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Advice for chairs on how to write an effective tenure and promotion letter (opinion)

Submitted by Richard Utz on October 13, 2020 - 3:00am

It's that time of the year again. Letters from everything between two and 10 external reviewers have been coming to departments from across the country (and beyond). Specialty area committees and promotion and tenure committees pore over those letters as well as the materials candidates themselves have submitted.

There is the curriculum vitae, supposed to follow the universitywide format everyone on campus loathes because it obliterates nuances essential for showcasing work in one's specific discipline. There is the personal narrative, usually between three and five pages long, which claims, sometimes in the pseudo-objective third person, that all the contingencies governing one's academic career were really planned events: that student evaluations moved in choreographed teleology from 4.2 (out of 5.0) in one's first year to a close-to-perfect 4.87 in one's pretenure year, that one's productivity increased from one refereed essay in a midlevel journal in year one to four essays in flagship journals in year five, and that one's service record began with the leisurely Student Awards Committee, but by now includes the time-intensive Undergraduate Curriculum Committee and two faculty searches. And there are positive peer teaching observations, samples of impressive representative creative/scholarly work, a successful grant proposal and ample other evidence attesting to a high level of professional productivity.

At the end of this process, when the caucus of a candidate's home unit colleagues has agreed on their recommendation and recorded their vote, all existing materials go to the department chair for the first-level administrative review of the case. The chair should not be surprised by the positive picture I

will assume for this essay. After all, the current chair (or a predecessor) has been writing annual performance reviews for the faculty, and a third-year review by a faculty review committee also indicated that the colleague was making good progress. In such a case, then, what's left to worry and write about?

Quite a lot, in fact. Experience shows that, even in cases for which everything looks good at the unit level, serious questions may be raised, and tenure and promotion withheld, at the levels once, twice or thrice removed from the unit. Quite often, such negative decisions are caused by a lack of successful communication between the candidate's home unit and such "external" audiences. Here is what I recommend a chair can do so that the positive unit-level recommendation will have plain sailing outside the department.

Begin well. As chair, I am the principal conduit of information between my unit and the dean and central administration. As such, I need to clarify what my faculty candidate does so that external faculty committees, deans and the provost will understand the field in which she works and how that field and her work adds value to the institution. Knowing all this, I begin each letter with a concise paragraph about what the candidate does in her research/scholarship and teaching. While I will use the exact field-specific terminology for her work, I will also use clarifying appositions and switch linguistic codes and terminologies to explain any matters a highly educated nonspecialist might otherwise undervalue. All readers will have a level of comfort as they proceed.

Align. When we originally hired the candidate, we already linked the job ad and responsibilities with our university and college's strategic plan. In fact, we received the hiring authorization on that very basis. Now, after five years, I will once again link her specific achievements with some of the central goals and values as expressed in those strategy documents (or the position ad and appointment letter). Depending on the case, I do this either via direct reference to the strategic plan or via the inclusion of appropriate terminology from the plan, which, to my target audiences, will sound strongly familiar and elicit positive connotation.

Compare. The audiences above our unit get rightfully annoyed if the chair's review letter simply repeats what the faculty caucus and the external reviewers

already expressed. Of course, some redundancy is unavoidable, and even productive, as it reinforces central points. But as the candidate's and all unit faculty's direct supervisor, I have the distinct ability to compare and contrast this specific case with recent ones in the unit; put student evaluations in comparative perspective with unit averages, course complexity and course size; and contextualize workload assignments. In addition, because of my access to all annual reviews, I can recount my own evaluation of the candidate's path toward her bid for tenure and promotion. It will be my evaluative narrative, but it can confirm the candidate's.

Invoke. Although I know that the term "prestige" derives from French and Latin roots meaning "deceit," "illusion," "imposture" and "dazzling influence" (first applied to Napoleon in 1815), I also know that the academy thrives on the authority delegated from university rankings, name recognition and reputation. Therefore, when mentioning the locus of a book publication, the source of a grant or the title of a journal, I may invoke a book series editor's institutional affiliation and title (if from an aspirational or peer university, and if a center director, endowed chair); the cachet of an external funding source (for example, a National Science Foundation grant); and the status (publisher, sponsoring organization, year of first publication or new and "cutting-edge" articles), submission and acceptance statistics, and number of readers per manuscript for a peer-reviewed journal.

Parse. Yes, Albert Einstein once said that "all religions, arts, and sciences are branches from the same tree," but he said this long before higher education became as focused and fragmented as it is today. If your unit candidate is in history, rhetoric or modern languages, for example, but your college dean is an economist, your provost an engineer and your college has a single representative from public policy on the university tenure and promotion committee, your most noble task as chair is to break down the (un)natural boundaries that might impede a positive evaluation of your candidate's record.

Parse what it means to present a keynote for the annual meeting of the American Historical Association by likening it to a homologous event in a STEM discipline. Explicate that the Modern Language Association's James Russell Lowell Prize for best book is one of the most prestigious (that word

again) recognitions awarded by the most widely known and established (since 1883) international academic organization in the humanities, with over 25,000 members in 100 countries. Include the reader statistics for the article your candidate published in *Inside Higher Ed*, which, while without footnotes and therefore left unacknowledged by the unit faculty committee, has reached a potential audience of as many as 3.7 million unique web visitors a month and, while not peer reviewed, has completely transformed how scholars think about pedagogical technologies. Of course, you cannot rope in all this information for each of your candidate's achievements because your letter would turn into an epistolary novel. Pick and choose according to your institutional priorities.

Consider COVID. If your institution made the smart decision to mitigate the disruptive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on normal faculty workloads and granted the choice of a one-year automatic extension to candidates for tenure and promotion, you don't need to comment further. But if your institution did not account for the interruptions the pandemic created for archival research, conferences, reviewing, refereeing, publishing processes and the like, you should contextualize the specific kinds of impediments for each candidate. That said, be sure to keep this section concise and provide specific evidence so that it won't be read as an apology for an overall lower level of productivity.

Some institutions prefer external reviews from specialists at peer or aspirational universities. That may be tricky this year in the fields where senior representatives have been leading the efforts on their own campuses to train their colleagues to deal with remote and hybrid instruction (those, say, who work in digital humanities, education, writing and communication). If such referees turn down your request to serve because they have been working nonstop since March, you might want to quote their explanations when describing the composition of your external reviewer list.

End well. If you have done all you can do throughout the letter, at the very end, think one step beyond the specific candidate under consideration. I often use the final paragraph in the letter (the one before the formal recommendation about tenure and promotion) to remind my intended readers about some of the essential contributions my unit makes to the institution as a whole.

Think about it: since tenure and promotion processes are absolutely central to the future of an academic institution, institutions often reserve several days to discuss the cases of candidates who will be granted employment for the next two or three decades. It is because of this existential investment that the chair's letter will find an attentive audience. Therefore, I often frame the candidate's work within the context of my unit's contribution to general education (everyone profits from and pays at least lip service to it), collaboration with other units (whose representatives are part of the decision-making process), and participation in the current universitywide quality enhancement plan (which is always on everyone's mind). I also highlight the unit's contribution to diversity, equity and inclusion and local, regional, national and global outreach.

Do I make it sound as if successful tenure and promotion depends entirely on smart and sound rhetorical and semantic strategy? That's not what I mean to say at all. But I do mean to say that even a very good case at the unit level still needs thorough attention and excellent contextualization and communication so that faculty and administrators at the decanal and provostial levels may make an informed positive decision. The chair's letter is a decisive element in this process.

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