Career Track External/Internal Letters

Purpose:

Letters from reviewers provide an additional perspective on the career track faculty member’s overall trajectory and quality and impact of their work. This assessment should be grounded within the faculty member’s specific workload and career sub-track.

Reviewers should be provided with material that helps them evaluate performance within the faculty member’s workload and the unit’s and the college’s expectations. For example, the materials provided reviewers for a faculty member appointed to the clinical career sub-track with an 80 clinical precepting/20 service workload should focus primarily on clinical activities (e.g., clinical teaching philosophy, student outcomes, etc.) rather than scholarship or research.

For all faculty with significant workload allocations to teaching, the material for review must include more than just student course evaluations (i.e., include the College’s Educator Portfolio).

Note, references below to “internal” refer to letters written by individuals within WSU and “external” refers to letters written by individuals outside WSU.

Requirements:

Letters:

• Letters should not be solicited from people who have a conflict of interest, such as a personal relationship with the candidate that goes beyond that of colleague (e.g., past or current mentor, partner, past or present collaborator, faculty who have conflict with candidate).
• Letters from WSU faculty who do not have a conflict of interest can be used as internal reviewers for career track faculty.
• At least four review letters are required for career track promotions and may be from either internal or external reviewers; however, all reviewers should be external to the department and none of the review letters may be from members of the faculty advisory committee.
• The minimum number of review letters is four; however, all letters received by the department by the time the case is forwarded to the dean’s office must be included in the file. Two reviewers may be nominated by the candidate.
• Unsolicited letters from students, colleagues, and citizens may be submitted but should be included only when unique perspectives are offered on the faculty member’s service to the institution and society. Such letters should be included as supplementary materials.
• All review letters received by the chair must be available to faculty and administrators involved in the review process.
Better Practices:

What makes a review letter useful?

- Letter is from noted senior faculty, scholars, clinicians, educators at WSU or comparable or better institutions, government or private-sector organizations.
- Clear evaluation of candidate’s packet
- Evaluation based on the candidate’s assigned workload

What makes a review letter not as useful?

- Letter is a testimonial or support letter.

What causes a letter to not be usable as an external review?

- Letter is from someone in the unit (including emeritus professors) or recently in the unit.
- Letter is from supervisor (including former advisors).
- Letter is from current/former colleague, collaborator or mentor.
- Letter is from current student.
- Unsolicited letters from students, colleagues, and citizens may not be used for external review purposes; however, when appropriate they may be included as supplementary materials.

Ideas for seeking reviewers for Career Track Faculty

- WSU career track or tenure track faculty in other units, especially in the same sub-track and/or in related disciplines/health sciences/health professions holding the rank or higher to which the candidate aspires.
- Faculty at other universities with programs in the candidate’s area and/or practicing clinicians, medical directors, and other practitioners in the candidate’s field
- When appropriate, consider external reviewers (academic or non-academic) with significant experience/leadership in communities of practice relevant to the candidate’s teaching, clinical precepting, and/or research/scholarship.

Information and Materials to Provide External and Internal Reviewers

- Include language required by the Provost’s Office in request for letters (see current Provost’s P&T Guidelines Memo for updated language)
  a. “Washington State University will treat your evaluation as a sensitive document, and it will not be made generally available. However, because Washington State University is a public institution and because our state has a very broad public records law, we are unable to guarantee confidentiality. If requested, evaluations will be made available to the candidate.”
  b. “Beginning in March 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted operations, including instructional delivery, at Washington State University and the rest of the U.S. As a result, our campus underwent a rapid transition to remote learning before the end of the spring semester. All classes continued online from spring 2020 through summer 2021 sessions. Research facilities, including labs and libraries, were closed for several months, and field research and conferences were also suspended. In conjunction with the disruptions experienced on campus, many faculty were working out of their homes while simultaneously providing childcare due to closures of childcare facilities and K-12 schools, and/or elder care. Many publication submissions went through unusually prolonged review processes. These research disruptions, significant shifts in teaching modalities, and challenges with dependent care have greatly affected productivity for many faculty and will have ripple effects for
several years to come. We ask that you take these unprecedented events into consideration when evaluating work performed by the candidate.”

• Communication with reviewers “… should center WSU’s core values and missions as well as provide context, including the faculty member’s defined responsibilities/official job description. When appropriate, WSU should make it clear to the reviewers the value the university, college and unit place on university missions and/or activities that reviewers may not be accustomed to seeing within a promotion or tenure package (e.g., community engaged scholarship, administrative service and leadership, innovation and entrepreneurship, etc.).”

• The chair’s solicitation letter to reviewers should provide context of particulars of the position- (e.g., workload, joint/split position, etc.) and may include specific areas or questions for the reviewer to address.

• Materials provided to the reviewers should include the candidate’s CV, department and college sub-track promotion guidelines, as well as the following as appropriate to the candidate’s sub-track and workload:
  • Educator Portfolio;
  • Supporting materials (e.g., reprints [unless DOI provided in CV]), selection of teaching, research, scholarship, or creative artifacts as applicable to primary and secondary responsibilities.

Tenure Track External Letters

Purpose:

External evaluations play an important role in the tenure and promotion process by providing disciplinary expertise and an external perspective. They ideally serve as an additional source of information from an objective standpoint about the broader impact and value of a candidate’s research/scholarship to the discipline/profession relative to others at the same or similar time in rank.

External letters solicited for the promotion and/or tenure review of tenure track faculty are letters written by individuals outside WSU.

Requirements:

Letters:

• Letters should not be solicited from people who have a conflict of interest, such as a personal relationship with the candidate that goes beyond that of colleague (e.g., mentor, collaborator, partners, faculty who have conflict with candidate).
• The minimum number of review letters is four; however, all letters received by the department by the time the case is forwarded to the Dean’s office must be included in the file.
• Two reviewers may be nominated by the candidate.
• For tenure track faculty, letters from WSU faculty are not considered "external" letters and should not be solicited. If they are received, they should be included in an appendix to the file.

All review letters received by the chair must be available to faculty and administrators involved in the review process.
Better Practices:

What makes a review letter useful?

- Clear evaluation of the impact of the candidate’s research/scholarship within the context of their position/workload.
- Letter is provided by noted senior faculty, scholar, researcher at comparable or better institutions, research centers, or government or private-sector organizations.
- Where appropriate, letter writers should hold a rank at least equal to the rank to which the candidate aspires.

What makes a review letter not as useful?

- Reviewer is too removed from the candidate’s field to provide applicable disciplinary context.
- Reviewer does not hold the rank to which the candidate aspires.
- Reviewer is not highly regarded in the candidate’s field/discipline.

What causes a letter to be not useable?

- Letter is from mentors, collaborators, former graduate students, post-doctoral associates, co-workers, etc.
- Letter is from a WSU employee.
- Unsolicited letters from students, colleagues, and citizens may not be used for external review purposes, but can, when appropriate, be included in supplementary materials.

Ideas for seeking reviewers for Tenure Track Faculty

- Consider using Academic Analytics.
- Ask tenured faculty within the unit for suggestions.
- If appropriate, consider external reviewers (academic or non-academic) with significant experience/leadership in communities of practice relevant to the candidate’s research/scholarship. This practice could be of particular importance to those candidates with community-engaged research/scholarship.
- When a candidate’s research/scholarship is interdisciplinary, consider external reviewers, as identified by the candidate, who have experience in one or more of the fields outside the core-discipline connected with the interdisciplinary work.

Information and Materials to Provide External Reviewers

- Include language required by the Provost’s Office in request for letters (see current Provost’s P&T Guidelines Memo for updated language)
  a. “Washington State University will treat your evaluation as a sensitive document, and it will not be made generally available. However, because Washington State University is a public institution and because our state has a very broad public records law, we are unable to guarantee confidentiality. If requested, evaluations will be made available to the candidate.”
  b. “Beginning in March 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted operations, including instructional delivery, at Washington State University and the rest of the U.S. As a result, our campus underwent a rapid transition to remote learning before the end of the spring semester. All classes continued online from spring 2020 through summer 2021 sessions. Research facilities, including labs and libraries, were closed for several months, and field research and conferences were also suspended. In conjunction with the disruptions experienced on campus, many faculty were working out of their homes while simultaneously providing childcare due to closures of childcare facilities and K-12 schools, and/or elder care. Many publication submissions went through unusually prolonged review processes. These research disruptions, significant shifts in teaching modalities, and challenges with
dependent care have greatly affected productivity for many faculty and will have ripple effects for several years to come. We ask that you take these unprecedented events into consideration when evaluating work performed by the candidate.”

• Communication with external reviewers “… should center WSU’s core values and missions as well as provide context, including the faculty member’s defined responsibilities/official job description. When appropriate, WSU should make it clear to the external reviewers the value the university, college and unit place on university missions and/or activities that reviewers may not be accustomed to seeing within a promotion or tenure package (e.g., community engaged scholarship, administrative service and leadership, innovation and entrepreneurship, etc.).”
• At a minimum, chairs should provide external reviewers with the faculty member’s updated CV, Research Statement, DOI links or PDFs of selected publications, and department and college tenure and promotion guidelines.
• Educator Portfolio and other statements (COVID-19 Impact, Context, Service, DEI, etc.) may also be provided to external reviewers as appropriate to the candidate’s workload.
• Supporting materials (e.g., reprints [unless DOI provided in CV], selection of teaching, research, scholarship, or creative artifacts as applicable to primary and secondary responsibilities.
• The chair’s solicitation letter to external reviewers should provide context of particulars of the position- (e.g., workload, joint/split position, tenure clock extensions, etc.) and may include specific areas or questions for the reviewer to address.

*Adapted with permission from C.M. Cooper, Associate Dean Faculty Affairs, WSU College of Arts and Sciences, by Gail D. Chermak, Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs, Elson S. Floyd College of Medicine.

Updated: January 10, 2023