F. The Department Deliberations

From the Faculty Handbook:

The aim of the review is to assess the achievements of the individual during his or her probationary period, as well as the promise shown for growth and further achievement. The detailed procedures by which the department conducts its assessment vary, but they must include the basic elements mentioned above as well as: (1) making the documentation gathered during the review available to the tenured faculty members of the department, (2) holding a meeting of the tenured faculty members for the announced purpose of discussing and voting on the promotion in question, and (3) taking the vote.

What the colleges say about departmental deliberations.

Evaluation Principles

F1. How do you evaluate research?

There are no formulas. Publication counts, citation counts, amount of external funding, number of walk-on-water support letters in the dossier, and other metrics do not by themselves signal excellence in research. Context has to be factored in, e.g., the reputation of the publication venue, the level of competition for grants, the stature and letter-writing habits of the external reviewers, etc.

What the colleges say about research evaluation.

F2. How do you evaluate teaching?

The information in a good teaching statement (see C7) provides an excellent starting point for evaluating teaching. This Weiss Award webpage provides a useful list of the many manifestations of teaching excellence. Systematic peer evaluation is a key component. (See B4). Expository talents that are observed by the external reviewers are relevant and should be noted. Course evaluations, while necessary as a way to hear student feedback and use in formative ways as input to teaching, are deeply flawed instruments for evaluating teaching and should be used with great care. Accumulated research evidence shows that students lack the expertise to assess the effectiveness of their instructor’s teaching and that student ratings may be biased against female instructors and instructors of color. Thus, teaching effectiveness should be evaluated using multiple sources of information: instructor self-reflections, peer observations, review of teaching materials, and student feedback about their experience in a course. While students are not reliable evaluators of pedagogy, they can provide useful experiential feedback on such questions as did an instructor communicate clearly, stimulate interest, treat students with respect, and appear prepared for class. When teaching evaluations are used, the focus should be on examining patterns in feedback over time, not comparing instructors to other faculty members, departmental averages, or other courses. When interpreting numerical scores, take into account biases that are known to influence student ratings (see above).

What the colleges say about the evaluation of teaching.
F3. How do you evaluate service?

In terms of on-campus service, the quality of the candidate’s participation on committees and in department meetings should be evaluated. The ability to work effectively with academic authorities (Chair, DGS, DUS, etc.) on issues that relate to the “greater good” is also important insofar as it signals an appreciation for collegiality.

Similarly, it is important for the candidate to have a modest record of service within their professional society (or equivalent). Leadership in a field requires the ability to identify quality research. That skill is developed in part by serving in capacities that require judgement of scholarly activity, e.g., reviewing papers that have been submitted to journals and conferences, reviewing applications that have been submitted to a fellowship board, reviewing proposals that have been submitted to a funding agency, etc.

What the colleges say about service and external engagement.

F4. How do you assess commitment to diversity and inclusion?

As with the evaluation of teaching, it is important to think broadly when assessing the candidate’s commitment to diversity and inclusion as there are many ways to make meaningful contributions. The guidance that the Office of Faculty Development and Diversity provides search committees is relevant to the assessment of a candidate who is being considered for tenure.

F5. How should the external letter “rate of return” be interpreted?

When asked if they are willing to write a letter, a potential reviewer may decline for a number of reasons. (a) Too busy in general. (b) Too busy responding to similar requests from other schools. (c) Reluctant to write a negative letter. (d) Lack of familiarity with the candidate’s work.

Correspondence from individuals who declined to serve as an external reviewers must be part of the dossier.

Likewise, if an individual agrees to write a letter but fails to deliver, then that fact needs to be reported together with all associated correspondence.

All instances of declining-to-write and failure-to-write must be taken at face value; no automatic conclusions should be drawn if there is a low return rate.

Meeting and Voting

From the Faculty Handbook: “There is no general prescription for interpreting the vote; some departments do not consider such a vote positive unless the margin of positive over negative votes is quite large. In any case, the department chairperson is not bound by the vote, though he or she must report it to the dean. The chairperson represents the department in making and explaining to the dean the department’s recommendation for or against the promotion.” What the colleges say about “the vote”.

F6. When does the Chair call for the first meeting and how should it be structured?

Typically it is after all the external letters are in hand. However, it is sometimes a good idea to meet in advance of that to go over procedures.

F7. Should “straw polls” be part of the deliberations?

Straw polls that are taken before there has been a full airing of the dossier are strongly discouraged. The premature articulation of a “yea” or a “nay” by a senior faculty member can stifle discussion and work against the idea that the candidate deserves an objective day in court. On the other hand, a straw poll staged late in the process with no pressure to get on board with the majority may have some value if highlights complicated assessments that require further discussion.

F8. Should the final vote of the tenured faculty be by secret ballot?

It can be argued that secret ballot voting promotes “honest” voting in a climate that is free of intimidation. On the other hand, a case can be made that frank deliberations would make it very hard to have a truly secret ballot. Whatever the chosen voting mechanism, it must be publicized and consistent across cases.

F9. How should votes of those unable to attend be viewed?

Whatever the recommendation, it should provide an incentive to be physically present. We note that being available by Zoom is far better than nothing, but nowhere near as valuable as being in the room. Many units follow the custom of having separate tallies for those not present at the final vote. It doesn’t discount the vote, it simply gives the reader of the dossier an extra piece of information when assessing the reasoning behind a vote. Being “in the room” builds collegiality.

Another practice is for the Chair to provide an “engagement table” in association with the vote tally. Each row would be associated with a tenured faculty member. The columns would tabulate things like “Attendance at Meeting 1 (Yes/No/Zoom), “Attendance at Meeting 2 (Yes/No/Zoom)”, “Read the External Letters”, “Read the Research Statement”, etc. Again, one must appreciate the shortcomings of such a mechanism. How do you assess contributions to a discussion? How much do you understand the research papers? Etc.

The Chair’s Letter

What the colleges say about the Chair’s letter.

F10. How should the final vote be interpreted by the Chair and others?

While the outcome of the vote is an important numerical fact, its interpretation is more complicated. All voting faculty should provide the chair with a confidential letter explaining the reasoning behind their vote. Those letters become part of the dossier and provide valuable information for the chair and for participants at the college and university stages of the review.
**F11. Should the results of the final vote be known only to the chair and to those downstream in the review process?**

The final tabulation that includes the votes of those unable to attend the meeting should be shared with the voting tenured faculty.

**F12. Should the Chair’s letter be shown to the tenured faculty voters before it is sent to the Dean?**

Making the letter visible to the voting faculty for fact-checking is recommended as it guards against misrepresentation, supports the principle of transparency, and reinforces the idea that the decision is more than just the Chair’s decision. The Chair has to make sure that the content of the letter respects the secret ballot principle (if that is the voting methodology) and that it does not exacerbate tensions should the case be controversial. Note that making the letter visible to the tenure faculty is simply for fact checking—it is not an invitation to serve as a co-author.

The visible letter can be accompanied by a confidential letter in which the Chair can offer to the Dean a personal assessment of the deliberations and vote.