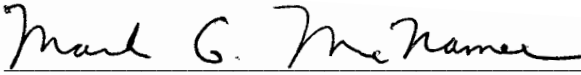




MEMORANDUM

Date: May 29, 2008

To: Department Heads
Chairs of 2008-09 Departmental Promotion and Tenure Committees
Chairs of 2008-09 Collegiate Promotion and Tenure Committees

From: 
Mark G. McNamee
Senior Vice President and Provost

Re: Guidance from the University Committee on Promotion and Tenure

On behalf of the University Committee on Promotion and Tenure, let me convey our collective thanks for the on-going improvement of dossiers sent forward for promotion and tenure. I continue to be impressed with the quality of our faculty and genuinely enjoy reading about their many accomplishments. The University Committee felt that the existing dossier format and guidelines provide a consistent framework for reviewing individual cases, in all of their disciplinary variety, so there are no major changes for 2008-09. You can access the P&T guidelines on the Provost's website at www.provost.vt.edu/tenure.php. Many departments have made special efforts to assist faculty members in presenting their case in the most effective way, and I thank you for your efforts on their behalf.

I am writing to share some guidance offered by the University Promotion and Tenure Committee that emerged from our very substantive and constructive conversations over several days and many cases. We feel that future dossiers and the process can be strengthened by adhering to these recommendations. We also offer advice to departmental and college committees on dealing with some of the difficult process issues that arise.

- External review letters:

- (1) The committee asked that we reinforce the expectation that external review letters should be solicited from senior faculty at major research institutions who are in the best position to judge the candidate's work. The external review letters must be from a peer institution or similar, and if not, the department head's statement must include justification for why an evaluator from elsewhere or without obvious appropriate academic rank or credentials was chosen to review the candidate's record.
- (2) There *must* be—at a minimum—four external review letters. *Cases should not be sent forward with less than four external review letters.* Forwarding a case without the minimum four external review letters may disadvantage the candidate, particularly if the external reviews vary in their evaluation of the candidate's record. Some departments have noted the difficulty in recent years of obtaining willing reviewers; it may be necessary to change the timeline for soliciting outside reviews so a sufficient number can be obtained.

- (3) A candidate may not suggest a majority of the external reviewers. In cases where the field is small and the number of potential external reviewers is very limited, consider having the **committee** make all recommendations regarding names of external reviewers. This prevents the majority of letters coming from the candidate's list, which can unnecessarily raise the question of impartiality. There were several cases this year in which candidates recommended four out of the five reviewers. This is not an appropriate balance.
 - (4) The reviewers should not be former advisors or others too close to the candidate. Some departments are still soliciting letters from doctoral advisors and others who have served on the candidate's doctoral committee. The guidelines strongly discourage this practice.
 - (5) The university committee had a long discussion about a few cases where letters from external reviewers were ambiguous or did not address the requested information, and the department or college committee sought further clarification or revision of the letter. The committee strongly discourages a department head from contacting an external reviewer to seek clarification. If contact seems absolutely necessary, then it should be documented and included in the dossier. Committee members are discouraged entirely from contacting external reviewers. The university committee members recommend that there be NO attempt to **revise** such letters even when they fall short of what is needed, since the effort to seek clarification could be viewed as coaching the reviewer and interfering with the independence of the review process. Instead, the committee or head may wish to comment on the inadequacy or ambiguity of a review letter in their summary of the case.
- Internal review letters: Some dossiers include letters from *internal* (VT) reviewers, particularly in cases involving interdisciplinary centers or joint appointments. The university committee felt that contacting **internal** reviewers for clarification in the case of inadequate or ambiguous information was acceptable when absolutely necessary.
 - Diversity accomplishments: Diversity accomplishments are a meaningful part of the faculty review process. Candidates must do a better job of participating in and documenting their involvement in diversity initiatives. Diversity accomplishments are especially important for candidates seeking promotion to full professor. Please use the categories developed by the Commission on Equal Opportunity and Diversity to prompt and organize diversity-related contributions. The categories may be found at section VII. C. 1. - 8. of the promotion and tenure guidelines. They are also available at www.provost.vt.edu/documents/reporting_diversity.php. Committees are asked to develop working expectations for department members, perhaps sharing good examples, and to review diversity contributions included in the dossier with those expectations in mind.
 - Supervision and Completion of Doctoral Students: The committee is concerned that some candidates for promotion to full professor have not guided at least several students to Ph.D. completion before seeking promotion. (This is also true for outside senior hires coming up for tenure within a year or two of their arrival.) Promotion to full seems premature without this accomplishment, especially in departments with substantial graduate programs. Since opportunities for graduate student supervision vary by department, it would be very helpful if the letter from either the departmental committee or the head addressed the departmental expectations for graduate student mentorship and degree completion, and how the candidate has met that expectation. [It may also be helpful to address the expectations for those coming up for tenure and promotion to *associate* professor, since these expectations and opportunities also vary by department and college.] Such a reflection will help the college and university committees review graduate student supervision and degree completion in an appropriate context.
 - Abstentions:
 - (1) A college committee member is not **eligible** to vote if he or she has already voted at the departmental level; not voting in such a circumstance is neither a positive nor a negative vote. Nor is it really an **abstention**, since the member is not eligible to vote on that case.

- (2) Abstentions of *eligible* voters count as "not yes." The recommendation statement should indicate that there were X number of eligible voters with X voting "yes," X voting "no," and X abstaining.
 - (3) A case must have a majority of positive votes from eligible voters to move forward. Abstentions of eligible voters effectively count as a "no" vote in determining a majority.
- Explanation of dissenting votes: In the recommendation statements from both the departmental and college promotion and tenure committees, an explanation of the concerns represented by the dissenting votes is very helpful in subsequent reviews and should be included. This may be a brief summary of the concerns included in the committee letter to which all committee members agree, or it may take the form of a minority report prepared by the dissenters, as allowed by the Faculty Handbook.

Thank you for your attention to these matters and for your continued support of a sound and fair process for the review of faculty for promotion and tenure.

MGM/sjk

cc: Deans
Members of the 2007-08 University Committee on Promotion and Tenure
Administrative Assistants to the Deans
Patricia Hyer
Peggy Layne
Kevin McDonald