptional artistic recognition – 1-3 points
- Additional points for the recipient of a major grant – 1-3 points
- Distinguished Faculty Lecturer – 8 points
- University or College Excellence Award – 4 points
- Additional points for service wherein one receives ACEs (Chair, Faculty Senate; Chair, CAGAS; Chapter President, UPI; Chair, CCPI; Director, CITR; Associate Director, Honors) – 2 points
- Significant recognition, honor, award in any of the three areas – .5-3 points
- Other activity of comparable value – 1-3 points

Total………………………………………………………………………………………………………

Overload Points

Faculty may choose to count ACEs over 22 as “points” rather than overload.

- ____________________________________________
- ____________________________________________
- ____________________________________________
- ____________________________________________

Total………………………………………………………………………………………………………

Total Points to date:

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Grand Total……………………………………………………………………………………………..

Department Chair _______________________   DPC Chair _______________________   Dean _______________________

(Date)             (Date)             (Date)