

MEMORANDUM

September 4, 2012

To: President Joe DiPietro

From: India Lane and Katie High

Re: External Peer Review in Promotion and Tenure Decisions

The use of external peer review for faculty promotion and tenure decisions is common at research intensive institutions but variable at other types of colleges and universities. When completed properly, the practice can provide multiple, objective perspectives in the assessment of faculty work. Good practice requires appropriate selection of external reviewers, clarity in instructions to reviewers, timely and thoughtful responses from reviewers, and consistency in practices across departments and colleges.

In response to your questions, we have prepared an overview of the advantages, disadvantages and issues related to contemporary external peer review, as well as a summary of recommended best practices. A table of sample institutional practices is also included; this table includes the relevant UT Chattanooga and UT Martin peer institutions. We hope this information will be useful to you as external letters of review are discussed at UT campuses.

Attachments

External Letters of Review for Promotion and Tenure

Prepared by the Office of Academic Affairs and Student Success

August 2012

General Points about Assessing Faculty Work

- The key to effective evaluation of faculty is the use of multiple, credible sources of evidence providing multiple perspectives.
- Faculty roles, responsibilities and work are varied and involve multiple audiences; multiple perspectives aid in the assessment of these varied roles.
- The inclusion of multiple perspectives lessens the probability of discrimination.
- Sources of evidence for high stakes evaluation must be credible based on dependability, relevance, applicability and defensibility.
- Input from other faculty is usually considered the most credible source, both internal and external to the institution.
- Weighting of varied perspectives and sources of evidence in assessments is usually tailored to the individual faculty member's effort allocation.

Purpose of External Letters from Peers

- To provide an independent and unbiased assessment of the candidate, most commonly an assessment of the candidate's scholarly work and reputation in his or her discipline
- Usually supplemental to, not a substitute for, the internal review process

Advantages of External Review

- External reviewers are expected to be objective and truthful experts; motivated by the common good of the discipline and the academy.
- The external review provides insight into how a candidate's scholarship or work is perceived outside the institution.
- Reviewers may offer a unique perspective on the nature of the work in the discipline that is beyond what is reflected in a peer reviewed publication (e.g. the skills and groundwork required for success, etc.).
- An external review can help determine how candidate stacks up against others in comparable cohort in the discipline, nationally or internationally.
- External review may be useful for decision making in a borderline tenure case, or split internal vote.
- External review can be particularly useful in less traditional scholarly fields (art, librarians, clinicians, extension, etc) where creative work differs from most academic departments.

- External review is a low cost (in actual dollar expenses) practice with potentially high benefit in important tenure decisions.
- A request for external review can be valuable for the reviewer as evidence of his or her reputation in the field and as a means to expand networks or opportunities for collaboration after the review process has ended.
- Conscientious and honest reviews can help the candidate improve performance in the future.
- Information from aggregate external reviews can help departments and institutions gain insight into the overall performance and impact of its faculty and areas for improvement.

Limitations of External Review

- Bias
 - There is still the potential for bias (positive or negative) in the review based on the candidate's training background, institution, type of work or other factors.
 - Gender bias has been observed in letters of recommendation: word choice, length of letter, amount of personal comments differ for female candidates; Similar biases are likely for racial or ethnic groups.
 - Regardless of attempts to avoid biased individuals, there is usually a selection bias on both the department's and the candidate's part.
- Scope of Review
 - The reviewer may not be asked or be able to speak to teaching, when teaching is the primary expectation for advancement.
- Logistics
 - It can be challenging to find enough appropriate external reviewers, especially in small disciplines.
 - It is challenging to get letters in a timely fashion.
 - The process is labor intensive for the institution (One large public university estimated 3000 letters were solicited each year).
 - The process is labor intensive for individual reviewers (e.g. senior faculty), especially in small disciplines.
 - The department may have to start the process over if promotion is denied.
 - It can be challenging to maintain confidentiality as letters and dossiers are handled and shared digitally.
- Quality and Consistency
 - Standards for promotion or tenure are not always clear and are not equivalent across institutions.
 - Inconsistency exists in detail of solicitation requests and quality of results.
 - Reviews are usually more positive than critical (or criticisms are written in "code").
 - Reviewers may be hesitant to be negative or critical for fear of litigation.
 - Reviews may be superficial and not thoughtfully completed.
- Professionalism Required
 - Critical reviews may lead to interpersonal strife or professional conflict if disclosed.

- There is the possibility of the “rogue”, inappropriate and unfair letter.

Contemporary Issues

- Peer review in the age of collaborative, global, interdisciplinary work will be challenging— fewer appropriate reviewers will be available given the unique combinations of disciplines.
- Best practices for external peer review of teaching and service are needed.
- Peer review is not always protected from discovery in legal proceedings, so letters could be viewed by outside.

Best Practices for External Letters of Review

- Use representative faculty groups and wide input to develop campus specific practices
- Ensure probationary faculty are well aware of the practice and related policies and receive mentoring regarding the selection of external reviewers
- Match candidates with reviewers based on area of expertise to be reviewed; seek experts in the relevant discipline or recipients of engagement activities
- Reviewers should be selected from names provided by both the candidate and the department chair or review committee (half and half)
- Selecting reviewers for a range of perspectives and appropriate match to the candidate’s work is considered more important than the status of the reviewer or reviewer’s institution. However, many institutions will require the letters to be from senior faculty from peer, benchmarked or aspirational institutions.
- Avoid reviewers with potential bias or conflict of interest: many institutions prohibit former mentors, collaborators, friends or close associates from serving as reviewers. Reviewers’ letters should specifically clarify the relationship with the candidate.
- Solicit sufficient numbers of letters to obtain at least 3 quality, distinct perspectives; ideally 5 – 10 letters are included.
- Use a standardized solicitation letter with clear instructions for the reviewer:
 - Request information about reviewer’s credentials and relationship to candidate
 - Provide reviewers with institutional or departmental policies and guidelines, forms, etc
 - Provide reviewers with sufficient and consistent documentation from the candidate to make an informed judgment (e.g curriculum vita versus full dossier, with or without teaching portfolio, selected publications or other specific information). Publications in press but not in print should be included.
 - Establish a deadline for return of the letter and a follow up plan (usually 14 – 45 days)
 - Establish a confidential point of contact for questions and for return of the review letter
 - Establish acceptable methods for format and delivery (fax, email, etc)
 - Ensure that reviewers know their rights (or lack thereof) to confidentiality internally and in the event of legal challenges (usually based on state law).
- Use a standardized table or log for recording solicitation and return of letters
- Conduct practice with general attention to confidentiality, keep careful records of contacts, etc

- All letters received should be included in the candidate's dossier. Any issues, qualifications or rebuttals should be attached in unusual cases.
- Inform internal committees which reviewers were suggested by the candidate.

Decision Points in Developing an External Peer Review Protocol

- Who will be involved in development
- Rank(s) and steps at which external letters are required
- Selection process for reviewers. Can the candidate block a reviewer(s)?
- Type of appraisal requested
 - positive, neutral, or critical
 - recommendation regarding tenure or advancement or no recommendation
 - comparative (to cohort of candidate) or independent assessment
- Qualifications of reviewers, including rank, institutions allowed, relationships allowed, exclusions
- Documents that will be provided to reviewer
- Documentation of credentials requested of the reviewer (cv, bio)
- Reuse of letters allowed? If so, in what time frame?
- Candidate's access to letter or redacted letter
- Exceptions allowed

Example Institutional Practices (see attached table)

References

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Highberg NP. Finding external reviewers in the tenure and promotion process. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. March 23, 2010.

Institutional Documents

<http://facsen.appstate.edu/sites/facsen.appstate.edu/files/P&T%20taskforce%20report.pdf>

<http://apo.chance.berkeley.edu/external.ltrs.disc.paper.htm>

<http://chronicle.com/article/An-Insiders-Tales-From-a/125666/>

Reports from the College of New Jersey Ad Hoc committee on External Review, 2007-2009.