

become an intentional part of the search process for those who are hired and for those candidates who are not. Recognizing the realities of the academic job search, and the scarcity of full-time, including full-time tenure-track, positions in many disciplines, how might a mentoring approach to the job search also include candidates who are not hired “who described feeling muddled, discombobulated, and disoriented by [a] lack of closure” (Andrzejewski 2023) when they were effectively ghosted during the hiring process? ▲

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External Review Letters in Promotion and Tenure: Recommendations for Chairs

Cinzia Cervato, Canan Bilen-Green, Carrie Ann Johnson, Carla Koretsky, and Adrienne Minerick

Institutions are increasingly scrutinizing the external review component of faculty evaluation for promotion and tenure decisions. Recognizing the pivotal role of external review letters in shaping the trajectory of academic careers, we surveyed external letter request templates from doctoral-granting universities with very high research activity (R1) and high research activity (R2). The primary objective was to summarize prevailing practices, highlight potential biases, and propose strategies for improvement, contributing to the ongoing discourse on the fairness and transparency of academic evaluation.

Studies have shown that tenure and promotion processes, touted as merit-driven, are influenced by gender and racial biases (Garrett, Williams, and Carr 2023; Llorens et al. 2021). Women face disparities in tenure outcomes, and biases intensify for individuals with multiple marginalized identities. Tenure and promotion practices are unique to higher education and are often veiled in confidentiality. A vital component of the process at most institutions is using external letters solicited from experts in the candidate’s field. Systemic biases manifest in unintended gendered and racially biased language within the selection process for external reviewers; the content of the external review letters; and assumptions made by promotion and tenure reviewers, including department chairs and evaluation committee members, about the content of the letters (Madera et al. 2024).

Unintended bias may negatively influence promotion and tenure decisions. To contribute to developing more inclusive institutional practices, we conducted a thematic analysis of seventy-five external review templates from 279 doctoral-granting US institutions. We focused on themes such as procedure and confidentiality, assessment criteria, probationary period, and the impact of COVID-19 that may add or counter potential biases in how disruptions manifested and were addressed.

Findings and Recommendations

The results of our thematic analysis revealed critical patterns in the external review templates and highlighted aspects related to procedure and confidentiality, assessment criteria, probationary periods, addressing potential bias, and COVID-19 impacts (see table 1). The complete analysis is summarized in Cervato et al. (2023). Here we offer recommendations for department chairs for a more inclusive external review process in promotion and tenure.

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Procedure and Confidentiality

Only one R1 institution specifically asked chairs and P&T committee chairs not to modify the template’s content. R1 institutions tend to emphasize the confidentiality of external review letters as allowed by state laws, underscoring the need to safeguard the integrity of the evaluation process. In contrast, unionized R1 and R2 campuses leaned toward transparency, sharing external review letters with candidates. This divergence in approaches prompts institutions to reflect on the ethical considerations surrounding reviewer confidentiality and encourages explicit communication of expectations to reviewers, mitigating potential biases.

Recommendation: Standardize the external review process.

- If available, use the Office of the Provost template to request reviews from external experts.
- Clearly outline the purpose of external reviews in the request letter, providing explicit information about evaluation criteria, institutional policies, and tenure/promotion expectations.

- Refrain from unnecessary modifications to the letter template. Any adjustments should be limited to providing context regarding the teaching load and resources offered to the candidate within that department and including information on unintentional biases.
- Collaborate with faculty to standardize procedures for selecting external reviewers, encouraging a random selection process from a diverse pool to minimize representational bias.

Assessment Criteria

According to our study, all requests asked the external reviewer to evaluate scholarly contributions, with many templates asking to comment on the candidate's teaching and service. Promotion and tenure portfolios at research institutions traditionally have included the candidate's teaching philosophy statement; tabulated results of student evaluation of teaching compared to the departmental, college, or institutional average; and occasionally peer teaching evaluation letters submitted by departmental colleagues. However, over the last few decades, extensive research has shown that course evaluations by students mostly measure instructor likeability rather than teaching effectiveness and that student evaluations are biased against faculty of color, faculty with accents and Asian last names, LGBTQIA+ faculty, and women faculty.

Recommendation: Limit external evaluation scope.

- Direct external reviewers to focus solely on assessing scholarship and professional service at the national or international level.
- Explicitly instruct external reviewers to comment on teaching

aspects only if they have firsthand experience or if they have directly observed the candidate's teaching.

Comparison to Other Scholars and Ability to Earn Tenure

More than 80 percent of R1 and half of the R2 templates asked the external reviewer to compare candidates to others at similar career stages, highlighting an emphasis on benchmarking against peers. Slightly less than half also requested an assessment of the candidate's future growth potential. In addition, approximately one-third of external review templates solicited explicit comments on whether the candidate would earn tenure at the reviewer's institution. However, the absence of detailed information regarding the institutional support available to candidates and potentially enormous differences across institutions poses challenges in conducting fair evaluations. Typically, external reviewers are full professors at comparable or higher-ranking institutions; their perception of the candidate's institutional/departmental context is likely incomplete.

Recommendation: Provide institutional context and explicit expectations.

- Include in request letters the institutional context, encompassing promotion and tenure expectations, typical teaching assignments, support structures, availability of research facilities, grant writing support, seed money, and more.
- Ask reviewers to avoid comparing the candidate to other scholars or assessing their likelihood of earning tenure at the reviewer's institution.

Table 1. Thematic Analysis of the External Letter Request Templates Grouped by Institution Type

Statements	R1 Institutions N = 52			R2 Institutions N = 23		
	Yes	No	N/A	Yes	No	N/A
Statements that were deemed neutral or with the potential to reduce bias included:						
Mentions COVID-19 impact	17 (32.7%)	35		3 (13.0%)	20	
Reference to diversity, equity, inclusion	3 (5.8%)	49		0	23	
Use of gender-neutral pronouns	25 (48.1%)	27		11 (47.5%)	12	
Notes on how to evaluate changes to the standard probationary period	18 (34.6%)	34		1 (4.3%)	22	
Confidentiality of letter	28 (53.8%)	17	7	6 (26.1%)	8	9
Request to evaluate research	36 (69.2%)	16		17 (73.9%)	6	
Request to evaluate creative work	27 (51.9%)	25		9 (39.1%)	14	
Request to evaluate scholarship	29 (55.8%)	23		15 (65.2%)	8	
Statements with the potential to introduce bias in the evaluation:						
Request to evaluate teaching	30 (57.7%)	22		9 (39.1%)	14	
Request to evaluate service	28 (53.8%)	24		10 (43.5%)	13	
P&T criteria: Future growth potential	25 (48.1%)	27		10 (43.5%)	13	
P&T criteria: Comparison to other scholars	42 (80.3%)	10		13 (56.5%)	10	
Opinion on tenure at the reviewer's/candidate's institution	19 (36.5%)	33		7 (30.4%)	16	
P&T criteria: National recognition	5 (9.6%)	47		4 (17.4%)	19	

The first group includes neutral statements that may be intended to reduce bias. The second group includes statements that may introduce bias in the evaluation.

Addressing Potential Bias

Only two R1 institutions explicitly acknowledged potential biases, sharing research on how COVID-19 more strongly impacted faculty of color and women faculty. Also, only half of the templates used gender-neutral pronouns.

Recommendation: Inform reviewers about bias in academia.

- Request templates should inform external reviewers about unintentional biases and offer specific methods to minimize bias.
- Reference research findings on biases in student evaluations, language disparities, tenure clock stoppages, and perceptions of caregiving responsibilities.
- Integrate gender-neutral pronouns in external review request templates to prevent subconscious gender bias and to ensure a more inclusive evaluation process.

Probationary Period

Despite the availability of extensions to the tenure clock at most institutions, only one-third of the external review templates, all but one from R1 institutions, communicated institutional policies regarding tenure clock extensions and how to consider them in the review process.

Recommendation: Explicitly ask to exclude extension year(s).

- Explicitly request exclusion of tenure clock extension year(s) and provide guidance to ensure uniform and equitable assessment of candidates.

COVID-19 Impact

Most templates did not mention the COVID-19 pandemic, possibly because they were written before 2020. The twenty letters out of seventy-five referencing COVID-19 included a summary of institutional policies to mitigate its negative effect on faculty. However, only a few acknowledged its disproportionate impacts on specific faculty populations, like caregiver faculty, faculty of color, and pretenure faculty.

Recommendation: Communicate the impact of recent events.

- Acknowledge the differential impact, within external review request letters, of events like the COVID-19 pandemic and post-George Floyd occurrences on faculty productivity, especially those with family caregiving responsibilities and faculty of color.

Finally, we recommend that reviewers, including department chairs and departmental committee members, independently assess tenure portfolios before reviewing external letters to avoid a negative characterization of the candidate based on their perception of what is hinted, implied, or omitted from external review letters (Stewart and Valian 2018). ▲

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From Crossing Campus to Crossing Continents: Faculty, Chair, and Global Partner Perspectives on an International Sabbatical

Emily Faulconer, Beverly Wood, and Stephen George-Williams

A sabbatical—a period of paid leave granted to faculty for research or study—is a construct in higher education that has experienced ebbs and flows in its favorability, though there are persistent arguments that it is important for research-active faculty. The day-to-day responsibilities of faculty can distract from and dilute efforts aimed at strategic planning, long-term planning, and reflection necessary to achieve promotion. It follows that faculty place a very high value on sabbatical leave time for its impact on career progression, with one study ranking sabbaticals second only to successful external funding (Smith et al. 2016). Faculty and institutions can benefit from sabbaticals through collaborative ideation to reveal new research ideas, development of new expertise, strategic dissemination efforts, and much more. Faculty who have participated in a sabbatical report stronger engagement with colleagues and a sense of social responsibility, with a higher tendency toward teamwork, creativity, and innovation. Sabbatical could also reduce the gap between academics and nonacademics through "experimental" sabbaticals (e.g., a year of consulting). It is important to note that benefits to students are not inherent, as one study reported no difference in student evaluations of teaching before and after sabbatical (Miller and Kang 1998), though faculty overwhelmingly agreed that sabbatical improved their attitude, making them a better faculty member (Miller and Kang 2006).

A sabbatical can be complex due to departmental, institutional, and external factors. Departmental factors like teaching commitments, service appointments, and joint appointments can reduce flexibility for faculty seeking a sabbatical. Furthermore, faculty must consider how their leave will impact their existing research activities, including student research supervision and advising. Faculty perceive the department chair as having both positive and negative influences on their ability to take a sabbatical, having notable oversight over the faculty responsibilities while on sabbatical (Miller and Kang 2006; Smith et al. 2016). External factors include

family and social responsibilities like childcare, eldercare, flexibility of partner's career for travel, and community obligations.

International sabbaticals can offer a unique life-changing opportunity for cultural immersion, providing crucial context for teaching and research while building a more robust professional network. If we wish our students to develop twenty-first-century skills to succeed in a global marketplace, we must be able to model them. For this reason, an international sabbatical is in direct support of the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Some studies report increased scholarly productivity as a result of international research collaborations (e.g., Castillo and Powell 2020). International sabbaticals can also bolster name recognition, landing speaking invitations at prestigious events. Interdisciplinary and diverse research teams increase funding success.

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In spring 2023, I formally requested my international sabbatical for the purpose of establishing a professional network with faculty outside the United States who are active in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) within STEM learning environments. The stated objectives were to network with STEM faculty at multiple Australian higher education institutions, attend an international education conference, and establish an interdisciplinary research team focused on undergraduate STEM education (either concentrating on high-impact practices or on humanizing online learning).