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P&T CONFIDENTIAL

Selecting Outside Evaluators

What steps can tenure candidates take to increase the odds of a fair external review?

By [DAVID D. PERLMUTTER](#)

For full and associate professors, the end of the first semester is usually the time when we finish writing evaluation letters for tenure candidates at other campuses. Of all the service duties of the modern tenured academic, acting as an outside reviewer is the most challenging. We sit in judgment of some candidate about whom we either know quite a lot (and thus have pre-existing prejudices about their qualifications) or nothing at all (and thus are judging them based on a packet of paper).

From the candidate's point of view, the process of outside evaluation is a bit mysterious. Nevertheless, while you can't control what your outside reviewers say about you, you do have some say in who gets tapped to evaluate you, and who doesn't. And there are steps you can take to increase the odds for a fair review.

The selection of outside evaluators varies from place to place but has some common elements. Typically, a tenure candidate is required to submit a list of names of potential reviewers. The department chair and members of the tenure committee then choose some evaluators from the list and select others on their own. You are also allowed to name people you do *not* want involved.

Most often there are standard qualifications and disqualifications for the selections: Your dissertation adviser and co-authors can't evaluate your tenure case. Evaluators must be tenured. If you're an associate professor seeking promotion, your reviewers usually must be full professors. Typically, institutions have some stipulation that reviewers come from "peer" colleges and universities.

However chosen, outside reviewers can be a critical influence and a crucial voice in the P&T process. It is quite possible, for example, that a tenure candidate is the sole researcher and teacher in a particular subfield in the department. In that case, the departmental committee should seek "peer elders" in the same subfield who can offer an expert perspective.

Likewise, in a contentious tenure case, the outside evaluators are — you hope — more impartial than the internal judges. Outside reviewers may be able to cut through the morass of internal issues and focus on the major tenure criteria for the candidate in question.

So what factors should you consider as you put together your half of the list?

Think ahead. You shouldn't be so careerist as to identify outside reviewers on your first day on the tenure track and start bombarding them with compliments. But you should begin building a reputation in your field so that other scholars have heard good news about you. Certainly, getting published and frequently cited in journals or at conferences is vital for the research scholar. The tenure tracker at a community college or a small liberal-arts institution may contribute to publications on teaching or fieldwide newsletters or Web sites. Involvement in national organizations in your discipline is another way to get your name out.

Also, while actual lobbying is distasteful, there is nothing wrong with expanding your field of contacts. If you read a great paper in a journal by a senior scholar in your field, drop the author a note of inquiry and appreciation. Be sincere; maybe ask some follow-up questions. The same method might apply for a new teacher consulting a more experienced colleague at another college about syllabus design. The point is: It can't hurt for leading people in your field to have heard about you, or even from you, at least once before your tenure file shows up in their mail slot.

Be honest in your nominations. Populate your list with people whom it makes sense to include. If, for instance, all five of your nominated reviewers are outside of your subfield, then the tenure committee will suspect, with reason, that (a) you are afraid of being judged by true "peers," or (b) your choices are pals and would not be honest jurors.

It is a good idea to explain briefly your selections to the departmental committee and the chair. What is your relationship, if any, with the nominees? What are their credentials? What aspects of your portfolio can they best speak to?

Now is the time for full disclosure. To conceal that you are working on a paper with one of the reviewers on your list, or to inflate their status in the field, is unethical and will probably be detected. Remember, the committee will ask outside reviewers to provide their CV's and to describe their relationship with you.

Choose people with the best-possible credentials. You don't have to list five Nobel

laureates as your outside reviewers. Just make sure their CV's demonstrate that they are accomplished enough to sit in judgment of a tenure candidate.

The reputation and affiliations of your outside evaluators will, of course, affect how much weight their opinion carries with your department and with top administrators and campuswide tenure committees. It is tempting to "lowball" the reviewer standard — that is, to pick people who just meet the minimum qualifications for an outside evaluator, the idea being that they will be more likely to ladle out praise than would the superstar senior scholar.

The problem with that strategy is that it is often transparent. The collective brains of the P&T committee, the chair, and all other internal players who will review your case can read a CV as well as you can — probably better. You don't want to be in a situation in which your list is rejected as "not good enough."

Choose people who understand your work. Prestige is fine, but the evaluation of a tenure packet can be a complicated and onerous task. In facing a mass of tenure materials it is easy to overlook something, especially if we are not familiar with its significance. That's why it's important to suggest evaluators who understand your area of specialization, including its jargon and measures of achievement.

For example, when I was an assistant professor, I taught the "101" intro course. Now, when I see tenure candidates who similarly have taught a lot of intro-level courses, I have a good deal of background with which to assess their student-evaluation scores, syllabi, classroom materials, and teaching philosophy. Likewise, one of my research areas is visual communication so I know the top journals and the most-cited scholars in that subfield. My expertise, such as it is, does not mean that my evaluations will be better or fairer than those of a reviewer who has never taught 101 courses or published in visual communication, just that my judgment will be more tied to similar experiences of the candidate.

Know when to go negative. The nomination game has a thorny aspect: At many institutions, you are allowed to specify people you do *not* want as your outside reviewers. The reasons vary as much as the human condition. I heard about an assistant professor who requested a potential evaluator not be used because "she is stalking me since we made out at a conference."

It's best to offer only minimal explanation when you list the rejects. Also, once you go beyond two or three names, committee members may wonder how many enemies you have made in your (as yet) short career.

The outside-evaluation process is a bit of a black box for everyone involved. As a tenure candidate you have to trust that most of us take the responsibility of writing an external review seriously. The candidates themselves, however, can help the fairness and smoothness

of the process with a bit of forethought and planning.

Next month's column will look at how to put together your promotion-and-tenure packet with outside reviewers in mind.

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