

Some guidance on writing letters from the Personnel Committee—9/2/20

1. Write about the work, the accomplishments and not the person. Distinguish between the professional and personal before you write. Be cautious about descriptions/adjectives that are supposedly about the work but may more accurately reflect a personal evaluation.
2. Collegiality is not a criterion.
3. Have clear tenure/promotion policy language in place.* (See Faculty Handbook and PC “Expectations for Tenure”)
4. Review that language before you write. Experts suggest you might consider even writing down the criteria. And then take one criterion at a time as you write. Research indicates that this deliberative, conscious approach helps us to avoid the intuitive, the automatic. It keeps us attentive.
5. Don’t rush your review work. Studies show this is where/when unintentional bias can creep in.
6. Do some reading on mitigating bias and on fair, equitable review.** Studies suggest that even the awareness of the possibility of bias helps us to be more accurate and fair in our assessments.
7. Do not compare candidates.
8. Evaluate holistically. Value no single data point excessively. Don’t guess at the meaning of one detail in the file. Look for patterns.
9. Acknowledge different contexts when assessing the evidence—e.g. is the course taught at 8:10 in the morning? Does the faculty member teach a large number of EN 105s? Is the faculty member teaching intro as well as senior classes, core classes, a variety of subjects, etc.? In other words, context pertains to all the ways that a faculty member contributes to the curriculum.
10. Read carefully the file’s various statements (teaching, scholarship, service), paying attention to the professional narratives the faculty member offers. Then read on to verify: Look to see that claims are substantiated elsewhere, by evidence in the rest of the dossier.
11. Aim to understand the file according to the statements—even if it’s also important to ensure continuity between the statements and the file. The candidates are in the best position to frame their work for readers.
12. Do not consider or refer to clock extensions in your evaluation of the file.

13. Read long form feedback and SRFs holistically, remembering that numerous studies have demonstrated the bias inherent in student evaluations of teaching. Be cautious and humble in interpreting and citing quantitative measures from the SRFs. Be aware, for example, that an apparent difference between two ratings may be statistically insignificant.
14. Have humility as you evaluate. Resist what is called “epistemic exclusion.” Be open, as you assess, to learning something new, whether it be about a new journal and its importance, an emergent field in your discipline, or a new mode of publishing scholarly/creative work. Be open to the ways in which the candidate may be changing and expanding, rather than just replicating, the strengths of the department.

*The PC believes that the Skidmore Faculty Handbook offers very clear language to guide us. Here excerpted are some key passages pertaining to tenure (direct quoting is in italics), but we urge you to read the pertinent FHB sections in their entirety per the third point above:

Decisions to reappoint, tenure, or promote faculty members are based on the quality of their credentials in three areas: performance as teachers, achievement as scholars or artists, and contribution to the welfare of the college community beyond the classroom. Teaching of high quality is paramount and the primary criterion....Yet high-quality teaching is but one of three criteria, and alone will not suffice.

Features of successful TEACHING: *motivation and mentoring, expertise, course design and delivery, fostering student learning*

Inclusive excellence in SCHOLARSHIP, of which there are various kinds: *discovery, integration, application*

COMMUNITY SERVICE is *responsible citizenship*; it expresses the extent of one’s commitment to the institution. Service is demonstrated in multiple arenas: *to students, to departments or academic programs, to the college, to the academic profession.*

[from Part One, VIII, A]

The awarding of tenure is based on teaching of high quality and significant growth as well as achievement in scholarly, creative, or professional work, high-quality teaching being the principal criterion. Evidence of contributions to the community’s collective affairs at the departmental and all-college levels will also be taken into account. While one cannot give mathematical precision to the weight given to the three criteria, one may say that 50 percent, 40 percent, and 10 percent express the general expectation that teaching and professional work are primary (teaching being the principal criterion), and that a modest level of service is expected in pre-tenure years.

[from Part One, VIII, E]

** for a brief but informative reading with a practical bent, see “Questions to Consider during Promotion & Tenure Review Processes.” Rochester Institute of Technology, November 30, 2016.
<https://www.rit.edu/nsfadvance/assets/pdf/promotionandtenureworkshopunconsciousbiashandout%2030nov2016.pdf>.