



To: Department Heads, Chairs, School Directors
Department P&T Committee Chairs

From: Ron Fricker, Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs

Date: April 30, 2023

Subject: Guidelines and Requirements for External Letters

1. **Purpose.** To provide guidance to departments about letters to external letter writers for candidates for promotion and tenure.
2. **Guidance Documents.** General requirements for promotion and tenure are contained in [section 3.4 of the Faculty Handbook](#), including section 3.4.4.4 which indicates that detailed guidelines are on the [provost's website](#). Requirements for dossier preparation are provided in the Guidelines for Promotion and Tenure Dossiers which is updated annually. This memo provides excerpts from that document focused specifically on external letters.
3. **External Reviewer Requirements.** Per the guidelines, “External reviewers are expected to be professors at major research universities; these reviewers should be viewed as senior contributors to the appropriate related discipline(s) or area of scholarship.”
 - a. A list of Virginia Tech’s SCHEV-approved peer institutions is available at <https://aie.vt.edu/strategic-analysis/peer-institutions.html>.
 - b. If the best person to evaluate the work is at a university below peer level, *explain and justify that choice in the department head letter.*
4. **Required Text.** The following text is required for the given conditions.
 - a. For All Candidates. Ask the reviewer to self-disclose their relationship with the candidate and any disqualifying relationships:

“As part of your letter, please describe your relationship with the candidate. This should include how long you have known the candidate, whether you have a personal or professional relationship with the candidate, and, in general, whether there is potential for conflict of interest. The university guidelines state that our external reviewers should not include former advisors, post-doctoral supervisors, co-investigators on grants, or co-authors on recent publications, or should not have other relationships that may be perceived as being too close to the candidate.”
 - b. For All Candidates. Include the following statement on confidentiality:

“The policy of Virginia Tech is to hold in confidence all letters of evaluation from persons outside the institution. Only the committees and administrative officers directly responsible for the decision of concern here will have access to your letter. It will not be provided to the candidate unless we are required specifically to do so by law.”

- c. For Candidates with One or More Tenure Clock Extensions. Address this in the letter to the external reviewer as follows:

“This candidate has received an extension of their tenure probationary period under approved university policies. You are asked to evaluate the candidate's accomplishments and appropriateness for tenure and/or promotion to associate professor as if the record had been accumulated during our normal six-year probationary period.”

5. **Suggested Text.** Letters to external reviewers should contain the following information.

- a. Describe Virginia Tech’s criteria for promotion and/or tenure. Some examples:

Candidates for tenure are evaluated in the light of the triple mission of the university: learning, discovery, and engagement. The award of tenure is based on the achievement of distinction in an area of learning and the prediction of eminence throughout the individual's professional career. The documentation and evaluation should recognize some significant impact of the candidate's contributions beyond the borders of the university. If the primary strength is in instruction, there should be recognition that the candidate's pedagogical contributions have influence beyond the immediate classroom; if in research, that there is significant impression on colleagues nationally; if in outreach, that the influence of the contributions reaches beyond the immediate clientele.

The university requires that an individual being promoted to associate professor with tenure must have clearly demonstrated outstanding professional achievement by evidence of prominence in an appropriate combination of teaching, creative scholarship, and recognized performance in extension and professional service. The appointment is contingent upon national recognition as an outstanding scholar and educator.

Virginia Tech's expectations are that the candidate for promotion to professor has “demonstrated excellence in research, scholarship, or creative achievement, as appropriate for the candidate's discipline and assignment.” Additionally, “promotion to the rank of professor is contingent upon national or international recognition as an outstanding scholar and educator.”

- b. Request a review of scholarship and professional contributions. Some examples:

Please provide a thorough, objective assessment of the candidate’s accomplishments as a scholar and an opinion as to whether the degree of accomplishment is appropriate for the level of associate professor at a comprehensive land-grant university with high standards of achievement expected of its faculty.

We would appreciate both your overall impressions of the candidate’s research and scholarship and specific comments addressing the following issues: ...

It would be helpful in your evaluation to rate the candidate’s scholarly and research achievements in comparison with other persons you have known at similar stages in their careers. Is the work of high quality? Does it reflect increasing maturity and depth? Does there appear to be potential for future growth?

Is the candidate on a trajectory that suggests subsequent successful promotion to full professor? How do you assess her prospects for future development?

Make a thorough and objective assessment of the candidate's scholarship. Comment on the significance of the work produced and its impact on the field.

- c. Avoid asking about teaching and university service; focus on professional service.
Some examples:

Our decision will be based on several kinds of evidence, including a candidate's contributions to the teaching, service, and outreach missions of the university. Your evaluation of the candidate's scholarship and professional contributions will form an important component in the dossier.

We do not expect you to comment on the candidate's teaching and university service activities.

Contributions to teaching and service will certainly enter into our decision; however, we seek your help only in evaluating the candidate's research.

6. **Things NOT to do.** Please do not do the following in the letter.

- a. Please DO NOT ask about "promotability" at the reviewer's home institution. Some examples of what *not* to do:

Would the candidate's record align with the expectations of the rank of associate professor at your institution?

What is the likelihood that this candidate would qualify for tenure at your institution?

- b. Please DO NOT use statements such as:

Your letter will be kept strictly confidential, and at no time become part of a file to which the Freedom of Information Act would apply.

The reference to the Freedom of Information Act in this statement is confusing and such letters are already exempt from FOIA. The only time that Virginia Tech is required to provide an external review letter to a candidate is if the document is under court-ordered subpoena.

The candidate has relinquished his right of access to evaluations supplied by reviewers.

Candidates don't have a right to access outside evaluations. This statement seems to imply that a candidate may choose to see the external evaluations.

We will maintain strict confidentiality and destroy your letter when the evaluation process is complete.

This statement leads the external reviewer to believe that all copies of his/her letter will be destroyed. The Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost is required to maintain the P&T records for 5 years after the promotion or tenure decision.