

SIMPSON COLLEGE FACULTY HANDBOOK

PART VII: APPENDIX D

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING LETTERS FOR THE FACULTY EVALUATION PROCESS

The following are suggestions for writing letters for tenure and promotion files. Part VII of the faculty handbook: Appendix B outlines the role of the letters from on-campus colleagues and students.

Here are a few questions and answers that might be helpful to faculty as they consider writing letters for colleagues.

Q: Who needs to write letters?

A: First, all review, tenure, and/or promotion files are open files. This means that anyone connected with the college can write a letter and ask that the letter be included in the review, tenure, and/or promotion file. In certain cases (tenure and promotion) specific people are asked to submit letters. Note, that the candidate under review can read the letters and also respond to the content of the letters by putting a letter in the file.

In the case of promotion and tenure, **all tenured faculty members in a department** are expected to write a letter for a departmental colleague up for **tenure, and/or promotion**. There is **no** requirement to write a letter for a departmental colleague during their regular reappointment review in years 1, 2, 4, and 5. You may wish to write a letter for reappointment, but no faculty member is required to do so. Similarly, in year three no one person is required to write a letter, the letter comes from the mid probationary review committee.

In addition, each candidate up for tenure and/or promotion is to ask two members from faculty members outside of their department to write a letter for the candidate's file.

Q: If the review, tenure, and/or promotion files are open files, does that mean anyone can read them?

A: No, the only people who can read the file are the faculty member being reviewed, the committee which is doing the review, the members of FPC, the chair of the department, the division head, the academic dean, and the president of the college. Tenure and promotion files, but not other review files, are also open to the board of trustees. Saying the files are open simply means that anyone connected with the college can request to add a letter to the file.

Q: If I write a letter for a colleague up for reappointment, tenure and/or promotion, where do I send it?

A: All letters for all reappointment, tenure and/or promotion should be sent to the Academic Dean's Office. Please make it clear if you are submitting a solicited (you were asked by the candidate, or you are writing as department chair or division head) or an unsolicited (you were not asked) letter and who the letter is for. No unsigned letters will be accepted

Q: What should the letter contain?

A: Letter writers are being asked to use their professional judgment to assess the candidate in relation to the four criteria (teaching, advising, professional development, and service) listed for tenure and/or promotion. Review the criteria in the Faculty Handbook (Part II Personnel Policies, Section 7). The letter writer should:

- Identify if the letter was solicited or unsolicited
- Describe in what context the letter is being written (i.e. tenured colleague in department, department chair, division head, etc.)
- The letter is not a character reference. Use the four criteria outlined in the Faculty Handbook. Letter writers should address all four areas. A writer will likely focus on the area(s) where she or he has the most knowledge about the candidate. For example, a letter writer may have knowledge about a colleague's teaching, but have no experience with the candidate when it comes to service to the college. It makes sense to write most about what you know.
- State your position on the candidate's reappointment, tenure and/or promotion. For example, "I support the promotion of Dr. Doe because I believe she has achieved the standards set by the faculty as outlined in the Faculty Handbook."

Q: If I am asked to write a letter, do I need to observe class?

A: Good practice suggests that a letter writer be knowledgeable about his or her subject. When asked by a colleague to write a letter, it is good practice to ask for a copy of the person's vitae, observe them in class, review their publications or creative work, and have a conversation with the person before writing the letter. There is no requirement to do these things, it is just good practice.

Q: What if I am asked by a colleague, but I don't feel I can write a positive letter? What if I don't know the person well enough to write for her or him?

A: You should express your reservations to your colleague and suggest that she or he may wish to choose someone else to write a letter.

Q: If I write a letter for someone, do I send a copy to that person? Should I talk to the person and tell her or him what I am going to write?

A: Since the candidate will likely read the letter in the file, it is up to the letter writer to decide whether or not to share the contents of the letter before submitting it to the Academic Dean's Office.

Q: What if I am a department colleague, department chair, or division head, and I don't want to write a letter? Can I be forced to write a letter for someone?

A: You should not write a letter if you feel that you cannot be objective. You should not write if you have a conflict of interest. Check with your department chair, or the academic dean if you are not sure about a possible conflict of interest.

At the same time, you are being asked to participate in the process as part of your professional responsibility. You are being asked for your professional opinion based on your experience with the candidate and your understanding of the established criteria. You are being asked if you believe the candidate meets the criteria established for reappointment, tenure and/or promotion as you understand them. Your opinion could be yes, or it might be no. The important thing is that you keep your letter focused on the four elements of the criteria and write only about what you believe to be true. Speak from your experience with the candidate. Do not include speculation, conjecture, or things you have heard from others.

Q: If I choose not to write a letter, will the person be penalized? How important are the letters?

A: The decision will be based on the information in the file, not on what is missing. It would be wrong for anyone to infer why a letter has not been written. The decision process includes multiple types of data, from multiple sources. The committee will be looking for a pattern. No one letter or other single piece of evidence will sway the decision.

Q: If I am under review, how do I select someone to write a letter for my file? What do I tell the person?

A: Generally, you should ask colleagues who know your work through personal experience. You will want someone to speak effectively about all four of the criteria. At the same time, it is perfectly acceptable to tell the writer that you think he or she is especially prepared to highlight your work in a particular area. For example, if you have served on a committee with your letter writer, you may wish to ask that person to make sure to speak to his or her experience with you on the committee.

Q: If I am under review but not being considered for promotion or tenure, may I ask other faculty members to write a letter for my file? May I ask students to write?

A: According to the handbook (Appendix B), people under review are strongly discouraged from soliciting letters from colleagues and students.