Promotion Letters

INTRODUCTION TO SPOTLIGHT ON PROMOTION LETTERS

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Promotion to tenure and then full professor, for most faculty, are *the only two comprehensive evaluations we make of each other as fellow professionals*. And that is true only if associate professors seek promotion to full professor.[1] The professional, reputational, financial, and psychological stakes of promotion—perhaps needless to point out—are extremely high. Mercilessly, the promotion process either validates or discredits candidates' professional choices, their ideas, their disciplinary approaches, and their scholarly reputations. "The politics of the university are so intense" *not* "because the stakes are so low," *contra* Henry Kissinger (who borrowed from the Columbia political scientist Wallace Sayre), but because they are so elevated for both the candidates and institutions.

Outside letters by more senior scholars from other institutions are an an important and integral part of the promotion process. As such, the letters comprise a vital service on behalf of colleagues, departments, academic administrators, students, taxpayers, parents, and other higher-education stakeholders. Few if any faculty members in a department may be knowledgeable about a candidate's particular subfield. Moreover, it may be difficult for faculty to be objective about the promotion of their junior colleagues. The external-review process, in short, is indispensable to the health of the departments, centers, colleges, universities, and a profession that largely governs itself.

Kurt Weyland argues that the external-review process is seriously and importantly deficient. Outside letters are self-selective and they invariably are positive. Potential reviewers are typically willing to write for the strongest cases, and they decline to write for "borderline" or "problematic" cases. The promotion process therefore is being subverted, Weyland argues. Whereas candidates who merit closer attention receive less scrutiny—less in terms of both the comprehensiveness of the external letters and the number of outside letters received—stellar candidates, those whose records already are documented and legitimated by the number and quality of their peer-reviewed publications, grants, citations, prizes, and other indicators, receive more and better evaluations.

Weyland proposes several coincident explanations for why external reviewers have become less critical in their letters and more willing to decline to write for less-than-outstanding candidates. His solution is for "well-endowed departments" to compensate external reviewers with a $2,000 honorarium (and lower amounts for less wealthy institutions). The honoraria will make the home departments the principals, he contends, thereby inducing more external reviewers to write and motivating them to write more thorough and more objective letters.

All of the political scientists who respond to Weyland's article have had administrative experience and, as to be expected, vary in their reactions. Michelle D. Deardorff disagrees with the notion that the external-review process actually has worsened, given that the academy was previously much less representative of gender and class than it is today. Deardorff, along with professors Valerie Johnson and Cynthia Opheim, also suggests that because of the institutionalization of rigorous third-year reviews and annual faculty evaluations, "we do a better job of anticipating" who will succeed and who will not. The external letters consequently are less of an issue.

As for paying for outside letters, Deardorff doubts that honoraria will have much effect because of the relatively small pool of full professors capable of doing thorough reviews of promotion candidates. Furthermore, a "pay-to-play" approach will help wealthier departments and universities and possibly harm less-well-endowed institutions, which then would find it more difficult to secure external reviews. She argues that a candidate's inability to attract external letters constitutes an evaluation on the merits of promotion in its own right; declinations thus may not be a problem that actually needs to be addressed.

Johnson also disagrees with Weyland's contention that there are "difficulties" getting "honest assessments of a candidate's scholarly record." In her experience, almost three quarters of invited external reviewers accept. To compensate reviewers with generous honoraria would alter the feedback process of external reviews by inserting (unwanted) calculations of compensation into the external-review process and by altering professional norms. Moreover, an institution's aggregate costs of the honoraria for dozens of promotion and tenure cases could sum in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, a point Opheim also makes. The real problems with outside letters, Johnson finds, is that they do not follow her department's explicitly stated writing guidelines and that they can be gratuitously mean-spirited.

In contrast, Jane Junn generally agrees with Weyland that "it has become increasingly difficult to find willing, thorough, and frank dossier reviewers." Junn concurs that it is reasonable to offer a monetary inducement to external reviewers, but she warns of the possibility of several (undesirable) unintended consequences. She offers two modifications to Weyland's proposal. The first is that departments clarify precisely what they want from the external reviewers in their letters; as the principals, they would be in a position to deny compensating those who did not answer the department's specific questions. The second, more difficult proposal is for the American Political Science Association to establish a fund to which all institutions would contribute and from which institutions could draw for compensating their reviewers.

Robert Lieberman is sympathetic to Weyland's argument, but he wonders about the degree to which the current external-review process is a problem. Outside letters offer subtle indicators of the merits of promotion, he notes, even those that uniformly recommend promotion. Letters that do not engage the material but merely summarize the CV, that avoid details, and that do not answer the department's questions are, in his experience, "bad signs": letters that indicate that the candidates are not emerging leaders in their area of specialization. Ultimately, however, promotion should first and foremost hinge on "our own careful and critical judgment" of tenure candidates as potential disciplinary leaders and, by extrapolation, of full-professor candidates who are newly established leaders in their field. Lieberman allows that

generous honoraria could motivate "more negative or on-the-fence referees to write," but there is no substitution for the careful reading of candidates' files by more senior faculty members and adminstrators.

Opheim also recognizes the logic of Weyland's argument. She points out that departments almost surely would be expected to pay for a portion of the honoraria. The money being saved from not investing in poor promotion candidates—that is, the non-incurred costs of the "false positives"—does not lead to the availability of ready, present-day funds for honoraria. Opheim agrees that paying reviewers would "certainly encourage prominent scholars" to accept a task not tied to their ongoing research, but she notes that this may be a matter of institutional and disciplinary norms. She found from her experience as associate provost that external reviewers for engineering candidates often wrote critical or negative letters, notwithstanding the absence of any financial inducement.

Having conducted a study of my own department's promotion process during a 12-year period (which I report in my separate response), I found that the quality and quantity of external letters *are* a significant problem. I am mildly supportive of honoraria, on the principle that external reviewers should receive some compensation for what is a consequential and time-consuming commitment. Twice I have received $500 honoraria for writing external letters; in neither instance did the honorarium motivate me to write a more thorough or more rigorous letter than I might have otherwise. However, on both occasions, I felt better about writing the letter; I was appreciative of the professional recognition of my efforts, not unlike the honoraria book publishers give for manuscript reviews or those that departments give for program evaluations. I suspect the larger problem, however, is one of numbers: too many letters are being solicited from relatively few qualified senior scholars. I conclude by offering two suggestions as to how the number of external reviewers could be increased.

There is rightly no specified criteria for promotion, given its holistic nature and the unique qualities of each candidate up for promotion. Faculty may conduct their research in collaboration with others or they may work on their own. They may focus on books, on both books and articles, or on articles exclusively. Furthermore, the apparent difference between those who produce at a high rate and those who have a shorter CV may conceal trade-offs between quality and quantity. This may reflect the fact that the volume of published research might depend on the type of research that candidates do, the kind of data they collect, and the originality of their projects, among other factors. Then there are teaching, service, grants, public outreach, community engagement, and other factors that figure in departments' and institutions' decisions. Departments, colleges, and universities have their own distinct priorities and promote accordingly. Just as clearly, institutions will use the external-review process in different ways.

Whatever the precise role that external reviews play in faculty promotion for any one institution, we can at least be conscious of the weaknesses and strengths of the external-review process and try to evaluate candidates as fairly and holistically as possible.

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NOTE

1. External recruitment may be another such an instance, especially as it may coincide with a change in rank, but it is not mandatory or automatic. Annual reviews and post-tenure reviews may be holistic, but they do not as a rule involve a close reading or comprehensive assessment of faculty members' published scholarship.

RESPONSE TO SPOTLIGHT ON PROMOTION LETTERS: REFLECTIONS ON THE CHANGING ACADEMY

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Although this proposal raises an intriguing question related to the present utility of external reviews in promotion and tenure decisions, its conjectures regarding the cause—and therefore appropriate solutions—seem problematic. Kurt Weyland assumes a universal institution while reflecting the perspective of only elite universities, and he presumes that less-stringent evaluations have resulted in uniformly positive assessments of candidate portfolios. The claims made in "Promotion Letters: Current Problems and a Reform Proposal" are empirical—more specifically, external reviews hold less value in decision making because they are now of lower quality and almost uniformly positive. However, the only evidence provided for this claim is discussions with colleagues, personal observations, and references to that "mystical past" when universities were uniquely about quality and the life of the mind.

I am concerned about these references to a time when higher education was so much better because (1) this critique of deterioration and frivolousness is made about every new generation by every aging one; and (2) people like me (based, in my case, on gender and class) typically were not included in higher education. I do not accuse Weyland of this rationale; I simply note that the existence of this more robust, romanticized past as compared to our more contested and messy current reality can rarely be documented. Instead, I suggest that there may be other reasons why external reviews tend to skew more positively than merely a decline in their quality. One change I have observed in more than 25 years as a full-time academic and a department chair at three different types of institutions (i.e., private Midwestern, public Southern historically black, and