

# TENURE AND PROMOTION GUIDELINES

## External Reviewer Qualification and Selection Process

*College of Education and Human Development*  
*Robert E. Baker, Interim Dean*

This document refers to the process used by the CEHD Dean's Office to identify the external reviewers (aka "external evaluators" or "outside reviewers") who will be asked to provide confidential assessments of a faculty member's appropriateness for a tenured appointment and/or promotion in rank. **Please note that this process *only* pertains to tenure-line faculty, and only to tenure and promotion evaluations** (not tenure-track contract renewal). Term faculty seeking promotion in rank are required to include outside letters concerning teaching effectiveness and/or scholarship of teaching, but those letters are acquired by the candidate (i.e., they are *not* confidential evaluations obtained by the Dean's Office).

Tenure-line candidates may also include letters of support in their portfolio that they acquire from outside sources; however, such letters are separate from the confidential letters from external reviewers that are used as part of the peer evaluation process for tenure-line faculty seeking tenure and/or promotion in rank.

### ***Rationale for Using External Reviewers for Tenure and Promotion Decisions***

Candidates for tenure and/or promotion must provide evidence that their research and scholarship is impactful at national and international levels and well regarded by other scholars (among other intended audiences). Indeed, the Mason Faculty Handbook explains that "scholars in a particular field have the chief competence for judging the work of their colleagues," with such scholars often residing outside the Mason campus. Promotion to full professor is even more dependent on assessments by outside scholars, as the Handbook emphasizes that "evidence of significant impact beyond the boundaries of the University must be much more substantial than in cases involving tenure or promotion to the rank of associate professor. Clear and convincing evidence must be provided of an established external reputation in the primary field."

### ***Qualifications for Serving as an External Reviewer***

First and foremost, external reviewers must have authentic expertise in the *specific* domains of research and scholarship in which candidates have focused their work. It is not sufficient for a prospective evaluator to have expertise in the same general discipline or multidisciplinary domain of study (e.g., "multicultural education" or "school counseling" or "kinesiology"). Rather, external reviewers must have a demonstrated record of scholarly accomplishments on precisely those themes and topics that the candidate has described as the primary areas of work in which he or she aspires to have an impact. Example: if an educational psychologist's primary research themes are in the domain of school-based

motivation, it would be inappropriate to select external reviewers whose primary expertise is in learning and cognition, even if those prospective evaluators identify as educational psychologists.

Structurally, external reviewers must have already earned the rank and tenure status that the candidate is seeking. That does not mean that the evaluator must currently be in an academic position, but if tenure and appropriate rank has *never* been earned in that scholar's history, there must be clear and convincing evidence that the prospective evaluator's scholarly accomplishments are equivalent to those who have earned tenure and the appropriate academic rank at a Research I university.

International external reviewers are a valued and welcome part of the process; however, care must be taken to ensure that the academic appointment/title of an international scholar is equivalent to someone in the U.S. who has earned (at least) the rank and tenure status that the candidate is seeking.

Typically, external reviewers are also expected to be employed at a Research I university (or the international equivalent), or to have an employment history that includes a tenured position at the appropriate academic rank at a Research I university. Thus, for example, an emeritus/a scholar from a Research I setting or someone who left a Research I university for a position at a lower-ranked institution would be eligible to serve as an external reviewer.

Proposed exceptions to the "Research I" criterion must be carefully assessed by the Dean's Office. Faculty who earned tenure and promotion at a Research II-level institution are acceptable *only* if their research productivity and reputation in the field is clearly aligned with the norms associated with faculty at Research I institutions (sometimes called the "big fish in a little pond" phenomenon). For cases involving candidates in the general field of educational research, such exceptions would ideally be employed at institutions that are at a comparable or higher rank than Mason in the *U.S. News and World Report's* reputational rankings of educational schools in research universities.

A final, essential qualification for all proposed external reviewers is that they be unbiased and capable of making an objective assessment of the candidate's research and scholarship. Bias and loss of objectivity can occur in a variety of different ways. An obvious disqualification would be anyone with whom the candidate has a personal (as opposed to a purely professional) relationship. In addition, when the statement, "the candidate is excellent" is tantamount to saying, "I am excellent" (because of a significant professional interdependency), a reviewer must be disqualified. That would include, for example, dissertation committee members, research mentors, and most research collaborators (with the word "most" reflecting the possibility that a single, "arms-length" collaboration would not be a threat to objectivity). Finally, the Dean's Office must be savvy enough about the candidate's work to effectively avoid prospective evaluators who might be biased for theoretical or political reasons that are orthogonal to the criteria being applied in the decision-making process. That is why candidates are permitted to notify the Dean's Office of the names of up to two outside scholars they would like to exclude from the external evaluation process.

## ***Procedures for Identifying Specific External Reviewers***

Candidates may suggest up to 40% of the external evaluators who will receive an invitation to provide an objective assessment of the candidate's qualifications for tenure and/or promotion. Operationally that means that, of the 12-13 invitations sent via email in the initial selection process (implemented by the CEHD Senior Associate Dean or other designee of the Dean), 5 of those initial invitations will be to individuals nominated by the candidate, with the other 7-8 invitations going to individuals identified by the Dean's Office.

Although CEHD follows the university's guideline that there must be a minimum of at least 5 external letters, the College's goal is to obtain at least 7-8 such letters (so that no one letter has an inappropriately high weighting in the process).

While the final tally of *received* letters is not required to conform exactly to the 40% threshold for *sent* letters, CEHD protocol is to continue the process of inviting outside reviewers and securing letters of evaluation until, at a minimum, the number of received letters written by evaluators nominated by the candidate is less than the number of received letters written by evaluators identified by the Dean's Office. Thus, to take an extreme example, if, in the initial invitation process, all 5 of the candidate-nominated evaluators provided a letter but only 2 administrator-nominated evaluators had time to provide a letter, the process would not be over, even though the minimum target for the total number of letters had been reached. Instead, the process of identifying additional prospective evaluators would continue until at least 6 administrator-nominated individuals had produced a letter.

Historically the response rate for associate rank outside reviewers has been in the 70-75% range, and in the 55-65% range for full professors (who, on average, have more administrative and service commitments). This means that it is common for the Dean's Office to need a list of nominees from the candidate that goes a bit beyond a "top 5" list. Candidates are thus asked at the outset of the process to provide, in order of preference, a list of at least 10-12 nominees.

To ensure that the candidate has an opportunity to have the intended impact on the pool of external reviewers, CEHD protocol is to keep seeking evaluations until at least 3 letters written by candidate-nominated reviewers have been received. In addition, if the Dean's Office identifies a prospective reviewer through its independent protocol who ends up also being nominated by the candidate, that outside reviewer is not counted against the candidate's 40% allotment.

Although the two sets of prospective external evaluators typically do not overlap by more than one or two names (this happens most commonly in full professor cases, where the target population is, by definition, much smaller), it is not surprising that an occasional redundancy would arise given the protocol used by the Dean's Office to identify prospective external reviewers. Specifically, the primary procedure used to identify such individuals, consistent with the "authentic expertise" criterion noted above under reviewer qualifications, is to extract keywords found in the candidate's research publications and narrative material and to then use these keywords to initiate online searches designed

to identify aligned work being done by scholars from around the country (and around the world). When an individual is identified who appears to have a research program and recognized expertise on a theme or topic highlighted in the candidate's work, an effort is made to find the prospective reviewer's CV to verify, at a detailed level, that an appropriate match has been made.

If there are faculty within CEHD who have "authentic expertise" on the specific themes and topics represented in a candidate's work (which is not always the case given that the College encompasses about 30 different disciplines and sub-disciplines), a consultative protocol following this same logic is implemented. Yet any nomination from a CEHD senior faculty member still requires careful verification of the appropriateness of the prospective evaluator through a review of the specific contents of the outside scholar's CV.

### ***Conclusion***

The process of identifying the "right" external reviewers and effectively motivating them to write a letter is an essential component of the tenure and promotion process. Indeed, the substantive integrity of the entire process rests heavily on this part of the process being carried out in a thoughtful and effective manner. Just one or two letters from reviewers who are unqualified, biased, or otherwise unsuitable can negatively impact the entire process, with significant negative consequences for the candidate, the university, or both parties.

In that spirit, the current letter of invitation (template) used by the College of Education and Human Development for tenure cases—along with the comparable letter used for full professor cases—is included as an Appendix to this document.

## **Appendix**

*Sample letter sent to external reviewers for tenure and promotion cases:*

[Insert Date]

Dr. [Insert Name]

[Insert Rank]

[Insert Address]

[Insert Address]

Dear Dr. [Insert Name]:

Thank you for agreeing to review the credentials of **Dr. [Insert Name]** as part of her application for tenure and promotion to the rank of associate professor at George Mason University. In addition to her vita, I am sending narrative background information with respect to her teaching, research, and service activities and accomplishments, as well as several recent publications that you may wish to sample as part of your analysis.

We would appreciate it if you could evaluate Dr. [Insert Name]'s accumulated record of scholarship and professional service, comment on her recognition within the field, and note any further knowledge you may have or can discern from her vita with respect to other aspects of her work. Your comments will be incorporated into the review process as we evaluate whether Dr. [Name]'s contributions in scholarship, teaching, and service are of sufficient scope and quality to merit tenure and promotion to the rank of associate professor.

As a reminder, our hoped-for deadline for receiving your letter is **[Insert Day, Date]**. If you cannot write within this time frame, please be sure that we have your letter by no later than **[Insert Day, Date]**, which is about when we will be moving from the reading phase to the deliberation phase.

To facilitate speed of response, it would be preferable if you could e-mail your letter to me at [mford@gmu.edu](mailto:mford@gmu.edu). However, if you do so, please also forward a signed hard copy to us at the address on the top of this page. You can also reach me with any questions you may have at (703) 993-2004.

With regard to the criteria for tenure and promotion at George Mason University (Mason): our Faculty Handbook states that, to earn tenure and/or promotion in rank, faculty must demonstrate satisfactory levels of citizenship/service and either high competence in teaching and genuine excellence in research, or genuine excellence in teaching and high competence in research (genuine excellence in both areas is of course ideal). These are necessarily somewhat abstract concepts, but they do illustrate two important principles: (1) although Mason is now formally classified as a "doctoral-highest research activity" (R1) university, with expectations consistent with this status, teaching and research are equally valued in our context (in part because we are acutely aware that enrollment is the primary source of funding for our permanently budgeted positions); and (2) faculty can be tenured or promoted despite a lack of "genuine excellence" in one domain as long as they have a solid record and accelerating trajectory of accomplishments in that domain (i.e., "high competence" is still required).

One last detail: our Provost requires that we provide a brief description of our external reviewers so that he can judge whether the reviewers are of appropriate stature and substantive relevance when he and his staff conduct the final level of review. If you have a vita handy that you could attach to an e-mail, or a website that you could point me to with biographical material, that would facilitate my preparation efforts. On the other hand, if this is an inconvenience, please do not feel obligated to provide this additional information, as there are other ways we could obtain the essential documentation.

With sincere thanks,

[Signature]

Martin E. Ford  
Senior Associate Dean and  
Professor of Education

### Confidentiality Statement

Your letter will be kept confidential from the candidate and all others not directly participating in the evaluation process. In the event of a grievance or legal action, we cannot assure complete confidentiality, but we are committed to disclosing information only to the extent required by law.

### *Sample letter sent to external reviewers for promotion to full professor cases:*

[Insert Date]

Dr. [Insert Name]  
[Insert Rank]  
[Insert Address]  
[Insert Address]

Dear Dr. [Insert Name]:

Thank you for agreeing to review the credentials of Dr. **Dr. [Insert Name]** as part of her application for promotion to the rank of professor at George Mason University. In addition to her vita, I am sending narrative background information with respect to her teaching, research, and service activities and accomplishments, as well as several recent publications that you may wish to sample as part of your analysis.

We would appreciate it if you could evaluate Dr. [Insert Name]'s accumulated record of scholarship and professional service, comment on her recognition within the field, and note any further knowledge you may have or can discern from her vita with respect to other aspects of her work. Your comments will be incorporated into the review process as we evaluate whether Dr. [Name]'s contributions in scholarship, teaching, and service are of sufficient scope and quality to merit promotion to the rank of professor.

As a reminder, our hoped-for deadline for receiving your letter is **[Insert Day, Date]**. If you cannot write within this time frame, please be sure that we have your letter by no later than **[Insert Day, Date]**, which is about when we will be moving from the reading phase to the deliberation phase.

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One last detail: our Provost requires that we provide a brief description of our external reviewers so that he can judge whether the reviewers are of appropriate stature and substantive relevance when he and his staff conduct the final level of review. If you have a vita handy that you could attach to an e-mail, or a website that you could point me to with biographical material, that would facilitate my preparation efforts. On the other hand, if this is an inconvenience, please do not feel obligated to provide this additional information, as there are other ways we could obtain the essential documentation.

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[Signature]

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