

# MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

To: MSU Faculty Senate

From: Engineering College Advisory Council

Topic: Proposed new faculty-evaluation standards for reappointment, tenure, and promotion

Date: August 4, 2021

The Engineering College Advisory Council (ECAC) understands from Section 3.3.4 of MSU's Bylaws for Academic Governance that the Faculty Senate is the major, deliberative, representative, and legislative body for the MSU faculty's tenure and promotion issues, and that it is tasked with discussing issues brought to it by college advisory councils, synthesizing the opinion of the faculty to form recommendations, and communicating those recommendations to the MSU President and Provost.

The ECAC wishes to bring issues for the Faculty Senate's discussion related to this year's annual framework letter from Provost Woodruff. This letter was emailed to MSU tenure system faculty, deans, school directors, and chairpersons on April 13, 2021 with the subject line "University Philosophy and Guiding Policies on Faculty Tenure and Promotion". That electronic letter, within the broader historical and societal context of our University's mission, presented the Provost's recommendations for standards to be used in evaluating tenure-track faculty members' packages for reappointment, promotion, and tenure (RPT). Because the ECAC recognizes that it is the Faculty Senate's responsibility to protect academic freedom and the faculty's role in academic governance, we outline areas of concern and pose a series of questions in response to what are perceived to be possibly significant changes in policy regarding the RPT standards.

The Provost's recommendations include the three traditional standards of research, teaching, and service that tenure-track faculty have been informed would serve as the basis of their RPT evaluation.

Source: MSU Faculty Handbook section entitled "Appointment, Reappointment, Tenure, and Promotion Recommendations" (<https://hr.msu.edu/policies-procedures/faculty-academic-staff/faculty-handbook/4Section-HR-Policies.html>)



The Provost's letter also seems to be proposing the addition of at least two new RPT standards that have not been included in the Faculty Handbook:

## COLLEGE OF ENGINEERING

Engineering College  
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- **Proposed Standard 7: "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Efforts Related to Research/Scholarship/Creative/Performative Activities, Teaching Outreach, and Service" and**
- **Proposed Standard 8: "Core Values Related to Conduct."**

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The ECAC agrees that promoting DEI and core values related to conduct is important, and the Engineering College has made significant efforts to promote both DEI and academic collegiality. In June, 2018, it appointed its first [Associate Dean for Inclusion and Diversity](#). It has also piloted the [Dean's Faculty Pathway Program](#) to develop a pipeline for faculty from diverse backgrounds, dramatically increased the ratio of women faculty (40 percent in 2019 new hires), and won a [Bronze Award from the American Society for Engineering Education \(ASEE\) Diversity Recognition Program](#) – the highest level of recognition presented by this program. To promote collegiality, in 2018, the ECAC conducted an extensive literature review on academic collegiality prior to adopting the following **Engineering College Statement on Collegiality**:

*The College of Engineering's primary goals are to advance, disseminate, and apply engineering knowledge. Achieving these goals requires adherence to ethical guidelines, such as those published by national professional societies for engineering education and practice. It also requires freedom of expression, so the merits of competing ideas can be compared through reasoned discourse. The College expects respectful, cooperative, and constructive interactions among its faculty, staff, and students as they advance the College's research, instruction, and service missions.*

The ECAC also shares the Provost's stated goals of "allowing scholars the freedom to explore and express themselves in their work in ways that could be antithetical to present knowledge" and the RPT mandate that "faculty must demonstrate substantive and sustainable achievement in research, teaching, and service, and the infusion of their scholarship into outreach and engagement efforts, when applicable", among the many other aspirational goals stated in the Provost's letter.

It is in this spirit that the ECAC brings to the Faculty Senate the following questions about the proposed new RPT standards. The questions relate to both a general interpretation of the new standards as well as specific concerns about their implementation.

**Question 1: Is it reasonable for current tenure-track faculty to be subjected to new evaluation standards late in a tenure-track faculty member's performance period?** Candidates for promotion to full professor who came to MSU as assistant professors would typically have been following the Faculty Handbook's official guidance that did not include these new standards for about ten years.

The traditional evaluation standards of research, teaching, and service have a substantial objective backing, because both effort and outcome can be measured using quantitative metrics. Metrics for research include proposals, grants, publications, citations, invited seminars, etc.; metrics for teaching include courses developed and taught, SIRS scores, students mentored, etc.; and metrics for service include committee appointments, journal editorships and reviews, outreach and extension activities, etc. The Provost's letter, however, does not identify such metrics for proposed standards 7 and 8, thereby making them highly subjective. Furthermore, only "working definitions" of diversity, equity, and inclusion, are available on an MSU website (<https://president.msu.edu/initiatives/dei-plan/dei-working-definitions.html>); these seem to be more aspirational than advisory in nature. Thus, they provide limited guidance for both tenure-track faculty members' efforts to document DEI contributions and RPT evaluators' efforts to assess those contributions.

The ECAC recognizes that a purely quantitative approach makes little allowance for special considerations and extraordinary achievements that do not readily fit into *a priori* classification bins. Form D's reflective essay, however, provides the necessary opportunity for explaining and heralding these important aspects of a faculty member's record without the need to add new, subjective RPT standards that have not been adequately discussed and debated by the Faculty Senate.

Similarly, in Proposed Standard 8, an individual's "conduct" (like that person's "collegiality") would seem to be largely a matter of personal opinion (i.e., subjective). Thus, this standard would likely result in problems similar to those our literature review showed resulted from the use of collegiality as an RPT standard.

**Question 2: Could the broad aspirational goals of promoting DEI and collegiality at MSU be achieved without adding these new subjective standards to the RPT process?** As noted previously, nontraditional faculty contributions can be highlighted in the Form D reflective essay within the context of the traditional three-pillar (i.e., research, teaching, and service) framework. That framework serves as the basis of not only the tenure-track RPT evaluation in the MSU Faculty Handbook, but also the faculty-effort distribution in appointment paperwork and the faculty-performance reporting in the annual activities report.

Conduct complaints are currently handled using existing [MSU policies](#), and levels of DEI engagement can be assessed by conducting surveys and through existing campus graduate and undergraduate enrollment and employment data. Faculty can already choose to describe their DEI engagement using existing fields on Form D. Adding DEI and conduct as RPT standards is likely to create confusion, including whether "DEI engagement" or "core values for conduct" should be formalized as additional pillars of faculty duty to be assigned their own effort-percentage value in faculty appointments and annual activities reports.

**Question 3: Is it feasible to define verifiable, DEI-related metric categories, category indicators, indicator models, data collection approaches, etc. that are acceptable to faculty and administrators campus-wide?** The complexities and challenges of establishing verifiable, DEI-related assessment protocols for an RPT evaluation needs to be considered. Many dimensions of diversity are not binary, but represent a continuous scale, raising questions of how to define whether a student is underrepresented. For example, questions such as, what percentage of an underrepresented race, or how severe of a physical handicap or mental disorder (e.g. autism, ADHD), would have to be satisfactorily answered to contribute to a DEI metric. Faculty members' need to collect and report such potentially

sensitive personal data on DEI-relevant traits (race, gender, LBGTQIA+ status, disability, etc.) may, in some cases, be incompatible with the need to protect student privacy.

To help preserve the integrity of RPT processes, department- and college-level RPT committees typically conduct due-diligence checks to verify data in RPT packages. These checks are typically facile for the objective metrics used to assess research, teaching, and service; however, they would likely be much more difficult for common classes of DEI data. Finally, the logistics of establishing guidelines and “diversity indices” suitable to rank the relative DEI-related merit of RPT candidates from different departments and colleges, and who, themselves, differ in race, gender, LBGTQIA+ status, disability, etc. are likely to be very complicated.

**Question 4: Would adding the proposed subjective standards provide a mechanism to repress faculty members’ academic freedom?** The abovementioned literature review conducted by ECAC members on the use of collegiality as an RPT standard at other institutions revealed instances in which faculty members’ expression of unpopular opinions or criticism of administrators’ policies resulted in low collegiality scores in RPT evaluations. Efforts to silence those expressing unpopular opinions are on the rise throughout many sectors of US society, including academia, and addition of subjective standards would make such efforts easier to implement in the RPT process and more difficult to challenge.

**Question 5: Would adding the proposed subjective standards provide a mechanism to discriminate against faculty?** Although discrimination against faculty based on factors included in [MSU’s Anti-Discrimination Policy](#) (e.g., political persuasion) is forbidden, such discrimination might be enabled by the proposed subjective standards. Ratings on subjective factors are inherently difficult to confirm or challenge.

**Question 6: Would adding new subjective standards provide a mechanism to reduce faculty voice and decision-making authority in MSU’s academic governance system?** Mechanisms by which MSU faculty members can participate in the academic governance system are defined in [MSU’s Bylaws](#). However, if the proposed subjective RPT standards provide a backdoor mechanism to repress faculty members’ willingness to express certain viewpoints regarding administrative governance or discriminate against faculty who express such viewpoints, those standards would indirectly reduce faculty voice and decision-making authority in academic governance.

**Question 7: Would adding DEI-related standards to MSU’s RPT evaluation process potentially make MSU vulnerable to lawsuits based on violations of the Michigan Constitution ([Section 26 of Article I](#)), which forbids any public university from discrimination against or granting preferential treatment to any individual or group on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin?** Many faculty members are not aware of the limitations imposed by the Michigan Constitution with regards to these factors, which may impact DEI initiatives.

Finally, in the spirit of continually improving MSU’s RPT process, the ECAC wishes to also raise a logistical concern about the proposal to add multiple new RPT standards. Faculty feedback the ECAC has received suggests that MSU’s RPT reporting and evaluation processes are already excessively cumbersome. The addition of new RPT standards would be expected to further increase the RPT reporting and evaluation burdens.

Thank you in advance for your attention to these important issues the ECAC brings to you for discussion. Some of these issues would potentially have a campus-wide negative impact on faculty members’ academic freedom, freedom from discrimination, and decision-making authority in MSU’s academic governance system. In the absence of clear guidelines and metrics, these would likely increase confusion and work burden associated with the RPT process. ECAC members would be pleased to share results of our literature review on the use of collegiality as an RPT standard and to participate in discussions of this issue, as the Faculty Senate formulates its recommendation(s), and communicates its recommendation(s) to the MSU President and Provost.

Sincerely,

Engineering College Advisory Council