


MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

October 10, 2024

To: University Committee on Faculty Tenure (UCFT)
University Committee on Faculty Affairs (UCFA)

From: Teresa Mastin, Ph.D. 
Vice Provost and Associate Vice President for Faculty and Academic Staff
Affairs

Subject: Request for Feedback on External Reference Letters Policy

Background

The [External Letters of Reference policy](#) requires letters of reference for all reviews of tenure system faculty involving the granting of tenure or promotion.

Issue

Recently, a question arose in connection to this policy. Specifically, if a faculty member withdraws from the tenure review process after external letters have been solicited, should new referees be sought when they resubmit their tenure dossier, or is it more appropriate to request updated letters from the original referees?

Request

This issue is not addressed in policy. There are different options on how to handle this, with pros and cons to each of these options. The options we see include:

- 1) request letters from new referees,
- 2) request updated letters from the previous referees, or
- 3) a combination of the first two options.

Our preference is to request new external letters to ensure a fair and equitable process. This option treats the process as brand new, with referees who can provide a fresh perspective. We have concerns with reaching out to the previous reviewers and asking them to update what they submitted, as that can lead to bias in their new response. Whereas a new reviewer would have no awareness of a review that didn't take place the year prior.

Regardless of the direction decided, we also recommend updating the current policy on external reference letters to provide greater clarity on this issue.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Attachment

Cc: Kara Yermak



OFFICE OF THE PROVOST

Michigan State University
Hannah Administration Building
426 Auditorium Road, Room 430
East Lansing, Michigan 48824

Phone: 517-355-6550
Fax: 517-355-9601
provost.msu.edu

External Letters of Reference

Revision history: 10/2015 Added University of Maryland and Rutgers as CIC schools

IV. ACADEMIC HUMAN RESOURCES POLICIES (*Cont.*)

This statement was endorsed by the University Committee on Faculty Affairs on March 14, 2006 and by University Committee on Faculty Tenure on February 8, 2006; it was issued by the Office of the Provost on May 3, 2006. Implementation was required in 2007-08. Revisions were endorsed by the University Committee on Faculty Tenure on October 12, 2011 and April 25, 2012, and by the University Committee on Faculty Affairs on October 25, 2011 and April 24, 2012.

External letters of reference are required for all reviews of tenure system faculty involving the granting of tenure or promotion; they are not required for reappointments. External letters of reference are required in order to ensure that individuals recommended have an achievement and performance level that is comparable with faculties of peer institutions. It is recognized that practices and procedures in units may vary; however, the process of soliciting external letters of reference must incorporate the following principles and procedures, which must be applied uniformly to all faculty in the unit. Any exception to these principles must be approved by the Office of the Provost prior to implementation.

1. External letters of reference should be from leading scholars in the relevant discipline at peer institutions. As a general rule, an external reviewer must at least hold the academic rank for which the candidate is being considered, i.e. an associate professor cannot review one being considered for professor. While there can be no definitive list of peer institutions, research-intensive universities of international scope such as the Big Ten Academic Alliance (BTAA)¹ institutions normally constitute our peers. It is incumbent on candidates and administrators to provide an explanation when external reviewers are selected from institutions that are not of the same stature as BTAA institutions.
2. External letters of reference should be submitted on institutional letterhead and carry the evaluator signature.
3. All external letters of reference solicited and received must be included in the review materials. Unsolicited letters will not be included in the review materials.
4. If an external letter of reference is solicited and the referee fails to or declines to submit a letter of evaluation, this information shall become part of the candidate's review materials. If a reason is provided in writing, it shall become part of the candidate's review materials unless precluded by an agreement on confidentiality.
5. College/department/school procedures will specify the minimum number of external letters (with a minimum of four and maximum of six).
6. The department chairperson/school director/dean of a non-departmentally organized college shall form a list of external referees. Department/school/non-departmentally organized college procedures will specify the number of potential evaluators to be suggested by the candidate, to which the department chairperson/school director/dean of a non-departmentally organized college (and others as provided by department/school/ college procedures) will add names. In accordance with college/department/school procedures, the chairperson/director/dean will determine which of the potential external referees will be asked to provide letters of reference. College/department/school procedures will specify a proportion or number of external letters of reference to be solicited from persons suggested by the candidate.
7. Candidates must not discuss their case with prospective or actual external evaluators at any stage of the review process, except as provided by department/school/college procedures. Soliciting external letters of reference and providing materials to the referees is solely the responsibility of the department chairperson/school director/dean of a non-departmentally organized college.
8. External referees must be professionally capable to evaluate the candidate's scholarly work objectively and to comment on its significance in the discipline. Letters must predominantly represent persons other than

collaborators and in no case may those who served as primary dissertation chair or major advisor for post doctoral research be chosen as external referees.

9. College/department/school procedures will specify the materials sent to external referees. It is minimally required, however, that in addition to the C.V. and reflective essay, a representative sample of the candidate's scholarly work will be made available to the external reviewer for the review.
10. The unit administrator's request to an external referee must include:
 1. the unit's statement on confidentiality, which must be consistent with the University's statement as contained in the policy "Confidentiality of Letters of Reference for Reappointment, Promotion and Tenure Recommendations"
 2. a request to disclose any potential conflicts of interest
 3. a description of the candidate's assignment, including, for example, the percentage of the appointment devoted to research/creative activities, teaching, service, etc.²
 4. a request to assess:
 1. the candidate in comparison to others in her/his cohort nationally, and
 2. the extent and quality of the scholarship of the candidate, including its contribution to the discipline.
11. For each external referee, the unit administrator shall provide:
 1. Name, rank/title, institutional affiliation.
 2. Brief summary of the referee's qualifications or CV
 3. Name of the person who recommended the evaluator, e.g., candidate, chairperson/director/dean, or other (specified).
 4. An assessment of the evaluator relationship to the candidate, including potential conflicts of interest.

¹ University of Chicago; University of Illinois; Indiana University; University of Iowa; University of Maryland; University of Michigan; Michigan State University; University of Minnesota; University of Nebraska/Lincoln; Northwestern University; Ohio State University; Pennsylvania State University; Purdue University; Rutgers University; University of Wisconsin-Madison.

² For candidates with assignments, or from units, that are non-traditional among peer institutions, it is also important to provide contextual information about the mission, roles, and structure of the unit ,e.g. residential colleges.