

May 14, 2009

TO: Deans and Department Heads  
FROM: Mark G. McNamee  
SUBJECT: Annual Follow-Up on Promotion and Tenure Reviews

At the end of each review cycle, the University Committee on Promotion and Tenure considers changes to the process or dossier guidelines designed to improve our operations. This memo summarizes several issues and changes that emerged from those discussions. I would appreciate it if you would share this “debrief” memo with your P&T committees for their further discussion and action where appropriate.

First, let me comment that there were many outstanding candidates presented this year. I continue to be impressed by the quality of our faculty and I am grateful for all of the contributions they make to our students, to the body of scholarship in their field, and to society. The dossiers clearly demonstrate that the department and colleges have made some stellar hires in recent years. Our more senior faculty members considered for promotion to professor have very significant records of accomplishment, of which they, and we, can be very proud. Thanks to you and your committees for the significant effort involved in documenting and assessing the accomplishments of your colleagues. The dossiers were assembled with care and effectively presented the breadth, depth, and impact of each faculty member’s work. This is some of the most important work we do as a body of scholars, and the university committee appreciates the thoughtfulness and attention that goes into the process.

### **Dossier Guidelines**

The university committee has not recommended any **substantive** changes to the dossier guidelines in terms of sections or manner of documentation. The revised guidelines are attached. They reflect the expectation that dossiers would be submitted electronically (see below), and they include minor clarifications suggested during the process this year. We have streamlined the document by not restating policies or procedures that are included elsewhere in the Faculty Handbook or online.

This year, the committee considered a total of 50 cases at the university level, the smallest number we have had in a number of years. As we look to the future, the number of tenure cases will nearly triple, reflecting aggressive hiring in the years after our budget reductions in 2002-03. For this reason, as well as new possibilities offered by Adobe 8 or 9 software, the university committee is asking that dossiers now be submitted in Adobe pdf format rather than as paper. Several colleges are already using electronic dossiers and have found these to be easy to work with while saving many reams of paper. Staff involved in managing the dossier submissions will work together to develop the details in the coming months, including standardization of bookmarks and other changes that take advantage of the electronic format. (Colleges may make their own decisions about the nature of supplemental materials not

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submitted to the university committee. These can include books, CDs, software, drawings, and artifacts that do not lend themselves to electronic submission.)

### **Several Issues Related to Diversity and International Contributions**

I would like to comment on how diversity and international contributions are considered and what part they play in the process. The University Strategic Plans have been important documents in guiding our overall efforts at Virginia Tech. The broad goals identified in the plan guide our investments, shape our initiatives, and become part of what we monitor and assess. This is very much part of how we improve as a university and how we are held accountable by our board, our accrediting bodies, and the public at large. Many of the areas identified in the plan in the areas of learning, discovery, and engagement have benefited from further elaboration and more specific implementation strategies developed by committees of faculty and relevant administrators. We have proceeded in this way many times and in many areas. Our diversity and international strategic plans and related special task force reports help us define next steps and provide a focus for our attention and investments in key areas. Engagement of faculty, staff, and administrators in working toward achievement of all our goals is crucial to our progress.

How do strategic plans translate to the individual faculty level in the context of promotion and tenure? The criteria for promotion and tenure as stated in the Faculty Handbook, section 2.8.4, remain the same – teaching, research, and outreach. Engagement in diversity and international activities or scholarship do not stand as separate criteria, but rather as examples of excellence in our learning, discovery, and engagement domains. We embrace “inclusive excellence” as a framework for many of our efforts. Inclusive excellence urges us to examine who our students are and how well we are serving them; what the needs are of local and global communities and how we might serve those better; and how our research and scholarship address the breadth of human experience and the most pressing problems of society. In this context, faculty engagement in diversity and international issues can help prepare our students for a global workplace and for their roles as informed and productive citizen leaders in a democracy. Inclusive excellence encourages us to be reflective in our pedagogical practices so that all students are able to learn to the best of their abilities. Given that excellence includes dimensions of diversity and global perspectives, faculty members are encouraged to document their active involvement in these areas if they have made contributions. Promotion and tenure committees are also encouraged to comment on these dimensions of excellence within the traditional areas of faculty accomplishment in teaching, research, outreach, and service when they assess the individual’s overall contributions.

### **External Letters**

Many committee members reflected on the increasing difficulty in obtaining thoughtful and timely letters from external reviewers. Good people are often very busy and getting their commitment can be challenging. Departmental committees and heads are strongly urged to start this process relatively early and to check with possible reviewers first to determine their availability and willingness to review candidate dossiers. The committee recognizes that there are very different disciplinary practices so there are no specific guidelines to be issued on this topic, other than what is already in the attached document. We continue to look for reviewers from major research universities whenever possible and for a clear rationale for other reviewers who bring special expertise and judgment to bear on the case, but don’t fit this standard profile.

## **“Early” Promotion and “Early” Tenure**

The university committee recognized that our language of “early tenure” or “early promotion” is misleading in many cases since candidates often brought highly relevant prior experience from other institutions. It is our practice at Virginia Tech to allow new untenured hires the entire probationary period prior to tenure consideration, even when they had previous university experience. Given this general practice, the committee requested that we refer to such cases as “non-mandatory” (rather than “early”) decisions, and confirm that faculty members with prior experience at the same rank may include all work at that rank in the full dossier, whether at Virginia Tech or elsewhere.

## **Graduate Education**

The university committee noted that most departments commented on the contributions of faculty members as chairs or members of graduate thesis or dissertation committees. The committee assumes that faculty members, especially those considered for promotion to professor, will have an appropriate record of accomplishment in this area. Since the size and nature of graduate programs vary widely, it is helpful to have evaluative comments about the role and success of the candidate in graduate education.

## **Mentoring**

The university committee continued its on-going, thoughtful conversation about the importance of mentoring in shaping a successful faculty career at every stage. We observed and heard about instances of excellent mentoring, usually for junior faculty members, and saw a few cases where individuals may have benefited from more effective mentoring. Although we have paid increased attention to mentoring of junior faculty members at Virginia Tech in recent years, we have not fully addressed the need for mentoring networks for faculty members at later stages in their careers. This is such an important topic that I will be addressing mentoring in a separate memo in the next several weeks. The *AdvanceVT* project has laid the groundwork for a mentoring initiative designed to support departments that want to start or improve their faculty mentoring programs. Details about a September 23-24, 2009 workshop on mentoring will be distributed soon so that departments can make plans to send a team.

Thanks to all of you, including your faculty committees, for managing a thoughtful and fair evaluation process.

cc: University Promotion and Tenure Committee

Attachment: Proposed Guidelines for Promotion and Tenure Dossiers, 2009-10