

## Standards for Promotion and the Award of Tenure Guidelines for Letters of Evaluation

To assist in the evaluation of the faculty member for appointment or promotion on either the tenure or the non-tenure track, a dossier is prepared and forwarded to the Dean. The dossier contains five elements: the chair's letter of recommendation, a curriculum vitae, the Documentation of Teaching Effectiveness form, the Critical References form, and letters of evaluation. **The purpose of this document is to assist those who prepare dossiers in requesting and obtaining the most effective letters of evaluation.**

Commonly, appointment and promotion dossiers contain more than the recommended number of evaluation letters. A recent audit of 22 consecutive appointment and promotion dossiers indicated that the average number of tenure track letters was 10 and the average number of non-tenure track letters was 9. It should be stressed, however, that the quantity of letters is less important than their quality.

The Faculty Appointments and Promotion Committee (FAPC) has noted that not all letters contain the critical elements needed to support an appointment or promotion decision. As a result, the most frequent reason for deferral of Committee action has been the need to request additional information from additional correspondents. The FAPC offers the guidelines below to ensure that evaluation letters submitted contain information that is most relevant to the appointment and promotion decision.

The critical elements for evaluation letters include:

### **Choice of correspondent.**

***Both Tracks.*** The most effective evaluation letters are from nationally recognized leaders in the relevant area of scholarship. Most commonly, these are from senior faculty members or directors of major research or clinical programs. Especially helpful are letters from individuals at institutions of stature similar to Vanderbilt who have not been collaborators and who have not played a significant role in the candidate's training or career development. If the candidate has had a successful collaborative relationship with another investigator, the collaborator may be asked to write in support of the candidate. The collaborator's letter, however, should explain clearly the independent role and the unique contributions of the candidate in the collaborative work. For promotions in Clinical Science Departments, it is helpful to have correspondents who are familiar with the culture and traditions within the candidate's discipline in order to put the faculty member's achievements in the appropriate context.

Letters from senior Vanderbilt faculty members are useful, especially when there are special circumstances about the candidate's achievements that are best assessed by intramural correspondents. The suggestions above apply as well.

***Non-Tenure Track.*** For appointments and promotions on the non-tenure track, letters from individuals at Vanderbilt University and the region that are knowledgeable of the candidate's contributions in service and/or teaching are appropriate. Documentation of impact as an educator can be obtained from formal teaching metrics and from letters written by previous trainees attesting to the candidate's highly effective teaching and mentoring skills. Other effective correspondents include successful former trainees, residents, medical students, CME organizers, referring physicians, community leaders, educators, and public health officials. Particularly helpful are letters from individuals who have been neither mentors nor close colleagues and who can comment on the candidate's contributions from a regional or national perspective.

***Correspondent knowledge about the Promotion Process and about Vanderbilt promotion criteria and tracks.*** It is essential that correspondents be aware of the Vanderbilt promotion criteria for the requested rank and track. They should understand that tenure is usually awarded at the Associate Professor level. For example, letters from international correspondents, and from scientists within the NIH or industry may submit an inadvertently negative letter because they are unfamiliar with our track and rank system.

### **Content of Letters.**

***General. The letter writer.*** It is helpful when the correspondent describes the basis of her/his knowledge of the candidate, as well as any relevant information that validate the correspondent's ability to make a judgment on an appropriate faculty rank for the candidate, e.g., "I have chaired our Medical School Promotions Committee for the past 5 years and am familiar with the promotion criteria at Vanderbilt".

***Creativity, independence, and impact.*** The best letters of evaluation contain objective evidence of the quality, impact, independence and originality of the candidate's scholarship and professional effort. An objective appraisal of the faculty member's achievements within a percentile range is useful (e.g., "I believe that Dr. Smith's achievements place her within the top 10<sup>th</sup> percentile of individuals working in this area today."). In addition, it is helpful if the correspondent is able to refer to specific individuals at their own or other institutions who have attained the requested rank and whose qualifications are comparable to those of the candidate. Assessments of teaching and mentoring should reference teaching metrics, trainee attestations, and outcomes of trainees.

***Apparent gaps or omissions in the dossier.*** It is probably best for correspondents to address directly apparent gaps in a faculty member's dossier; for example, the individual with substantial grant support, but few manuscripts, or vice versa. Other examples would include the individual put up for tenure after a period of lack of productivity, or an individual put forth for promotion well early in the seven year probationary period when the promotion might be regarded as premature.

***Assessment of the applicant's likelihood of promotion at the correspondent's institution.*** Often the best evidence of the quality and impact of a faculty member's scholarship is a clear statement by a credible correspondent from an institution of stature similar to Vanderbilt that the faculty member would be promoted to the proposed rank and track at the correspondent's institution.

School of Medicine  
Faculty Appointments and Promotions Committee  
Guidelines for Letters of Evaluation  
Summary of Recommendations

Nominations for appointment or promotion to the rank of associate professor or professor must be accompanied by letters of evaluation from individuals knowledgeable about the candidate's contributions. For individuals nominated for promotion on Basic Science Investigator/Physician Scientist Investigator Track (tenure track and tenured), at least five letters must be obtained from individuals outside of Vanderbilt University who are national or international experts in the candidate's discipline, who have not served as mentors, collaborators, or close colleagues of the candidate, and who are in a position to evaluate the significance of the candidate's contributions to their discipline.

In the case of promotion on the Basic Science Educator/Clinician Educator Track, at least five letters, excluding those from former trainees, must be submitted. These letters should be from individuals at and outside of Vanderbilt University who are knowledgeable of the candidate's contributions in service or teaching. The evaluation is strengthened, however, by letters from individuals who have been neither mentors nor close colleagues and who can comment on the candidate's contributions from a regional or national perspective. Documentation of impact as an educator can be obtained from letters written by previous trainees.

In the case of promotion on the Clinical Practice Track, at least three letters must be submitted by professionals holding the requested rank or a higher rank. These letters should be from individuals at Vanderbilt University and the region who are knowledgeable of the candidate's contributions in clinical service. At least one letter must be obtained by a professional from outside of the faculty member's department.

The department will transmit to the Faculty Appointments and Promotion Committee all letters of evaluation obtained by the department relating to the proposed candidate. When negative letters are received, the chair's letter of recommendation should be used to address the issues that such negative letters may have raised.

*Recommended by the Faculty Appointments and Promotion Committee  
September 17, 2003*

*Approved by the Executive Faculty  
December 17, 2003*

*Approved modifications for inclusion of new Clinical Practice Track Policies  
July 28, 2013*