

**Review of External Promotion & Tenure Review Letters**

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## **Background**

Organizational structures, communication systems, and institutional practices are not gender-neutral. Despite the widespread belief that promotion and tenure (P&T) evaluations are solely based on merit (McNamee & Miller, 2009; Weisshaar, 2017), systemic gender bias leads to inequities in the career advancement of university women, especially women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) (NAS, 2006). To address these issues, our study focuses on systems and structures of promotion and tenure at R1 and R2 institutions.

Critical analysis allows scholars to address biases at the organizational level as they apply to gender and intersectionality at academic institutions (Houston, 2012; Lin, 2023; NIH, 2008). Gender and racial bias exist in organizations, including academic institutions, where stereotypes and overt forms of discrimination disadvantage women in the workplace (Acker, 1990; Lin, 2023). Tenure denial, a personal and professionally painful outcome, varies significantly by type of institution, discipline, and demographic profile of the candidate, suggesting systemic bias against underrepresented groups and differences in organizational culture (Alleman et al., 2019; Dooris & Guidos, 2006; Durodoye et al., 2020; Fenelon, 2003). Furthermore, negative bias increases when women have multiple intersectional identities (Yadav et al., 2020). Various social identities, including gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, caregiving responsibilities, religion, disability status, regional issues, and country of origin, intersect and influence one's professional experience (Alvesson et al., 2008; Crenshaw, 1989; Houston, 2012; Konik & Cortina, 2008; Cervato et al., 2022).

Communication systems play a crucial role in career advancement, and potential for advancement is affected by communication in external review letters, so our research focuses on communication systems that affect career advancement through an examination of external

reviews as an organizational communication practice, and outlines suggestions for the creation of gender-inclusive institutional practices.

Research-intensive institutions typically require letters from external reviewers with relevant content expertise as part of the evaluation process used to grant tenure and promotion to associate professor and promotion to full professor (Gottlieb et al., 2022). Tenure and promotion evaluations, including the external reviewers' role, are meant to be confidential (Nevo & Nevo, 1996). While gender disparities in tenure outcomes have been studied and documented, little research on external reviewers in the promotion and tenure process is available (Clemons & Goldberg, 2013). To address this gap, we used an organizational communication lens to critically deconstruct and analyze promotion and tenure external review templates from 75 publicly available templates used to request external promotion and tenure review letters to identify language and content that may impact the evaluation of women and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) faculty, and share recommendations for best practices for 1) institutions creating and using templates for requesting external letters, 2) external reviewers who receive requests based on these templates, and 3) internal reviewers who consider external letters in promotion and tenure evaluations to improve the content of such templates to mitigate bias.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

The underrepresentation of women in tenure-track and tenured positions can also be attributed to biased gatekeepers and bias and power differences that impact tenure and promotion evaluation processes (Garrett et al., 2022; Linabary et al., 2021). Such systemic biases must be actively understood and countered for gender equity in higher education (Smith et al., 2018). Women are less likely than men to receive tenure and promotion to full professorship (Fox, 2005; Ginther & Hayes, 1999; Weisshaar, 2017). An extensive study of assistant professors in

sociology, computer science, and English showed that productivity differences account only for a portion of the gender gap in tenure achievement in all three fields and that a large share of the gender gap can only be explained by inequality in tenure and promotion evaluation practices (Weisshaar, 2017). Understanding the steps involved in the evaluation and identifying those that can lead to evaluation bias is thus critical to close the gender gap (Carnes et al., 2012).

Women in STEM fields are less likely to be hired into tenure-track positions, be granted tenure, and be promoted to full professor (Durodoye et al., 2020; Holman et al., 2018; Khan & Ginther, 2018; NAS, 2006). Thus, women remain underrepresented in tenure-track and tenured positions at research institutions and are overrepresented in non-tenure-track positions, especially in STEM fields. These gender differences have been attributed to the unequal representation of women in certain fields of study, such as biology having better female representation compared to computer science or engineering. Additionally, there are gender disparities in graduate preparation, where on average, women take half a year longer to earn a Ph.D. and have a lower likelihood of having research assistant experience. These factors lead to women in non-tenure-track positions reporting low job satisfaction and job security (Rennane et al., 2022). Bias in external reviews led Stewart and Valian (2018) to caution committee members not to place excessive weight on external review letters for tenure and promotion and went as far as to recommend that the practice be dropped.

### ***Tenure and Promotion Practices***

Practices are activities and ways of acting/being that take place in a socially constructed context (Jansson, 2013). One practice uncommon outside of higher education is tenure—an employment status attained after a usually lengthy probationary period. Faculty with tenure can typically only be terminated in exceptional instances, such as for justifiable cause or the

elimination of an entire academic program. Tenure and promotion practices vary somewhat by institution but typically use “arm’s length” external reviews from accomplished scholars at the full professor rank at equivalent or more highly ranked research institutions. External letters are intended to provide internal reviewers with an “expert” assessment of the quality of a candidate’s contributions in a specific research area and the impact of the candidate’s research on their field (Clemons & Goldberg, 2013). Additionally, these letters are intended for college and university promotion and tenure committee members and higher-level administrators, who may lack the discipline-specific knowledge or time to adequately evaluate candidates’ research accomplishments (Chance, 2012).

External reviewers are usually selected from a pool provided by the candidate and one assembled by the department chair and tenure/promotion committee members. The required number of letters generally varies from three to 20 (Stewart & Valian, 2018), with six being a common target number. Non-U.S.-based academics are sometimes excluded because they may be unfamiliar with the importance of the tenure and promotion process and the nuances of faculty evaluation in the U.S. (Garrett et al., 2022; Mu & Hatch, 2021; Schneider, 2000). Because suggested external reviewers typically come from the professional and personal networks of the department chair and tenure/promotion committee members (Chance, 2012), the selection process is not random, which may exacerbate systemic bias, favoring replication of the identities of current faculty at the associate and full professor ranks (Llorens et al., 2021). At most institutions, the candidate’s former advisors, collaborators, and colleagues are excluded from the external review process.

### ***Potential Sources of Bias***

The external review process may suffer from systemic bias because of unintended gendered language in external review letters, the external reviewer selection processes, and the assumptions made by internal reviewers regarding the content of external review letters. Unconscious bias can negatively impact subjective assessments, for example, of resumes (Eaton et al., 2020; Moss-Racusin et al., 2012; Steinpreis et al., 1999), student evaluations of faculty (Binderkrantz & Bisgaard, 2023; Buser et al., 2022), or recommendation letters for job applicants (Dutt et al., 2016). Similarly, Stewart and Valian (2018) raise the concern that external review letters used to assess candidates for tenure and promotion portfolios may be similarly biased and thus may negatively and unfairly influence tenure and promotion decisions made by internal committee members, chairs, deans, or provosts. Practices in soliciting external review letters may amplify such biases, so it is important to understand and minimize bias from the beginning of the external review process.

In a study of more than 2,000 promotion and tenure cases at 10 institutions, Spitzmueller et al. (2022) identified potential sources of bias in the promotion to full professor that are unrelated to a candidate's portfolio but are instead due to biases in the process. Specifically, they cite external review letters as one potential source of bias: reviewers who are not sufficiently positive. The specific background of the letter writers may affect what they write and how they perceive a candidate's research record, and men write a disproportionate number of letters for promotion and tenure (Logeais et al., 2022). External reviews have strong influence, and letter writers need to be aware of how they view their role, including how long they have held power in the field and how attached they are to maintaining that power (Itchuaqiyah & Walton, 2021). Cycles of bias may be upheld and perpetuated by letter writers who identify with traditionally

narrow perceptions of worthwhile scholarship (Bellamy et al., 2022). The external reviewer selection process is not random, so someone who would not support the tenure or promotion case would likely refuse to write a letter. In fact, external reviews have a significantly positive slant overall (Weyland, 2019). Thus, external letters tend to be favorable, so internal reviewers might be inclined to “read between the lines,” searching for what is not said (Chance, 2012; Schneider, 2000).

Bias may also be introduced through gendered language in external review letters (Kahn et al., 2023). For example, an analysis of letters of recommendation for postdoctoral scholars in geosciences identified significant gender differences in the tone of the letters, with only 15% of women candidates receiving excellent letters compared to 24% of the men applicants (Dutt et al., 2016). Letters of recommendation for chemistry and biochemistry faculty job candidates used more standout adjectives like “excellent,” “superb,” and “exceptional” for men candidates (Schmader et al., 2007). Such gender differences have also been reported in the language used by external reviewers in the tenure and promotion process, with phrases like “brilliant scientist,” “trailblazer,” and “role model” more commonly used for men candidates, whereas “hard-working” and “very productive” are more likely to be found in letters written for women candidates (Dutt et al., 2016). These findings were confirmed in a study of more than 1,400 external letters written for nearly 300 promotion and tenure candidates that analyzed the presence of epistemic exclusion language (Edema-Sillo et al., 2022). The study showed that language stereotypes in the letters might devalue women faculty and faculty of color’s scholarship. Because external reviewers may or may not be aware of the cognitive biases related to certain words, their lack of accountability should discourage departments from over-relying on external letters (Stewart & Valian, 2018). Additionally, the confidentiality of external letters may

hinder the ability of the candidates to provide evidence of scholarly contributions and impact during the tenure and promotion evaluation. This can be particularly challenging for community-engaged research or non-traditional forms of scholarship that may not align with traditional publication metrics (Teufel-Shone, 2011). The reliance on confidential review letters may disadvantage candidates whose work is not easily quantifiable or does not fit within conventional academic norms.

Sensemaking is the process by which organizational members make sense of the organizational environment (Dougherty & Smythe, 2004; Weick, 1995). In other words, sensemaking is an ongoing reflection of plausible ideas that rationalize what people are doing in an organization (Weick et al., 2005). By relying on sensemaking, built by the culture of their organizations and through their individual life experiences, internal reviewers may assume negative characterizations of the candidate based on their perceptions of what is hinted at, implied, or omitted from external review letters rather than relying on the explicit content of the letter. This can introduce additional bias into the tenure and promotion evaluation process (Stewart & Valian, 2018).

## **Methods**

### ***Data Sample***

We searched the websites of 146 U.S. doctoral institutions with Very high research activity (R1 according to the Carnegie classification) and 133 doctoral institutions with High research activity (R2) for a total sample of 279 institutions. We limited the search to research-intensive institutions because the job responsibilities of candidates and the expectations for promotion and tenure were presumed to be most comparable. The list included private (28.3%) and public (71.7%) institutions. Among the R1 institutions, 52 (35.6%) included a publicly



available template of the letter that department chairs were asked to send to potential external promotion and tenure reviewers. Of those, five were private institutions, and 47 were public. Promotion guidelines of all R1 institutions mentioned external letters, but not all shared a letter request template, or access to specific information regarding the external review process required an institutional login. We did not reach out to institutional representatives to obtain letter templates that were not publicly available.

The use of external reviewers in the promotion and tenure process varied by institution in the R2 cohort. Of the 133 institutions, 23 required at least one letter from an external reviewer, seven mentioned that external letters were optional, and two allowed the candidate to include up to two letters of support from external colleagues as part of their dossier. Twenty-three letter request templates (17.3%) were publicly available, five from private and 18 from public institutions. Thus, a total of 75 letter request templates were considered for this study. Of the R1 institutions providing a letter request template, 12 are located in the Midwest, 16 in the Southeast, 11 in the Northeast, six in the Pacific, five in the Southwest, and two in the Rocky Mountains. Nine R2 institutions from the Midwest, six from the Northeast, five from the Southeast, two from the Southwest, and one from the Pacific provided letter request templates. Twenty-nine R1 and ten R2 institutions have a faculty union.

### ***Thematic analysis***

We conducted a thematic analysis on the external reviewer templates beginning with an initial set of codes based on previous research on bias (Eaton et al., 2020; Gottlieb et al., 2022; Llorens et al., 2021; Steward & Valian, 2018) and from the principal investigator's experience with promotion and tenure committees. Thematic analysis is used to analyze patterns in data and assess how these patterns work together (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Coders read through the letter

request templates using the initial codes and identified topics that did not fit into the initial categories. Codes were grouped into themes to analyze how bias is built into or resisted by external review templates. New codes were discussed and added until code saturation was reached, meaning no new issues or codes emerged (Bryant & Charmaz, 2008; Hennink et al., 2017). We also addressed the wording of tenure and promotion criteria in the letters, such as explicit requests to consider the national recognition of the candidate, potential for future growth, and how the candidate compares to other scholars at similar career stages. All but two institutions allowed the template to be modified by department or committee chairs. In most cases, the chair could use the same template for tenure and promotion to associate professor or for promotion to full professor. For this study, we evaluated the templates from the perspective of tenure and promotion to associate professor.

## **Results**

Letter request templates usually included a description of the tenure and promotion criteria used by the institution (and/or college or department), with the external reviewer asked to assess whether a candidate's accomplishments met the requirements to receive tenure and promotion based on these criteria. Most also asked the reviewer to describe the nature of past personal and professional interactions with the candidate. Codes used in the analysis included COVID-19 impact; Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity (DEI) in reference to the institution or candidate's service; directives regarding how to evaluate changes to the standard length of the probationary period; statements delineating the intended focus of the evaluation (i.e., research-only; research and teaching; full portfolio); statements regarding the confidentiality of the letter and if the candidate will have access to it; a question about the potential of the candidate to earn tenure at the reviewer's institution; and use of gender-neutral pronouns. External review letters

are required by all 146 R1 institutions we analyzed; only 17% of the 133 R2 institutions required at least one letter.

Codes were organized into overarching themes, including procedure and confidentiality, assessment, probationary period, addressing potential bias, and COVID-19 impacts.

### ***Procedure and Confidentiality***

All R1 and R2 templates included a deadline for receiving the external letter, a statement on the importance of external letters' role in the tenure and promotion process, and how grateful the department was for the reviewer's time, expertise, and contribution to the process. One private R2 institution mentioned providing the external reviewer with an honorarium.

About half of the letter request templates from R1 institutions (53.8%) stated that the letter would be kept confidential. Some public institutions (e.g., University of Albany, NY), according to state or system requirements, asked the reviewer to choose one of three options (the candidate may read the evaluation, may read the evaluation after identifying information has been removed, or may not read the evaluation). Other institutions (e.g., Temple University) included a confidentiality agreement to be signed by the reviewer with their request letter. Some letters disclosed if the candidate had/had not waived their right to review the letter according to state law (e.g., Oregon State University).

About one in four R2 letter request templates specified that the candidate could not access the letter. However, more R2 templates (nine) than R1 templates (five) did not explicitly mention letter confidentiality. A larger percentage of R1 campuses included in the sample are unionized (55%) compared to R2 institutions (43%). The most notable difference between unionized and non-unionized campuses was letter confidentiality, with half of the unionized campuses sharing external letters with the candidate.

### ***Assessment***

Most R1 templates asked the reviewer to evaluate the candidate's research (69.2%), with about half also requesting evaluation of their teaching (57.7%) and service (53.8%) contributions (Table 1). About half (51.9%) of the letters included specific statements about creative work, and 55.8% about the candidate's scholarship. Only one R1 and no R2 template requested external reviewers to evaluate the candidate's contributions to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) activities.

**Table 1:**

*Thematic analysis of the external letter request templates grouped by institution type. The first group includes statements that are neutral or may be intended to reduce bias. The second group includes statements that may introduce bias in the evaluation.*

Statements	R1 Institutions			R2 Institutions		
	(Very High Research)			(High Research)		
	Yes	No	N/A	Yes	No	N/A
<i>Statements that are neutral or may reduce bias.</i>						
Mentions COVID-19 impact	17 (32.7%)	35		3 (13.0%)	20	
Reference to DEI	3 (5.8%)	49		0	23	
Use of gender-neutral pronouns	25 (48.1%)	27		11 (47.5%)	12	
Notes how to evaluate changes to 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	
<i>Statements that may introduce bias in the evaluation</i>						
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 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	

Letter request templates from R2 institutions tended to be shorter and less specific than the ones from R1 institutions, especially regarding scholarship. Most commonly, R2 templates asked the external reviewer to evaluate research and scholarly productivity, with approximately 40% also requesting an assessment of teaching and service contributions. Concerning scholarship, all R2 letters requested external reviewers to evaluate the quality, impact, relevance, or significance of the candidate's scholarly work. Three institutions asked the external reviewer to comment on the quality of the journals in which the candidate published and two on the number of publications.

About half of the R1 templates (48.1%) asked questions about the candidate's future growth potential (Table 1). All asked specific questions about the quality and impact of their scholarly contributions, with nine (17%) also asking to comment on their quantity. About one-

third were asked to comment on the quality of the publishers/journals where the candidate's work appeared, and most included statements regarding the significance of their research contributions. About 80% of the R1 templates asked the external reviewer to compare the candidate to other scholars at similar career stages. National recognition was noted in a small subset of the letters from R1 institutions (9.6%), often, but not always, referring specifically to promotion to full professor because a single template was typically provided for all promotion and tenure cases.

Many R1 templates (36%) asked the reviewer to note whether they believed the candidate would earn tenure at their institution. About half of the R2 templates asked the reviewer to assess the candidate's growth potential and compare the candidate to other scholars at a similar career stage, a smaller percentage than the R1 institutions. One-third of the R2 templates (six) asked the reviewer not to make a recommendation on the candidate's likelihood of earning tenure at their institution or the candidate's institution. One R2 institution asked the reviewer to comment on it. The remaining templates did not mention this.

### ***COVID-19 Impacts***

One-third of the letter request templates from R1 institutions (17) included a statement on the impact that COVID-19 might have had on the candidate, asking the reviewer to be mindful of the challenges the pandemic inflicted on faculty. The impact of COVID on campus activities and faculty's work was mentioned in three (13%) of the R2 templates. Examples of COVID-19 impacts described in letter request templates include the closure of research facilities, restrictions on travel, challenges of shifting to new teaching modalities (remote, hybrid), the necessity to provide additional support to students, delays in procuring supplies and equipment, cancellation of conference presentations or performances/exhibitions, changes in the timelines for publication

leading to gaps in the candidate's scholarly record, and modifications by granting agencies in terms of new and existing funding. Additionally, letter request templates sometimes noted that faculty could include a separate COVID impact statement with their tenure and promotion materials, and some included summaries of institutional policies (e.g., automatic or granted-upon-request extensions of the tenure clock) adopted to counter COVID impacts.

### ***Probationary period***

Approximately one-third of the R1 templates (34.6%) included wording about changes to the probationary period (extension, reduction) and how they should be evaluated. Only one of the R2 templates (Lehigh University) mentioned the potential extension of the probationary period and how the reviewer should evaluate the candidate's dossier in that scenario. An example of wording comes from Texas A&M University:

“Please note that Professor [Last name] received a [number of years] extension of the tenure clock by virtue of university policy. We ask that you recognize this extension's adjustment to the candidate's time in rank and evaluate their work as if it were accomplished in the period of service that excludes their extension years.”

Some templates, like the one from Louisiana State University, addressed the scenario when the candidate has requested early review, noting that it is “highly unusual and should proceed only when merit is well established and clearly exceeds the holistic expectations applied in other reviews.”

### ***Addressing potential bias***

Letter request templates from two R1 institutions specifically addressed how COVID had a stronger impact on faculty of color, and one mentioned that national-level research suggests

that faculty of color and women faculty may have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. A COVID impact statement was required at these institutions as part of the tenure and promotion materials. In the letter request template from the University of Arizona, external reviewers were asked to consider that “the pandemic, and related deepening of social gaps, have taken a serious toll on faculty productivity and to take into consideration the vastly different circumstances that faculty have operated under and adapted to during the pandemic.”

Our results align with other findings about implicit bias (Eaton et al., 2020; Lin, 2023): discussions of implicit bias or unique challenges faculty might face related to gender or race were absent outside the two examples where they were mentioned in the context of COVID impact. Two R1 institutions mentioned the institution valued faculty contribution to serve Latinx students and students from all underrepresented backgrounds (University of Arizona, University of Texas at El Paso). The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign encouraged the reviewer to comment on the candidate’s DEI activities, noting that this would provide a fuller sense of the candidate’s contributions.

## **Discussion**

Most research institutions have a long history of requesting external reviews of tenure and promotion portfolios (Gottlieb et al., 2022), so it is important to examine the underlying rationales and purposes for requesting these reviews, as well as to assess the efficacy of external review processes in achieving this purpose. External review letters are intended to provide an unbiased assessment of a candidate’s tenure and promotion portfolio, particularly given that most stipulate that the reviewer may not be a colleague, collaborator, or former advisor of the candidate (Gottlieb et al., 2022; Schlozman, 1998). In addition, external reviewers are generally



presumed to have more specific content expertise regarding a particular subdiscipline than internal reviewers.

One of the implied rationales for requesting external reviews is to provide an unbiased assessment of tenure and promotion portfolios (Chance, 2012; Clemons & Goldberg, 2013), so research institutions should pay attention to the growing literature regarding cognitive bias in review processes and explicitly incorporate these findings into the external review process to actively mitigate such bias. We have identified common aspects of external review letter request templates that address the overarching themes we found in the external review templates.

### ***Procedure and confidentiality***

Our study suggests that R1 institutions are more likely to ensure the confidentiality of letters used in the review process and that unionized campuses are more likely to share external review letters with candidates. There are multiple lenses through which to view confidentiality in reviews. A lack of confidentiality might discourage some potential external reviewers from accepting the review requests, especially in smaller disciplines (Schneider, 2000); however, confidentiality can also be linked to abuses of power and increased bias (Baez, 2002). Additionally, review letters already skew positive, so confidentiality may no longer be critical for potential reviewers (Weyland, 2019). However, where confidentiality is necessary, communication in external review templates could outline the ethical expectations of reviewers.

While most tenure and promotion external review request templates probably result from extensive institutional communication, we found a strong example of mitigating bias through the use of thoughtful details at two universities: University of Arizona and Texas A&M University (UA, 2022; TAMU, 2022). However, only one institution specifically asked department chairs or tenure and promotion committee chairs not to modify letters beyond including the candidate's

name or removing optional paragraphs that might not apply to a specific candidate. Allowing department or committee chairs to modify the letter without making them aware of the risks of potential bias inherent in the process invalidates the careful communication process through which institutions attempt to mitigate bias.

### *Assessment*

**Requests to review candidates' teaching and service contributions.** External reviewers are typically selected based on scholarly expertise closely aligned with the candidate. Although generally unstated, the rationale is that external reviewers can provide valuable insights into the quality of the candidate's work and its scholarly impact within a particular subdiscipline (Chance, 2012). External reviewers are not typically selected based on their teaching or service contributions or expertise. Expectations for service and teaching may differ significantly between the external reviewer's and candidate's institutions. And in contrast to scholarly contributions, which should be available for reviewers to assess via work disseminated at conferences and in peer-reviewed publications, most reviewers do not have firsthand knowledge of the candidate's teaching contributions or service provided to their institutions (although they may have valuable insights regarding service contributions to the profession). Nonetheless, more than half of the review request letter templates specifically ask the external reviewer to evaluate the candidate's teaching and service work in addition to their research. Assessment of teaching ability should be excluded from external review templates unless there is a significant reason to assume the reviewer has seen the candidate teach.

Promotion and tenure portfolios at research institutions usually include a 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 (Thomas et al., 2014). However, over the last few decades, extensive research has shown that course evaluations by students mostly measure instructor likeability rather than teaching effectiveness (e.g., Spooren et al., 2013). Additionally, extensive research has demonstrated that student evaluations are biased against faculty of color (Bavishi et al., 2010), faculty with accents and Asian last names (Subtirelu, 2015), LGBTQIA+ faculty (Anderson & Kanner, 2011), and women faculty (Binderkrantz & Bisgaard, 2023; Boring, 2017; Buser et al., 2022). Although there is little research regarding peer evaluations of teaching, most faculty peer evaluators are not trained in pedagogical assessment. Finally, hidden service demands are regularly placed on faculty of color and women (Carrigan et al., 2011; Pillay & Abhayawansa, 2014). External reviewers may or may not be aware of this literature and may be unable to identify and appropriately assess specific faculty populations' often intense and disproportionate demands on time and energy.

**Comparison to other scholars.** Request templates most commonly asked the external reviewer to compare the candidate to other scholars at similar career stages (80.3% of R1 templates and 56.5% of R2 templates), with some also requesting the reviewer to assess the future growth potential of the candidate (48.1% of R1 templates and 43.5% of R2 templates). Most external review request letters include departmental or institutional tenure and promotion criteria information. However, few detailed the institutional supports available to candidates (e.g., typical teaching assignments, technical support for research facilities or grant writing, seed money available for research or teaching, funded graduate assistant support, start-up packages, faculty development support). These supports are likely to differ enormously across institutions. This lack of communication forces external reviewers to guess or assume the types of

institutional support systems available to a particular candidate, making comparisons to “other scholars” challenging at best and opening the door to unfair evaluation.

**Ability to earn tenure at the reviewer’s institution.** Request letter templates frequently asked external reviewers to explicitly address whether or not the reviewer believed that the candidate would earn tenure at the reviewer’s institution. However, as noted above, most letter templates do not provide information about institutional support frameworks available to candidates or expectations for achieving promotion. Because external reviewers are typically full professors from peer or higher-ranking institutions, their perception of the specific institutional context in which the candidate has been working is likely incomplete and possibly skewed. While six R2 institutions specifically asked the reviewer not to comment on this, about one-third of the R1 and R2 templates explicitly included this request. None of the R1 institutions requested that reviewers not comment on this. Communication about institutional context and expectations for promotion and tenure could add another layer of protection against bias.

### ***COVID-19 impact***

For over two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has upended the lives of faculty and students. A growing body of research demonstrates the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on faculty of color and faculty with family caregiving responsibilities. Most templates did not mention the pandemic, possibly because they were written before the onset of the pandemic in 2020. The 20 letters that mentioned COVID-19 included a summary of institutional policies enacted to counter the negative effects on faculty, particularly pre-tenure faculty. Some noted the optional or automatic extension of the tenure clock and the opportunity or requirement to include a statement on COVID impact as part of the tenure and promotion portfolio. Most did not

explicitly communicate the demonstrated disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on specific faculty populations.

### ***Probationary period***

Extensions to the tenure clock are available at most institutions to accommodate the arrival of a child, eldercare, health issues, and other potential interruptions to career progression. One-third of the R1 and only one R2 template specifically communicated their institutional policy regarding tenure clock extensions and explicitly asked the reviewer to exclude the extension years in considering the candidate's scholarly productivity.

### ***Addressing potential bias***

Potential for bias can be made explicit in the external reviewer template. Of the two institutions that did, one shared research about how COVID had a stronger impact on faculty of color, and the other mentioned that national-level research suggests that faculty of color and women faculty may have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

Only half of the templates used gender-neutral pronouns, possibly because they are not updated regularly. The use of inclusive language is still under development in academic publishing and style guides (Cameron & Stinson, 2019; Eaton et al., 2020; Magazine & Blakemore, 2023).

### **Recommendations**

Given the potential for bias, Stewart and Valian (2018) question the necessity and utility of requesting an external review of candidates for tenure and promotion. They ask institutions to carefully consider external letters' intended purpose and create communication processes that transparently reflect external and internal reviewers' different expectations regarding tenure and promotion. However, external letters are a common practice and a normalized communication in

academia. To further mitigate bias in external review practices, we offer the following recommendations based on our survey of request template letters.

- *Standardize the external review process at the institutional level.* Institutions should clarify the rationale for external review and include an explicit statement regarding this rationale in requests for external review. Furthermore, requests for external review should include required institutional statements regarding tenure and promotion evaluation criteria, relevant institutional policies (e.g., about tenure clock extensions), and general information regarding well-documented potential sources of evaluation bias. We found several examples where departments and colleges had criteria that deviated from the institutional standard, particularly in the selection of external reviewers, with significant variations in the number of external letters sought and how external reviewers were selected. We also recommend creating procedures that encourage choosing external reviewers randomly from an extensive list of scholars and gathering six to 10 letters to minimize the chance of more than three or four coming from demanding experts (Chance, 2012).
- *Limit external evaluation to scholarship and professional service.* External reviewers are presumably selected based on their expertise in a research field and because they can provide important insights into the quality of a candidate's scholarship and its impact on the broader field. They are not typically selected based on their teaching or service expertise and likely lack the knowledge and institutional context to provide useful and unbiased external reviews of a candidate's teaching effectiveness or service contributions to their institution.

Therefore, external reviewers should be explicitly asked to focus their evaluation on the candidate's scholarship and should only comment on the candidate's accomplishments in teaching, mentoring, or service if they span beyond the institution and the reviewer can provide specific insights regarding these activities beyond those which would be available to internal reviewers. External reviewers could be asked to comment on the candidate's accomplishments in professional service and mentoring beyond the institution, activities to which women and underrepresented minority faculty tend to dedicate more time and effort than their male counterparts and that are often central to the mission of the department and institution (Spitzmueller et al., 2022). Activities beyond the institution that contribute to the institution's DEI commitments should also be considered.

- *Provide institutional context and expectations.* External review request letters should clearly explain the institutional context and expectations for tenure. External reviewers are often chosen from higher-ranked institutions than the candidate and may make incorrect assumptions regarding both expectations for research and levels of institutional support provided to the candidate. External review requests should include information about typical teaching expectations, graduate assistant support, technical support, research facilities, seed funds for research, financial support to present at conferences, and other relevant institutional supports or contexts. At the local level, bias can be mitigated by encouraging committee members to form independent tenure and promotion portfolio assessments before reading external review letters (Stewart & Valian, 2018).

- *Ask reviewers to refrain from recommending or comparing to other scholars or commenting on the likelihood that a candidate would receive tenure or promotion at their institution.* Given the potential differences between the reviewer and candidate institutions, in terms of both expectations and support, reviewers should be explicitly asked not to comment on the candidate's potential to earn tenure at their institution or to compare the candidate to hypothetical scholars at their institutions or elsewhere.
- *Provide reviewers with information regarding bias in academia.* External review request templates should include explicit communication regarding research documenting bias against specific faculty populations in academia (e.g., BIPOC faculty, women faculty, international faculty, disabled faculty) and methods to minimize bias (e.g., unrushed evaluation; using rubrics to evaluate using specific criteria; maintaining conscious awareness of sources of bias). Request letters should reference relevant research findings regarding biases in faculty evaluation, such as bias in student evaluation scores, bias in language used to describe men vs. women in student, peer, and external evaluations, bias in the use of tenure clock stoppages, and perceptions of tenure clock stoppages. External reviewers may need to familiarize themselves with research on biases. Including this information in the request letter can help reviewers become more aware of their potential biases, including the language used in their evaluation letters (Stewart & Valian, 2018).
- *Communicate differential impacts of recent events on productivity.* The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to impact scholars for many years to come. We recommend



that external review letter requests include explicit statements regarding the differential impact that COVID-19 and the events following the murder of George Floyd have had on faculty with family caregiving responsibilities and faculty of color to increase the level of awareness of external writers of the possible circumstances of the candidate they are evaluating.

- *Use of inclusive language.* Although gender-neutral language is still under development, we recommend that templates include gender-neutral pronouns to ensure that assumptions about the candidate's gender identity do not subconsciously bias the reviewer.

### **Limitations**

The sample of external review template letters used in this study is limited to those publicly available on institutions' websites at the time of this study (summer-fall 2022). Given the broad range of potential content, we cannot determine if a subsample of 27% of templates is representative of the procedures at 279 R1 and R2 institutions. However, reaching out to institutional representatives was not deemed feasible because we expected a small rate of response, assuming that we were able to identify the correct individual, but also because of the variability in institutional structures and who oversees the promotion and tenure process.

### **Conclusion**

Given that 60% of research-intensive institutions reviewed for this study require external review letters, standardizing the external review process and clarifying expectations can help expose and reduce potential biases. Institutions should consider limiting external evaluation to scholarship and professional service, provide reviewers with institutional context and expectations, ask reviewers to refrain from recommending or comparing candidates to faculty

elsewhere and utilize external review request templates that explicitly address potential biases and methods. Implementing these measures, along with having internal reviewers form independent conclusions before reading external letters, can help reduce the impact of bias in the external review process and promote equitable evaluations.

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