

What is an item?

History

When the RTP policy was being revised, FAC members were faced with two realities that needed to be changed. First, faculty had become less selective in what they included in their WPAFs, resulting in large files that were increasingly difficult to evaluate. Second, a general sense of distrust seemed to exist in terms of documentation of service contributions. The result was that faculty provided documentation of the smallest service contributions which resulted, again, in larger, but not necessarily more informative, files.

Attempted solutions

In order to make the files more selective and representative of best practices, the revised 2003 RTP policy placed a 15-page limit on the reflective statement and a limit of 30 items to serve as documentation of contributions to teaching, scholarship/creative activity, and service. Provost Sheath has also requested that, as part of their file, faculty include a “complete” vita; one that provides detailed lists of classes taught (including number of students), publications, and service contributions. Much of this information had previously been included in the reflective statement or in the listing of file materials.

The problem

In the new policy FAC did not define the term “item.” Not surprisingly, the lack of a definition led to confusion on the part of faculty compiling their WPAF’s, as well as those who review the files. The opinions held by faculty and administrators cover the continuum from an item is equal to “one piece of paper” to an item is “everything that can fit in one staple”.

It should be noted that results of the RTP survey carried out last year indicated that file size had diminished as the result of the new policy, primarily among new faculty. It is not surprising that faculty who have had files in the review system multiple times are reluctant to change the way they put their WPAF together. Faculty accustomed to the old system may hesitate to counsel new faculty to include less. We might expect, therefore, that as faculty who came in under the old policy are promoted out of the review system, the culture change called for by the new policy should result in smaller files in the future. In essence, we are trying to invoke a culture change that will take 2 to 4 years to accomplish.

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The issue remains, however, that without guidelines about what constitutes an item, faculty will present varying degrees of documentation in their files, making the task of reviewing files more difficult and possibly discriminatory. FAC believes, however, that defining what is meant by the term “item” is much less important than getting faculty to understand the significance of the reflective statement to the WPAF. The reflective statement is not a list of accomplishments; that is the function of the complete vita. Instead, the reflective statement provides faculty with an opportunity to explain their educational philosophy, to highlight some successes, and discuss lessons learned.

When writing the reflective statement for their WPAF, faculty should strive to present a coherent story about their work. Similarly, when selecting items for the WPAF, faculty should choose a

representative sampling of material that supports and documents the reflective statement. Each item must, in some way, be directly linked to the reflective statement.

We do understand, however, that faculty and reviewers are seeking guidance about what an item is. We have concluded that it is impossible to present a definition of the term “item,” although we do have some thoughts about what an item is not. An item is not, necessarily, one piece of paper, one syllabus, one journal article, or one CD (although these could each be considered an item in the appropriate context). On the other hand, an item is not all the pages that can be held together with one staple!

Instead of a definition, this document provides examples of possible items for each of the three sections discussed in the reflective statement. We begin with scholarship/creative activity, as the easiest section to document, and end with teaching, which is the most difficult.

Scholarship/creative activity items: It is not necessary to provide documentation of every activity that falls in this category. These accomplishments are all listed in the vita. Documentation should be reserved for what faculty perceive as their most important scholarship and creative activities. The documentation should be directly linked to the reflective statement, and the discussion should include why the selected activity is important (e.g., how did this item contribute to the field, etc.).

Items chosen for discussion should be appropriate to the faculty member’s discipline. The following examples should not be taken as an exhaustive list of all possible items, but as illustrations of the “size” of typical scholarship/creative activity items. An item in this section could be a reprint or preprint. If an article has been accepted to a journal but not yet published, a copy of the manuscript and the acceptance letter from the editor would constitute an item. Similarly, an article that has been submitted but not yet reviewed should be accompanied by documentation that it has been received by the journal editor. In addition, it could be a grant proposal submitted to an external agency and its status. Books, monographs, and technical reports would each count as items. For the arts, it could be the review of a play, showing, or musical performance. Please see the current RTP policy for other examples of items in this category.

Service items: It is not necessary or desired that faculty provide documentation of every service activity. The complete vita should list all service activities and a short statement of the role faculty played in the conduct of those activities. The reflective statement is a place to highlight only the most important activities and documentation should relate directly to the activities highlighted in the narrative. For example, when serving on a committee, if a faculty member was primarily responsible for the development of a policy or procedure, inclusion of the policy or procedure would constitute an item. Chairs of Academic Senate committees might include, as an item, the final report of the committee as evidence of tasks accomplished. A workshop conducted for a community group might be documented by a letter of thanks or a copy of the program.

Teaching items: Teaching is our primary mission, yet it is the most difficult area of faculty work to document. This section of the reflective statement is particularly important. It

should not be a list of courses and number of students taught (again, these kinds of information would be found in the complete vita). Instead, the reflective statement should be a thoughtful analysis of process and outcomes for a sample of classes.

Our definition of “item” for this section is somewhat generous because we recognize the difficulties inherent in documenting an activity that is, essentially, private (at least in terms of other faculty). If a particular course is discussed in the reflective statement, we believe that all of the selected material associated with that class might be considered an item (e.g., syllabus, sample exam, sample assignment, peer evaluation, etc.). However, all such material must be discussed in the reflective statement, or it should not be included as documentation. There is no reason to put in multiple syllabi for the same course, for example, unless a point is being made about major changes in the curriculum for that course. One exam or one assignment is sufficient unless the reflective statement includes a discussion of different assessment techniques.

Conclusion

FAC members think that the complete vita, the reflective statement page limit, and the requirement to discuss each item in the reflective statement will, in turn, result in reduced and more selective documentation. We also look forward to the day when reflective statements are truly reflective. We are convinced that, as the culture changes, faculty will begin to accept the fact that promotion and tenure decisions do not hinge on the size of the WPAF, but on the accomplishments of the individual.