

External Review for Promotion and Tenure

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External Review for Promotion and Tenure

August 2006

Tracy Bicknell-Holmes

Chair, Research and Instruction Services
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Kay Logan-Peters

Chair, Access and Branch Services
University of Nebraska-Lincoln



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SURVEY RESULTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

According to data collected in 2000, librarians at 41 of the 111 reporting academic ARL member libraries (37%) are in tenure track positions; librarians are eligible for a comparable continuing appointment at another 23 academic libraries (21%). In addition, data collected as part of the ARL annual salary survey shows that all but eight academic libraries have a multi-tier ranking system for librarians. This is a clear indication that there is an evaluation process in place for librarian promotion and tenure or other continuing appointment at most ARL libraries.

When a librarian becomes eligible for promotion to the next rank or for permanent appointment many institutions require external reviews of the candidate by peers at other institutions. These reviews become an important part of the evaluation of a librarian's potential for ongoing contributions to the position and the profession.

A literature search reveals that little has been written about the external review process for librarians seeking promotion or continuing appointment. Bradigan and Mularski (1996) conducted a study of criteria used by library administrators to evaluate candidate publications for promotion and tenure and discovered that solicited external assessments were key to their evaluations. Leyson and Black (1998) surveyed Carnegie research institutions on whether they required peer review of faculty. Their study focused primarily on peer review

within an institution and mentioned that review by external peers was an important part of the review. Expanding the search to higher education literature, a few additional articles rise to the surface that specifically address external review procedures used to evaluate English (Poston, 1984), nursing school (Reilly, Carlisle, Mikan and Goldsmith, 1996), political science (Schlozman, 1998), and accounting faculty (Schwartz and Schroeder, 1997). Although these articles provide some information that may be applicable to external review of library faculty, nothing in library literature specifically addresses procedures used in academic libraries to conduct external reviews of candidates for promotion and tenure.

The authors of this survey have performed a number of external reviews and have experienced a wide variety of procedures and policies from the requesting libraries. For example, the contents of candidates' portfolios have varied greatly. Some have contained only publications. Others have included a wide variety of material demonstrating work in service and job performance. One included the performance evaluations of the candidate. Some portfolios included the institutions' standards; others did not. The instructions to the reviewers have also varied. Some institutions instructed the reviewer to evaluate the quality of the candidate's work based on the included standards. Some asked the reviewer to evaluate the candidate

based on the reviewer's institutional standards. Others asked whether the candidate would receive tenure at the reviewer's institution. Occasionally, the reviewers were offered compensation in exchange for the review.

This survey was designed to identify the policies and procedures that ARL member libraries are using in the external review process for candidates who are eligible for promotion, tenure, or continuing appointment. It examines how external reviewers are identified and asked to participate in the review process, what instructions are given to reviewers, what materials are included in candidates' portfolios, and the criteria for evaluating candidates' portfolios, among other questions.

Background

The survey was distributed to the 123 ARL member libraries in February 2006. Seventy-seven libraries (63%) responded to the survey. Librarians at 35 of the responding institutions have faculty status. Forty-four institutions offer tenure or other permanent appointments (32 with faculty status and 12 without). Slightly more than half of the respondents (39 or 51%) do not require external reviews for librarians who are candidates for promotion, tenure, or continuing appointment. While the majority of these have neither faculty status nor permanent appointments (27 or 69%), they also include six whose librarians have faculty status and 11 that offer tenure or other permanent appointments (five with faculty status and six without).

Of the 38 respondents that do require external reviews, 36 require them for candidates seeking promotion to the next level, 27 require them for tenure candidates, and seven require them for continuous appointment candidates. Not surprisingly, most of these respondents have faculty status and/or offer tenure or other permanent appointment. Librarians at 29 institutions have faculty status and 28 of these require external reviews for promotion candidates. Twenty-seven of these also offer tenure and all require external reviews for tenure candi-

dates. Eight of the nine institutions where librarians do not have faculty status require external reviews for promotion candidates. Six of the nine offer permanent appointments and five of them require external reviews for those candidates.

Review of Terminology

Thirty of the responding institutions that require external review (79%) provided promotion and tenure criteria and procedural documents. Findings from a review of this documentation are included here and in the survey data analysis that follows. A large majority of the procedural documents distinguish reviewers outside an institution from those within the institution with terminology such as "external reviewer," "outside referee," and "external referee" and call their reviews "external evaluations," "outside review letters," or "letters of evaluation." A third specifically contrast these external letters from "solicited letters of support"—letters solicited by the candidate—and internal documents or letters written by supervisors or co-authors/collaborators of the candidate. A few use "references," "referees," "external reviewers," and "evaluation letters" interchangeably and solicit reviews both from writers familiar with the candidate or internal to the university and external writers unfamiliar with or unknown to the candidate. Others refer to "letters of reference" or "references" when discussing procedures that clearly describe external reviews.

Purpose of External Reviews

A few documents include a clear statement of the purpose of external reviews, such as to provide an "independent, unbiased evaluation of the candidate's scholarly attainment." One document states that, "The function of outside reviewers is to provide independent assessments of the candidate's work and professional standing."

In some cases, the purpose of the review can be gleaned from the instructions to the external reviewers—to "provide evaluative information,"

“evaluative comments,” “objective appraisal,” “candid appraisal,” “critical evaluation,” “letter of assessment,” “substantive and rigorous evaluation,” or “comment in a discriminating and objective way”—or from the criteria for selecting external reviewers, such as “Objective evaluators without conflicts of interest,” and “unbiased, external evaluators.” Based on these statements, for nearly half of the institutions external reviews are to be unbiased evaluations or critical assessments of the candidates.

At three institutions, the language in the instructions to the external reviewers or from the criteria for selecting external reviewers reveals that the purpose of the external review is to put the candidate in a positive light. For example: “Your name has been suggested...as someone who could write a recommendation on [candidate’s] behalf;” referees contacted by the candidate who have “agreed to write positive written letters of recommendation;” and external reviewers are “expected to display the academic professional and his/her activities and achievements in the most advantageous light.” At one of these institutions, the positive letters are paired with letters designed to evaluate the candidate critically and objectively.

Five institutions (17%) require external reviews only for those candidates seeking the top one or two highest ranks and this occurs primarily in systems with four or five ranks. One institution requires external reviews only for candidates seeking continuing appointment.

Soliciting Reviews

At 30 of the responding libraries (79%), candidates for promotion or tenure identify potential external reviewers. In all but six of these libraries, they receive assistance from review committees and/or the library director. It is also not unusual for supervisors to assist candidates in this process. Personnel officers are involved at only three of the libraries. At five of the eight libraries where the candidate does not identify reviewers, the com-

mittee and/or library director most often does so. At one library, the external reviewers are those library directors who serve on the visiting Library Advisory Council. At another, the candidate’s supervisor identifies reviewers, while at the third it is the unit director, who may not be the candidate’s immediate supervisor.

Somewhat unexpectedly, the documentation of five institutions specifies that the candidate has the opportunity to identify people (s)he would prefer not be asked to provide an external review and why. At two of these institutions, a person who has been identified by the candidate as inappropriate may still be asked to write a review, but the review must be accompanied by the candidate’s objection and a rationale on why (s)he was chosen as a reviewer against the candidate’s expressed concerns.

Nearly three-fourths of the respondents indicated that reviewers are selected based on their reputation in the candidate’s area of expertise. For six, this is the only criterion, the remainder chose multiple criteria. Rank of the reviewer is the second most important factor and some select reviewers because their home institution has similar promotion and tenure criteria. Other criteria include the reviewer’s knowledge of the candidate’s contributions and the favorable reputation of the reviewer’s institution. For example, six institutions specifically require that reviewers come from a “comparable,” “peer,” or “benchmark” institution or otherwise comment on the quality of the institution where the reviewer works. Four require that reviewers be considered experts in their field. Five require a specific rank for the external reviewer, most commonly at the rank to which the candidate aspires or above. In one case, only full professors or the equivalent can be selected as external reviewers.

Some libraries seek input from reviewers who have had limited or no contact with the candidate while others seek out reviewers with knowledge of the candidate and his/her contributions. According to a review of the procedural documents, five institutions either require that letters come both from

reviewers familiar with the candidate and those who are not, or allow a portion of the reviewers to be familiar with the candidate. Three specifically exclude co-authors, people in direct supervisory line, and former students or teachers from writing reviews. One of these states that reviewers must be “sufficiently at arms length” to provide an objective assessment. Another six state that reviewers should be knowledgeable about the candidate or the candidate’s accomplishments, or should be people who have direct knowledge about the candidate’s performance. Interestingly, one of these institutions also specifically instructs the reviewer to supply an “objective appraisal.”

On average, institutions seek five reviewers for each candidate. The minimum number of external reviews sought was one; three respondents solicit up to 10. According to the documentation, three institutions require an increasing number of external reviews with increasing rank. Forty percent do not specify a number of external reviewers required while a third state a minimum number of reviewers required. According to the survey responses, five of the ten institutions that specify a minimum number regularly require more than the minimum when soliciting reviews while two typically request the minimum number required by their institutions.

Many survey respondents convene a review committee to oversee promotion and tenure activities. These committees, or the committee chair, most frequently make the initial contact with potential reviewers (14 responses or 38%). Library directors and personnel officers are next most likely to initiate contact. At only four libraries do immediate supervisors contact reviewers. In no case does the candidate contact the reviewer directly.

Very rarely are reviewers unable to participate. Seven libraries (19%) indicated that a request to serve as a reviewer had never been rejected. Occasionally, a reviewer is unable to provide input due to other work commitments or because they are deemed ineligible due to rank, lack of tenure,

etc. In some cases, reviewers simply do not respond to letters seeking input on a candidate’s portfolio. Although the numbers are small and probably not large enough to illustrate a clear pattern, there does not seem to be any correlation between the way an external review is solicited and the likelihood that the request will be turned down.

The Candidate’s Portfolio

Few candidates have complete control of the contents of the portfolio sent to reviewers. Most often the contents are dictated by administrative/procedural requirements (17 responses or 46%). Occasionally, candidates are able to select materials to include in their portfolios, in combination with required materials (11 or 30%).

Generally, the candidate’s portfolio is sent after initial contact has been made with a potential reviewer and the person has agreed to serve (24 responses or 67%). Materials included in the portfolio nearly always include the candidate’s curriculum vitae (CV) or “factual résumé” (33 or 89%) and evidence of publishing or scholarly activities (26 or 70%). Respondents who send the CV/résumé with the candidate’s portfolio tend to send additional supporting documentation, as well. A significant number include a summary of accomplishments written by the candidate (20 or 54%), evidence of creative and service activities (17 or 46% each), and job related materials (13 or 35%). Other materials include criteria for assessment, institutional documents, peer assessments of teaching, and letters of reference. One institution reported that they sent “whatever the candidate submits.” According to the procedural documents reviewed, only one institution sends copies of performance appraisals with the candidate’s portfolio.

A third of the respondents (12) send the reviewer a candidate’s portfolio along with the initial letter of inquiry. The procedural documents of five of these institutions include a list of the portfolio contents. All of these institutions submit the candidate’s CV or résumé. Other documents include

the institution's criteria/standards for promotion and tenure, copies of the candidate's publications, the candidate's statement of accomplishments, research, etc., and the candidate's position description, among others.

Four respondents do not send external reviewers either the CV or résumé. A review of these institutions' documentation reveals that the reviewers are asked to comment only on firsthand knowledge of the candidate or are required/expected to be familiar with at least some aspect of the candidate's work. Of these four institutions, two send a candidate's summary statement of accomplishments, one sends publications, and one sends nothing from the candidate's portfolio.

Instructions to Reviewers

The majority of respondents (30 or 81%) indicate that external reviewers are asked to evaluate the candidate based on the promotion and tenure standards of the candidate's library. All but one send the standards or a URL where they may be retrieved with the candidate's portfolio; the other sends the university's minimum guidelines for promotion and tenure reviews. Three institutions (8%) ask the reviewer to evaluate the candidate using the criteria of the reviewer's library. Interestingly, two of these also send copies of the criteria of the candidate's library with the portfolio.

One institution responded that they do not specify criteria with which to evaluate a candidate; three had other criteria. A review of the documentation for these four institutions shows that they ask reviewers to comment only on aspects of the candidate's work with which the reviewer is familiar, have firsthand knowledge or have directly observed, or instruct them to comment on both the evidence in the folder and their personal knowledge about the candidate.

Reviewers are asked to evaluate a variety of the candidate's activities and areas of performance. The candidate's record of publishing or scholarly activities is the most common area evaluated by

external reviewers (34 or 89%). The candidate's creative and service activities tie for second with 25 responses each (66%). Job performance is included in the evaluation by about a third of respondents. According to the documents reviewed, the most common areas reviewers were asked to evaluate include pattern of productivity, quality and significance of the candidate's work, the impact of the candidate's work on the institution and/or the profession, and the potential for further growth and/or continued professional productivity.

A reading of the procedural documents shows that three of the institutions ask reviewers to make a recommendation on whether the candidate should be awarded promotion or continuing appointment, while an equal number specifically tell reviewers not to make a recommendation on whether the candidate should be awarded promotion or continuing appointment. Ten institutions ask external reviewers to compare the candidate to librarians at other institutions or in similar positions. Eight ask that external reviewers evaluate or estimate the candidate's stature or standing in the field, or comment on the degree of recognition the candidate has achieved in the profession. For example, one library asks reviewers to compare the candidate with others in positions nationally and internationally, another requests that reviewers evaluate the recognition the candidate has received at regional, national and international levels, and a third asks that reviewers evaluate the state/regional/national/international stature of the candidate as a result of his/her work. One institution asks the evaluator to comment on the manner in which the candidate's work "enhances the effectiveness or standing" of the university.

Reviewers are asked to comment on other aspects of the candidate's performance, as well. External reviewers for one library are asked "whether [the candidate] would be ranked among the most capable and promising librarians in his/her area;" another asks reviewers to evaluate the originality of the candidate's achievements; yet

another requests that reviewers evaluate the independence of the candidate's contributions.

Fifty-four percent of the respondents (20) give the reviewer more than one month to complete the review while 46% (17) allow two weeks to one month for completion of the review. No respondent gives the reviewer less than two weeks. If the reviewer has questions about the review process or instructions, in almost every case (s)he is instructed to contact the person who made the initial contact. In one case, the personnel officer makes first contact, but the reviewer is told to contact the library director if there are questions. In another case, just the opposite is true. In a third case, the review committee makes the initial contact, but the library director is the contact for questions. The candidate is never designated as a contact.

Relationship of the Portfolio Contents to Reviewer Instructions

A comparison of the responses to the questions about what the reviewer is asked to evaluate and what documentation is submitted as part of the candidate's portfolio reveals that the majority of respondents (28 or 76%) provide sufficient evidence of the candidate's performance in each area they ask the external reviewer to evaluate. A few send very little material, but also only ask for a limited review. For example, one respondent only sends examples of the candidate's publications and only asks the reviewer to evaluate those publications. Another sends only a summary statement, but instructs the reviewer to "evaluate only areas within the criteria of which the reviewer has personal knowledge." A third doesn't send a portfolio at all, but explains that the "reviewer is asked to comment on specific accomplishments and/or position responsibilities suggested by the candidate."

What is notable is the number of respondents who rely heavily on the candidate's CV or summary statement for evidence of performance. For example, three respondents send only a CV or summary, four send both a CV and summary, and two

send a CV and publications. All ask the reviewer to evaluate publications, creative and service activities, and job performance. Also of note are the practices of the three institutions that stated the purpose of the review is to show the candidate in a positive light. One of these sends the reviewers the CV and publications; the other two send all categories of portfolio materials. Together these examples raise the unanswered question of what is sufficient evidence of the quality of the performance the reviewer is being asked to evaluate.

Procedural documents were available for seven of the institutions that ask reviewers to evaluate a candidate's job performance. In two cases, reviewers are specifically chosen because they are acquainted with the candidate's work or have a professional connection with him/her. In two others, reviewers include both those who are familiar with the candidate and those who are not. The remaining three documents were unclear on these points.

Estimated Costs of Time Spent on a Review

Not surprisingly, none of the survey respondents track or have tried to track the costs of requiring external reviews for candidates. None track or try to estimate the time spent by candidates and others in preparing documentation for external reviews, either. Likewise, none of the respondents compensate reviewers financially for conducting reviews of their candidates.

In the absence of this information, the survey authors developed a rough estimate of the cost of conducting external reviews using data available from this survey and the ARL annual salary survey. Administrative and department chair positions and library faculty with longer years of service are most likely to be external reviewers. Using salary survey data on the average salaries for these positions and assuming a 40-hour workweek for a 52-week year, an average hourly rate of each position was calculated. According to this survey's respondents, one review takes 5.9 hours of labor, on average, and 24 hours at most. The cost of conducting one review

was calculated by multiplying the hourly rate by the mean and maximum amount of time reported for conducting a review. The table of data that was generated is below.

A director completing one review a year in 5.9 hours would cost \$479, while a director taking the maximum number of hours for one review would cost \$1,948. At the other end of the scale, the cost of a cataloging or reference librarian conducting one external review might range from \$163 to \$682. Clearly the cost of conducting external reviews varies considerably based on the position level of the reviewer, the amount of time (s)he spends, and the number of reviews conducted each year.

The Role of External Reviews in the Promotion and Tenure Process

External reviews of candidates appear to carry fairly significant weight with both peers and administrators. Seventy-nine percent of respondents (27) rated the influence of external review letters on administrators as a four or five on a five-point scale where five equaled "very much;" only one rated the influence below a three. The influence of external review letters on peers was slightly lower; 66% of respondents (23) rated their influence as a four or five, the remaining 34% (12) as a three.

Responding to Review Requests

Seventy-two percent of the survey respondents (53) said that librarians at their institutions conduct reviews of candidates at other institutions. Of the 38 institutions that require external reviews of their candidates, only one institution said they do not conduct external reviews of candidates from other institutions. Of the institutions that do not require external reviews of their candidates, 46% (18) accept invitations to review candidates from other institutions.

Estimates of the number of external reviews by library faculty and time spent on them are anecdotal or rough estimates at best, as this work is often not reported to their home institutions. However, survey respondents estimated that the number of reviews conducted annually ranged from one to 22. The average was 6.6. Reviewers spent a minimum of 30 minutes and a maximum of 24 hours on each review or an average of 5.9 hours.

Privacy Concerns

One concern about external reviews that came out in the comments and in the review of procedural documents is the confidentiality of external review letters. Often, a candidate's right to see an external review of his/her candidacy is dictated by state

Position	Average Salary**	Hourly Rate***	Cost Estimate to Conduct One Review	
			Mean (5.9 hrs)	Maximum (24 hrs)
Director	\$168,894	\$81.20	\$479.07	\$1,948.78
Associate Director	\$102,484	\$49.27	\$290.70	\$1,182.51
Assistant Director	\$92,478	\$44.46	\$262.32	\$1,067.05
Head, Branch	\$70,179	\$33.74	\$199.07	\$809.76
Department Chair*	\$67,490	\$32.45	\$191.44	\$778.73
Reference				
over 14 years experience	\$59,134	\$28.43	\$167.74	\$682.32
Cataloging				
over 14 years experience	\$57,631	\$27.71	\$163.47	\$664.97
* calculated as an average of all types of department heads				
** Source: "Table 25: Average Salaries of ARL University Librarians by Position and Geographic Region," <i>ARL Annual Salary Survey 2005-06</i> , Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2005.				
*** Average salary / 2080 hours				

law or university policy. More than a third of the documents reviewed required that external review letters remain strictly confidential; the candidate is not allowed to see them or respond to their contents. A small number state that the candidate can request to see the letter in redacted form where all identifying information is blacked out. In one case, the candidate has five days to respond to the contents of a letter, but it is not clear whether the letter is in redacted form. In another case, state law dictates that the candidate has the right to see external review letters if (s)he makes a request. It is not clear whether the letters are in redacted form or identifying information is available to the candidate who reviews them. In two cases, the institution allows the candidate to choose among options: waiving their rights to see the letter, seeing the letter in redacted form, or seeing the complete letter with identification of the reviewer included. In both cases, the reviewer is apprised of whether the candidate will see the letter when they conduct the review.

Unique Features of the Review Process

The review of procedural documents also revealed these interesting features of the external review process:

- A small number of institutions specifically state that external review letters may be used again for another review at a later date. For example, documentation from one university says that external review letters “may be used again” but cannot be used selectively. All of the letters must be used or none of them may be.
- The documentation for another university talks about “interviews with referees,” but it isn’t clear whether this is done in addition to a written external evaluation or in lieu of a written review.
- In one document, knowledge of the candidate is considered “evidence of the candidate’s

visibility” and is defined as having heard the candidate present a paper, having read an article by the candidate, etc.

- At another university, the library faculty personnel committee reads the external review letters and prepares a “written analysis of the validity and significance of the reviews received.”
- Three institutions specifically require that all letters solicited must be included in the file whether negative or positive.
- Several institutions also state that negative input from external evaluators should be addressed rather than ignored.
- Nearly all of the institutions that supplied procedural documents specifically require reviewers or the person who selects the reviewer to document the relationship of the reviewer to the candidate.
- Two institutions specifically require that letters written to solicit outside evaluation contain neutral language about the candidate.

Conclusion

These survey results clearly show that external reviews carry weight in tenure and promotion decisions with both peers and administrators. They also show a significant amount of collegiality on the part of faculty who are asked to perform external reviews. Although there are some similarities and patterns in the process of conducting outside peer reviews, procedures vary across institutions. In some cases, these variations are due to institutional policy. In others, they seem to be choices made by the library faculty in developing their internal procedures.

Nonetheless, what is striking about these survey results is how closely they mirror other studies of the external review process in some areas, yet differ widely in others. For example, when Reilly, Carlisle, Mikan, and Goldsmith surveyed nursing schools, they found that external reviews were required by 60% of institutions for tenure and 64%

for promotion, compared with this survey's results of 31% and 43% respectively. (1996, p. 370)

Schlozman researched the external review process of political science faculty from the point of view of full professors who completed the reviews. She found that faculty spent an average of 10.6 hours on reviews of candidates for tenure and nine hours on candidates for promotion, compared to the estimate of 5.9 hours in this survey. (1998, p. 624) It would be interesting to survey library faculty directly to see if the estimates from those who have completed external reviews are closer to those estimated by the political science faculty. Schlozman also found that the burden of completing external reviews was shared very unevenly in her profession. This may be true in academic libraries, too, since at eleven of the responding institutions reviewers complete fewer than five evaluations a year while at three they complete more than ten.

None of the literature found on external reviews discussed cost estimates for the process and no one

requiring external reviews in this survey is tracking the cost, either. The estimate of the cost of an external review is very rough and only takes into account the time spent by the faculty performing the reviews. Perhaps the dollar cost of the process is not as critical as ensuring that good decisions on promotion and tenure are being made, though. As one survey respondent noted, "Money spent on getting a tenure decision correct is money very well spent."

This survey begins to describe the external review process in research libraries and points to areas where more research could be undertaken. Additional research could attempt to more accurately estimate the costs of personnel and resources for portfolio preparation, identify best practices, and answer questions such as: What is the success rate for candidates who undergo external review? How does the success rate relate to the rigorosity of the process? What are the privacy issues? Do all promotions require external review or only those to specific ranks?

