


TO: Deans and Department Heads

FROM: Thanassis Rikakis 
Executive Vice President and Provost

DATE: May 31, 2017

SUBJECT: Annual Follow-Up on Promotion and Tenure 2016-17

The University Promotion and Tenure Committee recommended 59 faculty members for promotion this spring. For associate professor with tenure, 30 candidates were recommended for promotion. For tenure at the currently held rank, four candidates were recommended for tenure. For promotion to professor with tenure, three candidates were recommended. And for promotion to professor, 22 candidates were recommended. These 59 candidates will be recommended for approval at the June 5, 2017, meeting of the Board of Visitors.

The university committee engaged in detailed discussions of candidates and acknowledged the contributions of the department committees, department heads, college committees, and deans in preparing the dossiers, writing letters, and seeking external reviewers. The promotion process is a faculty process and faculty at Virginia Tech take this responsibility seriously.

The university committee also discussed the promotion and tenure process and suggested some changes to the dossier guidelines. This memo summarizes the discussion and recommendations that emerged from the university committee's meetings.

Contextualizing the Faculty Member's Accomplishments

The university committee discussed the importance of placing the faculty member's accomplishments in the context of departmental and college expectations, the responsibilities that were assigned to the faculty member, and the disciplinary context in which the faculty member is working.

Expectations. Each department has identified key metrics of faculty success and national peer departments which provide the opportunity for benchmarking the department's programs. As a follow-up to this benchmarking exercise, departments have been asked to develop a written document that identifies the department's performance expectations for faculty members. Department heads and faculty members are expected to work collaboratively on defining what constitutes a national reputation for promotion and tenure, and what constitutes national distinction and leadership for promotion to professor. We expect departments to include quantitative and qualitative indicators that illustrate the stature and impact of the faculty member's research and scholarly work, and to account for variations in expectations across subdisciplines represented within the department. The department's expectations should be placed in the context of the metrics and national peer

departments that were identified this year. The document should address expectations in all areas of relevant scholarly activity (e.g., supervision of graduate students, external funding, undergraduate teaching, scholarly publications or creative presentations, awards). The department's document will be a standardized, transparent, nationally-validated, inclusive context for evaluation of promotion.

Assigned Responsibilities. The department committee and the department head letters should address the assigned responsibilities and describe them in the context of the department's usual assignments of teaching, research, outreach, and service. This provides the opportunity to discuss the faculty member's accomplishments in the context of the assigned "percentage of effort." Global statements such as "has a heavy teaching load" or "has a substantial service role for a tenure-track faculty member" are less helpful than more specific statements (e.g., "in addition to the usual expectation of teaching three courses per academic year, the candidate has also assumed responsibility for supervising the three laboratory sections that are associated with the senior capstone course"). These letters should also address departmental expectations for a range of responsibilities related to promotion, including involvement of undergraduates in research, completion of masters and doctoral students, external funding to support graduate research assistantships or postdoctoral associates, involvement in performances in nationally competitive venues, and so forth. It is the responsibility of the department head to align assignments with the nationally benchmarked expectations for the track a faculty member occupies as described in the department's expectations document.

National Peer Cohorts. Deans and department heads have also been asked to guide tenure-track faculty members to identify a national peer cohort that consists of faculty members at peer and aspirational research universities who are working in similar scholarly areas. This cohort may include faculty members who were recently promoted and tenured and who are viewed as emerging leaders in their fields. The accomplishments of the cohort provide a context within which the Virginia Tech faculty member can set goals for her or his professional accomplishments, and plan an agenda for the next few years. A national peer cohort also provides the context for how a national reputation is indicated within the particular discipline or subdiscipline. Furthermore, awareness of standing within a national peer cohort can help produce positive comparisons when external letter writers compare candidates to peers at other institutions. For faculty members looking toward promotion to professor, similar use of a peer cohort would be valuable in setting goals for national distinction and leadership in one's discipline.

Collaborative Research and Cluster Hiring

Our focus on destination areas and the associated cluster hires will result in greater emphasis on collaborative research. The destination areas explicitly encourage transdisciplinary research on major problems and questions of societal importance. For promotion and/or tenure, it will be necessary to convey in the promotion dossier the important contributions of the candidate to the collaborative research. This can be incorporated into the candidate's statements as well as the internal letters that are included at the department and college levels.

Our growing focus on collaborative research and cluster hiring requires instruction to the external reviewers about the expectations of faculty members who are engaged in these efforts. Identifying a faculty member as a member of a cluster hire sends the message that successful accomplishments will undoubtedly include scholarly work that is published with a number of co-authors and in journals that cross disciplinary boundaries. Such inter/transdisciplinary journals may be newer and have less overall impact than more established disciplinary journals; however, these interdisciplinary journals may be the highest profile outlets for this kind of work. Colleges and departments should work with destination area stakeholder committees (or interdisciplinary program committees) to establish nationally benchmarked lists of appropriate transdisciplinary scholarship outlets for faculty involved in the destination area clusters or other Virginia Tech interdisciplinary clusters. The department head and department committee should address in their letters the appropriateness of the outlets in which the candidate has published or presented work. Overall, the department letter to external reviewers for collaborative appointments should highlight for reviewers the nature of these collaborative inter/transdisciplinary appointments and the expectations associated with these positions.

External Reviewers

Last year's promotion and tenure follow-up letter commented extensively on selection of external reviewers. Please refresh yourself on this letter on the Provost's website prior to selecting external reviewers for next year's candidates. This year, most promotion dossiers included an appropriate set of external reviewers, but there were a few exceptions. External reviewers should primarily be full professors at peer universities, which may include SCHEV peers as well as the department's competitive and aspirational peers that were identified this year. It is important to include senior, accomplished faculty members who will have had experience with the promotion process at their home research university. Additionally, it is particularly important to include senior faculty who are national leaders to evaluate candidates for promotion to professor.

Department heads and/or department committee chairs should also carefully instruct external reviewers about our expectations for promotion: (a) a national reputation for research and scholarly work for promotion and tenure; (b) national leadership and distinction for promotion to professor; and (c) placing the candidate's accomplishments in the context of faculty members who are working in similar fields at other research universities.

Dossier Guidelines

The university committee also emphasized some aspects of the dossier.

- **Executive Summary:** Consider opening the executive summary with a paragraph that describes the faculty member's research and scholarly work and the context in which the faculty member is working.
- **Summary Tables:** Should be used in the executive summary whenever possible. Please identify important aspects of accomplishments (e.g., first author, corresponding author, new courses developed; graduate student committees chaired).
- **Candidate's Statement:** Provide an introductory statement about the faculty member's

professional identity and the context of their work within the broad field(s) in which they are working.

- **Research Funding:** Should be summarized by external and internal funding sources, the role of the faculty member for each source should be listed, and the candidate's portion of funding should be highlighted, along with the total project.

Faculty members are encouraged to include summary tables in the materials submitted for the 2nd and 4th year reviews to receive feedback in preparation for the promotion dossier.

Importance of Internal Letters

Internal letters provide the context for evaluating candidates for promotion. The department committee letter represents the faculty's evaluation of the accomplishments of the candidate and should address how the candidate has contributed to the overall goals of the program and department. The college committee letter should address the general expectations and standards of the college and reflect on the department committee's letter. Both committee letters should reflect on reasons for any split vote, balancing the majority opinion with sufficient information for the next level of review to understand any disagreements among committee members.

The department head letter is critically important and should provide a detailed assessment of the candidate's accomplishments. These accomplishments should be discussed in the context of the assigned responsibilities for the candidate and the department's expectations. The department head letter should also summarize the comments and recommendations of the external reviewers. It is especially important that the department head letter identifies and discusses all criticisms made by external reviewers. It is not sufficient to simply disagree with a criticism; it is necessary for the department head to provide a reasoned argument about the criticisms that are raised. The department head letter should also address any gaps in the candidate's record without revealing any confidential information. A gap of two or three years or an inversion of a trajectory (research, teaching, outreach, or service) requires a detailed and careful discussion by the department head.

The dean's letter provides the overall college context for the faculty member's accomplishments and should provide an integrative summary of the candidate's contributions to the department, college, and university goals.

Summary

The promotion and tenure process is successful due to the commitment of faculty members, department heads, deans, and the University Promotion and Tenure Committee. Each year, we identify ways to improve the process, refine the dossier, and obtain the best external reviews. I appreciate the contributions of everyone who is involved in the promotion process. As we expand our faculty, we will continue to focus on ways in which we can ensure the success of our colleagues as they pursue their careers and contribute to the university's strategic plans.

cc: University Promotion and Tenure Committee