

The proposal for a significant honorarium for external reviewers evokes strong reaction both negative and positive from colleagues. Not surprisingly for an administrator, my first reaction to the proposal was concern for costs. Weyland makes a persuasive argument that a short-term investment is worth

I believe that, despite its challenges, the proposal for paying significant honoraria has merit. Still, as one of my colleagues noted, the most effective strategies for ensuring success are to hire strong candidates, mentor them carefully, and have high standards for tenure and promotion.

Another inevitable trend for tenure candidates, particularly in those universities striving for higher research profiles, is that these candidates are increasingly “weeded out” in the years before the tenure decision.

ensuring the quality of a long-term commitment. However, from the university’s perspective, initial costs are not insignificant. Honoraria paid in one department likely would lead to the practice in many departments across campus. An average of 50 candidates a year, each soliciting three reviews at \$2,000 each, would result in a cost of \$300,000. Who would pay? Departments probably would be expected to bear at least some of the expense. By necessity, most department chairs are not thinking about long-term investments; rather, they are strategizing about getting through the fiscal year. Cost is not the definitive argument against paying a significant honorarium, but it cannot be ignored.

Some colleagues indicate ethical discomfort at the notion of paying reviewers. Should reviewers be encouraged to change their opinions to more negative ones? Should there be a sliding scale of negativity based on the rate an institution agreed to pay? Some skeptics advocate paying a smaller honorarium to acknowledge the time spent on a thorough review.

In my experience, I have observed significant variations across disciplines in the degree of objectivity or negativity of external reviews. For example, despite the absence of honoraria, the external reviews in engineering were not always positive. This may be because engineering is a discipline that has straightforward and universal research metrics that include not only the quality and quantity of publications but also external funding and preparation of graduate students. It might be worth emulating this model to some degree or variation by giving external reviewers more specific charges. They might focus on certain components of the portfolio or comment on what they believe to be the most important pieces in the candidate’s work. This might present the task as a manageable enterprise rather than an amorphous or burdensome project.

Despite the preceding arguments against paying, I think it is an option worth exploring. My discussions reveal enthusiasm for the option among some established scholars and chairs. Supporters for paying emphasize that it incentivizes a more careful review. These advocates agree that it must be a substantial amount to entice recognized scholars to devote time and energy for a thorough analysis. Not paying sends a message that time invested is not appreciated. As one colleague stated, “It takes time to be critical.”

Paying reviewers almost certainly would expand the pool of those willing to engage in comprehensive reviews. Although it might not entice the highest-tier faculty or “stars” who already have hefty salaries and subsidies, it most certainly would encourage prominent scholars who are hesitant to take on yet another task that is not immediately tied to their research agenda.

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CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: SPOTLIGHT ON PROMOTION LETTERS

Bartholomew Sparrow, *University of Texas at Austin*

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Kurt Weyland brings welcome attention to an issue of clear importance to political scientists. To learn more about the external-review process, I reviewed the record of my department’s solicitation for promotion letters from 2005 through 2018 (with candidates’ names removed). Of the 435 total promotion requests for 47 candidates (21 to associate professor, 26 to full professor), 292 of those solicited (67%) agreed to write and 106 (24%) declined; 37 (8.5%) did not respond.

The department requested an average of 9.3 letters per candidate. It received 6.2 letters per candidate, and another 2.3 potential reviewers declined to write. Fewer than one solicited reviewer per candidate (0.79) did not respond. Of the 47 promotion candidates, 18 had 0 or 1 declination; 16 had 2 declinations; 10 had 3 declinations; 10 had 4 declinations; 9 had 5 declinations; and 5 had either 6 or 7 declinations.¹ Among the solicited reviewers’ reasons for declining, 36 indicated they were too busy; 19 wrote they were committed to other promotion letters; 11 explained they were on sabbatical or in the field; 7 replied their administrative duties precluded them from writing; and 15 answered they were unfamiliar with the candidate’s work. Only one external reviewer declined because of the lack of confidentiality (with the state of Texas’s open-records laws).

Of the 292 letters received, four fifths were “helpful” external reviews (i.e., “good signs,” in Lieberman’s words) in my assessment, based on being a member of the department’s executive committee for almost all of those 12 years. These were thorough, forthright, and fair letters that evaluated the quality, originality, and impact of the candidate’s contributions to the field or sub-discipline. They were straightforward in their judgement of the candidate’s merits and weaknesses. They contextualized the candidate’s scholarship in a disciplinary genealogy. And they placed the candidate relative to others in her or his cohort (as they were requested to do).

About a fifth of the letters were “unhelpful” (i.e., Lieberman’s “bad signs”), insofar as they did not closely examine or analyze the candidate’s scholarship, but, instead, were overly general and

uncritical. They sometimes omitted important aspects of the candidate's scholarship, frequently did not answer the posed questions (per Johnson's and Junn's comments), and often merely stated the number and name of the journal or press where the candidate published, in lieu of engaging in the quality of the ideas, substance, and methods of the candidate's research. Consistent with Weyland's observations, the less useful letters were typically written on behalf of the less compelling candidates.

Even so, the promotion candidates did not neatly divide into two exclusive camps. Relatively few candidates had unimpeachable records and even fewer were clearly unworthy of promotion. The number of "problematic" or "weak" candidates—those whose scholarship was "usually not very good" and "usually not very enlightening," in Weyland's words—was small, perhaps because of the department's more exacting third-year and annual reviews.

With the higher demand for letters and the relatively smaller supply of prominent scholars able to write, it is little wonder that there are more declinations and, when external faculty agree to write, more unhelpful letters.

Neither was it always possible to know what to conclude from the declinations. Declinations could be a reflection of the candidate's subfield or the degree of her or his specialization. Or, they could be simply bad luck, an artifact of the small number of reviews being solicited per candidate and the fact that any set of invited external reviewers could have conflicting administrative responsibilities, previous external-review commitments, be on leave or on sabbatical, have injuries, or experience other issues.

The department's data nonetheless confirmed the deficiency of the external-review process. When the number of declinations and non-responses was added to the number of unhelpful letters, I found that *when asked to write an external-review letter for a promotion case, about one-half of the faculty dropped the ball*. They declined to write; they wrote unhelpful letters; or they did not respond to the request for an external letter (or, as if they agreed to write a letter, it was never submitted).² For a profession that seeks to govern itself and one whose members—or some of whose members—are concerned about administrative overreach,³ this is a troubling deficit of professionalism. This record is particularly disturbing in view of the many talented scholars who are underplaced or have yet to land tenure-track jobs.

Offering honoraria to external reviewers would likely promote a higher yield among those solicited. It makes sense to compensate external reviewers so as to tangibly acknowledge the effort it takes to write comprehensive and candid letters. "It takes time to be critical," as Opheim points out. The granting of more than modest payments raises real questions, however, those of the erosion of professional norms (i.e., writing promotion letters no longer being viewed an academic obligation), of how the honoraria would be funded—especially with the financial inequalities among institutions—and of the impact

of the payment of honoraria on the thoroughness and sincerity of external letters.

This may be more of a numbers issue, however. As colleges and universities request more letters per candidate (e.g., one institution I know recently increased its minimum from four to five letters) and as more institutions seek to improve their research credentials, there are more requests for external reviews (per Deardorff's observation). With the higher demand for letters and the relatively smaller supply of prominent scholars able to write, it is little wonder that there are more declinations and, when external faculty agree to write, more unhelpful letters.

An obvious solution is to expand the pool of letter writers. One way to do so is by relaxing the "peer-institution" restriction that universities have adopted, whether formally or informally, given how widely dispersed expert faculty are across the United States

and around the world. The University of Texas, for instance, requests that external reviews be only from Association of American Universities and R1 "peer institutions" or from the few foreign universities that rank in the global top 50. However, the individual credentials of a scholar for the purpose of evaluating a promotion candidate's record is far more significant than is the prestige or ranking of that scholar's home institution. Yet university administrators assume institutional ranking to be a proxy for the quality of any one faculty member and her or his department.

Given that many institutions ask that only full professors write in tenure cases, another way to expand the pool is to allow associate professors to write letters for promotion to tenure. Outstanding associate professors may have more recent, more extensive, and more specialized knowledge of a candidate's disciplinary contributions; they may also have fewer administrative commitments and other responsibilities than their full-professor colleagues and be more willing to write external letters. Again, the CV and scholarly reputation of an external reviewer is of greater significance than whether she or he has (yet) been promoted to full professor.

Both measures would mitigate the numbers problem and likely increase the yield among solicited reviewers—more, I suspect, than by paying honoraria. Whatever the answers, the external-review process merits our sustained thought—as Professor Weyland and the above respondents to his essay have begun to do. ■

NOTES

1. External reviewers were more receptive to writing letters for tenure: a 70% acceptance rate for potential external reviewers in tenure cases versus a 57% rate for promotions to full professor.
2. I coded as "non-responders" the handful of external reviewers who agreed to send in a letter but ended up never doing so as.
3. See, for example, Benjamin Ginsberg. 2011. *The Fall of the Faculty*. New York: Oxford University Press.

SPOTLIGHT CONTRIBUTORS

Michelle D. Deardorff is professor and department head of Political Science and Public Service at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. She may be reached at michelle-deardorff@utc.edu.

Valerie Johnson is associate professor and chair of the Department of Political Science at DePaul University. She may be reached at Valerie.c.johnson@depaul.edu.

Jane Junn is USC associates chair in social sciences and professor of political science and gender studies at the University of Southern California. She may be reached at junn@usc.edu.

Robert C. Lieberman is professor of political science at Johns Hopkins University. From 2013 to 2016, he served as provost and senior vice president for academic affairs. He may be reached at rlieberman@jhu.edu.

Cynthia Opheim is professor in the Department of Political at Texas State University and recently served as university associate provost. She may be reached at coo1@txstate.edu.

Bartholomew Sparrow is professor in the Department of Government at The University of Texas at Austin and is the guest editor of this spotlight. He may be reached at bhs@austin.utexas.edu.