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## **The Department Chair's Role in Fostering Equity: Faculty Evaluation**

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## **The Department Chair's Role in Fostering Departmental Equity: Faculty Evaluation**

Many universities have a “leaky pipeline” – with fewer women and minorities progressing through the academic ranks to reach the full professor level. The department evaluation process – for both annual performance reviews and tenure and promotion review processes – are critical for faculty member’s career success, as well as the department and institution equity. Therefore, the evaluation process is an important hurdle to address in moving towards equity.

Examples of where bias might creep into the system include (1) women faculty being asked to go up for review a year later purportedly to have additional publications despite the faculty member’s perception of having similar research productivity to male faculty from her department and (2) having research productivity credited to a male collaborator. On top of these hurdles, many operating papers have ambiguous criteria that allow the standards to change depending on the evaluator and on who they are evaluating.

Institutions that create evaluations that are equitable will improve academic workforce stability. Typically, faculty review committees advise the Chair on their evaluation of the faculty member. Chairs can play a key role in ensuring that the criteria and process they use to evaluate faculty members are fair and equitable. The authors developed an online [Faculty Evaluation Toolkit](#) that is openly available to use to improve the evaluation process. Key parts are summarized below.

### **What can you do to ensure that the evaluation criteria are fair and equitable?**

Initiate a faculty review of the evaluation criteria that focuses on the following aspects.

- Start with identifying departmental, school and university values.
- Be sure that the criteria align with those values. For example, if your university espouses a teacher-scholar model, then teaching should be recognized and rewarded

in addition to scholarship. If your university values diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), then DEI work should be included in the criteria.

- Make sure that the criteria are as clear as possible. Vague terms (i.e., there is no common definition) – such as “prestigious,” “continual,” “consistently,” “sustained,” and “commitment” – need to be avoided or operationalized. Otherwise, terms are likely to be interpreted differently across faculty members.
- Clearly define rating levels at each rank. For example, what it means to be rated satisfactory or excellent should be presented for different appointment types, ranks, and differentiated workloads.
- To account for variability in how faculty members enact their roles, recognize and encourage multiple forms of evidence. For example, student evaluations of teaching (which may be biased against certain groups) should not be the only indicator of teaching. Similarly, if there are examples or lists of activities, is there an “other” category to allow for alternative activities?
- When faculty collaborate, require evidence of and give appropriate credit to all participants in publications, presentations, proposals, and awarded projects. For example, when women work with men on projects, they may unfairly be perceived as contributing less to the project.
- Remember that criteria need to be regularly reviewed as times change. For example, as new forms of scholarship emerge, consider how the impact, reach, and quality of new types of dissemination outlets (such as podcasts, blogs, social media, and webinars) and new types of products (such as data) are included.

A summary of key equity questions that cover general, teaching, research, and service considerations is included in the [Faculty Evaluation Toolkit](#).

### **How can you promote equity in the review process?**

1. Insist on clear and equitable evaluation criteria. See the previous section.
2. Provide specific feedback in annual reviews on cumulative progress toward meeting promotion and, if relevant, tenure criteria. Identify specific actions that should be taken to meet expectations for promotion. For example, “you have one peer-reviewed publication at this stage while at least five peer-reviewed publications of similar quality are expected for a positive promotion review” vs. “you should endeavor to increase your number of peer-reviewed publications.”
3. Meet with the faculty member to discuss your recommendations and answer any questions they may have.
4. Consider the makeup of the departmental review committee. Diversify committee membership by race, gender, rank (if appropriate), hearing status, age, etc. to provide a visible reminder that excellence comes in diverse forms and to increase members’ motivation to respond equitably.
5. Request training for the committee from the EOA Office or Human Resources and/or use available [online resources](#), ensuring that sources of bias are covered.
6. Set expectations in your charge letter to the committee.
  - Require committee members to maintain confidentiality. Given that bias, misunderstandings, and disagreements may enter the discussion, it is important to maintain the confidentiality of all discussions held to protect the candidate from potential harm as well as to ensure the integrity of the process and department collegiality.

- Use an inclusive decision-making process. That is, start from why a candidate should be granted tenure or promotion to focus more attention on the merits of applicants and less attention on their membership in a specific demographic group.
- Ensure adequate time for the process because good decision-making takes time. Reviewers need to read all the materials in the candidate's dossier and compare the evidence to the criteria.
- Set the expectation that reviewers come to meetings prepared to share an initial assessment of the applicant's standing in each category that is backed up with evidence and to bring up issues for clarification or questions.
- Set the expectation that there will then be an evidence-based discussion of each category separately.
- Note that consensus is not required.
- Require a summative evaluation letter that outlines the main points and pieces of evidence supporting each vote; for a split vote, require the minority opinion with its evidence.
- If a candidate has an extended tenure clock, state that they are to be evaluated based on regular expectations.
- Hold the committee responsible for fair and equitable evaluations by requiring them to provide a justification for their ratings and asking questions when evaluations appear unfair. Require decisions based on concrete evidence, not on vague assertions or assumptions.

A template charge letter and an example structured committee process are provided in the [Faculty Evaluation Toolkit](#).

## **Conclusion**

Each faculty member has unique needs. The goal is to meet those needs *equitably* rather than being concerned about whether everyone is being treated *equally*. For example, when reviewing faculty dossiers there are many ways faculty can contribute to the university's mission. It is important that all those varied contributions are valued in the review process. Not all contributions can be listed in departmental evaluation criteria, so some flexibility is needed. But consistency in how variations are handled is also needed.

In addition to supporting faculty with equitable evaluations, Chairs can also help create an equitable climate by supporting inclusive excellence in faculty recruitment and hiring and the use of family-friendly policies. To learn more about these additional topics, check out our follow-up articles appearing...

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