

## How to Ask Your Chair for a Promotion

Ideally, whoever oversees your promotion (e.g., your chair) will regularly communicate your promotion status. He or she will explain what work remains to be done—and help you accomplish this work. But if this interaction goes awry, you may need to negotiate with your chair. The following advice assumes you actually deserve promotion or will soon.

### Help Your Chair Help You

Chairs will more readily facilitate promotion if they are psychologically predisposed to do so and if the promotion case is easy to make.

Your quest should begin soon after a promotion or a new position starts. Celebration and gratitude for your chair's stewardship should segue into a request for his or her wisdom and guidance in preparing for the next promotion. This has two positive psychological impacts.

First, nothing so conveys respect for a chair (and invites reciprocity) as asking earnestly for the chair's advice.

Second, chairs will want to support positive outcomes of advice they think they have provided. Formulate your own plan for promotion beforehand. Your chair may not know what you should do next, and your asking "what would you think of x, y, or z" both spares the chair embarrassment and makes endorsing your plans easy. (Your next conversation should begin, "When we last talked, you thought x, y, and z were good ideas." You may thus lead the chair to take ownership of your own advice.)

You may likewise ask for advice on how to solicit invitations to key conferences, editorial boards, study sections, etc. Perceptive chairs will volunteer to network on your behalf if they can.

In addition, you may want to elicit your chair's help in obtaining letters of reference to support your promotion. Educate your chair about the leading figures in your area, and why they are leaders. With this knowledge, the chair can strategize about how to make these leading figures aware of your work.

Any meeting with your chair should educate

him or her about you. Say: "You may be interested in my latest..." discovery, teaching accomplishment, trainee who has accepted a prestigious position, funding of a grant, and so on. Be prepared to explain; chairs are not omniscient.

When meeting with your chair, always assume that the entire conversation will be forgotten. Take detailed contemporaneous notes. Immediately assemble the notes so that



Martin E. Feder

they will be comprehensible long afterwards, and then share them with your chair. Include a disclaimer: "I have compiled these notes so I will be able to remember for future meetings. This is my best recollection of our conversation. If you would like to correct or expand upon these notes, please do so." Sometimes a chair will think one thing has been said, and you will hear another.

Shared notes are excellent for reconciling such differences. Record and share any revisions.

Before subsequent conversations, provide your chair with all preceding notes. Say, for example, "I was reviewing my notes for our next meeting and thought I would share them with you for your convenience." Your chair will probably feel obliged to honor any assurances and re-endorse any plans from prior meetings.

### Explicit Requests for Promotion

If the above practices do not lead to promotion spontaneously, you may need to broach it explicitly. If your chair does not agree, you need to convince your chair to proceed. Prepare by reviewing the criteria for promotion and comparing your progress to the criteria. The key question to ask your chair is, "What's keeping me from being promoted?" Possible answers lie in two nonexclusive realms.

The first realm of possible reasons why you have not been promoted is that your chair believes you have not yet satisfied the promotion criteria. If so, you must discover in what ways he or she thinks you have fallen short. If your chair does not understand that you have already satisfied the promotion criteria,



**[C]hairs will want to support positive outcomes of advice they think they have provided.**

**When meeting with your chair, always assume that the entire conversation will be forgotten. Take detailed contemporaneous notes.**

you need to present and explain the evidence. If the chair points out a genuine deficiency or risk, you should acknowledge this with thanks and plan with the chair how best to address it. You may have unrealistic expectations or may overestimate your own accomplishments. Listen carefully for such indications.

If the chair misunderstands the promotion criteria, tactfully ask that the chair recheck his or her understanding. You can also suggest that some respected senior colleagues review your accomplishments on the chair's behalf. You may even offer to help the chair arrange such review.

The second realm of possible reasons why you have not been promoted is that although your chair believes you satisfy the criteria, other matters interfere. Examples of such other matters may include institutional restrictions, a chair's illness or preoccupation with urgent issues, or a need for you to "wait your turn" in the promotion queue. You need to discover the specific issues; only then can you frame an appropriate response.

**Do not be discouraged if a first explicit broaching of promotion does not lead directly to promotion.**

If the chair cannot begin the promotion process, ask how best to facilitate promotion once the delay ends. For example, ask if you should begin preparing your materials so that they will be ready. You can also negotiate a contingent response. For example, you and the chair may agree that your promotion will

be considered within four months after an institutional moratorium ends. Or you may agree that if the backlog in the regular promotion queue is not cleared in a year, your chair will pursue an alternative pathway.

Do not be discouraged if a first explicit broaching of promotion does not lead directly to promotion. The first meeting's purpose is to understand where the problems lie so that they can be addressed before the second

meeting. The second meeting's purpose should be to attain promotion.

### **When All Else Fails**

If you deserve promotion and the above strategies have not worked, the normal recourse is first the next level up in the academic hierarchy, then the next higher level, and so on up to your institution's chief academic officer.

A nonconfrontational way of broaching the subject with someone at a higher level is to say, "I've spoken to my promotion committee chair / section chief / department chair / one level down, and I am unable to understand why my promotion has stalled. Can you help me understand?" Sometimes a useful answer may be forthcoming. Sometimes this query will prompt those with whom you meet to make their own inquiries, afterwards relaying their findings to you if they can. Usually "higher levels" are skilled at making inquiries that will not harm a promotion case.

### **Conclusion**

Sometimes the promotion process does not unfold in an ideal manner. But by following the advice above, you may be able to keep the process on track and achieve the hoped-for outcome. ■

—Martin E. Feder, University of Chicago

### **Note**

A more-detailed version of this article can be found at <http://pondside.uchicago.edu/~feder/Howtoaskforpromotion.htm>.

Innovative research at the interface  
between the life sciences and the physical sciences

**Browse our content  
at <http://hfspj.aip.org>**

**Open Access  
for All Articles  
after 6 Months**

**Immediate  
Open Access  
Available  
for Authors**

**Online submissions  
and subscription info  
at <http://hfspj.aip.org>**

HFSP Journal  
Frontiers of Interdisciplinary  
Research in the Life Sciences

VOLUME 3  
ISSUE 3  
MAY 1995-2000