

## Peer Review Committees: General Principles and Recommendations

Service on a peer review committee (PRC) is one of the greatest ways to give back to your colleagues. The process is a rewarding one where you see your junior colleagues grow and develop on their path to tenure and promotion. As we know from our own experience going through the retention, tenure, and promotion (RTP) process, it is intended to be a developmental process, where faculty reflect, receive feedback and as a result grow as teachers and faculty.

Compared to other levels of review, the PRC is the closest to the candidate. PRC members usually come from the candidate's department. Members of the PRC may have intimate knowledge of the candidate's work, and may have possibly been a collaborator in research, or sat on a committee with the candidate. This is a double-edged sword - this first-hand knowledge can help provide context and additional description of the candidate's work for subsequent reviewers. However, it can often be difficult to separate working knowledge of the candidate from the materials that are in the file.

Whereas the narrative changes each file, PRC (and other review) letters provide the continuing record of a candidate's teaching, research and service in their WPAF. As such, these letters should include supportive feedback, constructive criticism and disciplinary context for and significance of the candidate's work. Consider these letters to be the conversation between the reviewers and the candidate; a call and response, if you will.

Important things to remember:

- PRC review and deliberation is confidential and should not be shared beyond the members of the PRC.
- Members of the PRC cannot speak to the candidate about their file during the review timeline. That starts when the file is submitted and ends when the candidate reviews their final letter of the review (from the Dean or Provost).
- Any request for items must go through the custodian of the file.
- The PRC may only review the materials in the WPAF, and not include any personal knowledge of the candidate or their work; or materials the candidate has chosen not to include.
- Review is solely governed by the policies relevant to the file: The University RTP policy, relevant College RTP policy, and Department or School RTP policy (if there is one.)

## Review Process

\*\* Please refer to [University Retention, Tenure & Promotion Document](#), section III. D., Responsibilities of the Peer Review Committee for detailed discussion of the responsibilities.

### Pre-Review

Closely review relevant documents - read all relevant RTP documents to ensure you are familiar with the standards for review. As our RTP documents change regularly, be sure that you are using the documents provided by the candidate, as they may have selected previous versions of the RTP documents.

Decide on chair for committee - When considering how to manage the workload, **all members of the PRC must review the entire file**, including prior PRC letters and items of evidence. While it is tempting to split up the work (especially when a PRC is reviewing multiple files), it may not be in the best interest of the candidate (e.g. one member reviews and writes a letter, while others edit the drafted letter). The three-member PRC provides checks-and-balances in its review.

### Review for Completeness

Review for completeness (Univ. RTP, III. D. 1.) - each member of the PRC needs to do a complete review of the WPAF.

- Review the table of contents and ensure that the content listed is actually accessible and matches the table.
- Review the list of required items for the file and confirm the materials are included and correct (e.g. memo, SEIs, RTP policy, etc.).
- Count the items of evidence and page numbers of reflective statement.
- Review the narrative to see if all the evidence is listed correctly, and if the candidate could benefit from additional pieces of evidence.

During the review, in addition to ensuring the items are accessible, consider the following: Is there a missing piece of evidence? Is there an extraneous item of evidence? This is a very nuanced part of the process. While the PRC is only allowed to evaluate the file based on what is in the file, there is a way to assist the candidate in strengthening their file. For example, a faculty refers to a draft manuscript of an article, and discusses the research topic in their narrative, but doesn't include a draft of the manuscript. This may be an item to request during the review for completeness. The faculty isn't required to add, but instead is able to consider.

## **Reviewing the File**

The file should be reviewed using only the criteria set forth in the department/school, college and university RTP standards. The PRC should not consider any materials not included in the WPAF or personal knowledge of the candidate or their work.

Remember that files are reflective and selective. Please be mindful of the candidate's agency in selectivity when asking them to include activity in subsequent files.

Look for patterns, not outliers, especially in student evaluations of instruction. As we recommend to faculty under review, it is important to recognize and address the comments in SEI, but we understand that there may be single students with a loud voice that don't speak for all students.

The impact and significance of research noted in the narrative must be established by the candidate; not your own personal (or professional) feeling about the nature of the work, or venue for dissemination. This also applies to the candidate's discussion of service; the candidate, through the narrative and items of evidence, makes the argument for the impact and significance of this work. If a candidate does not do this in their WPAF, it is not the PRC's role to accomplish this via the letter.

## **Writing the Letter**

When the file reaches the Promotion & Tenure Committee, PRC letters help members from different departments have a full understanding of the candidate's work, and can help them understand the context of their work in a discipline they may be unfamiliar with. While it is up to the candidate to write for a general audience, the PRC letters still help provide background from the candidate's early years.

It can be helpful to recount the work that was discussed in the file: "The candidate described this teaching technique which had this outcome..." This provides a record for subsequent year reviewers to see the growth of the candidate. See below for sample paragraphs.

If there is concern that the candidate is not on a path to fulfill standards, be explicit as to what must occur to correct this. Equally important is to make explicit what aspect of the standards are in danger of not being met.

An overly lengthy letter can make it more challenging for different reviewers. Concise narrative letters that are explicit about the candidate's progress are invaluable.

## **Post Review Period**

The timeline of the evaluation process makes it difficult for junior faculty to ask questions and receive guidance on their files. As such, the Faculty Affairs Committee developed guidelines on how members of PRCs could still provide guidance without breaking confidentiality or violating the process of the review.

- [Faculty Mentoring and Services on Peer Review Committees](#), FAC 2018

## Sample Letters

The structure of a letter follows that of the narrative, beginning with an opening paragraph that outlines where the candidate is in their tenure process, along with relevant service credit; moving on to reviews of teaching, research and service; and ending with an overall recommendation for the candidate. Opening paragraphs for each section should explicitly state whether the candidate is meeting the standards for teaching, research and service.

Common paragraph format in letters:

- Introductory topic sentence
- Few lines of description of the activity, including evidence from items or student evaluations of instruction
- Statement of evaluation of the activity, including questions or next steps, if applicable.
- Statement of endorsement or disapproval of the retention, tenure, and/or promotion. (Univ. RTP, III. D. 5. B.), (see also Univ. RTP, Appendix E)
- Statement if the vote was unanimous. (Univ. RTP, III. D. 6.), (see also Univ. RTP, Appendix E)

### Teaching

#### Example 1

*“Professor has become quite adept at engaging students in the classroom using the Socratic method. They describe their method in a way that not only elicits responses from all students, it encourages students from historically underserved groups. In self-assessments, students have described this experience positively. One student remarked, “I was unsure about being called on cold, but by following the prep materials from Prof X, I was eager to be called on.” This has been a topic discussion in our field for a number of years, and Professor is at the forefront of using this technique. The PRC commends Professor for their success, and encourages them to share this with colleagues to extend the use of this technique throughout the department.”*

#### Example 2

*“Professor has experimented with many technological tools to engage students in their online classes. They have tried live polling and a discussion question website. However, it is unclear as to how well the techniques are working to engage students, as evidenced by students’ comments in a mid-semester evaluation. One student commented, “There are too many websites being used in class, so I get confused about how to respond and where;” while another commented, “I really hate the polling in class... it feels like it happens every 5 minutes, so I don’t have time to take my notes.” The PRC appreciates the Professor’s willingness and interest in trying new*

*technology, however it is unsure about the efficacy of such technology. The PRC asks the candidate to elaborate more in their next file: Why did you choose this technology for this area of content? What were the outcomes of using it?"*

## **Research**

The letter can provide a broader context for subsequent reviews. For example, discussing the importance of the journal, or the difficulty in publishing in a particular journal. Additionally, if there is a type of publication that is specific to your discipline that could merit further explanation, include this in your letter. For example:

*"While scholars in our discipline typically choose to publish in peer-review journals, having an article published in this particular magazine represents a recognition by the discipline that this scholar's work is an exemplar of this area of inquiry. The PRC recognizes this publication as being on par with other peer-review journals in our field."*

## **Service**

Each department offers different advice to junior faculty with regard to the type and amount of service they should commit to. If this is not spelled out in detail in the RTP document, it could be helpful to mention in the service section of the letter.

*"Professor has selected a college-level committee as a way to learn more about the college and university, while contributing their expertise. They describe their contributions to the committee as attending meetings, and providing feedback on documents. The PRC believes that this is an appropriate committee for Professor at this point in their career. In their next file, we look forward to hearing specific examples of their contribution to this committee, and how sitting on this committee has helped them understand our students and campus in a deeper way."*