

How to Mitigate Bias When Soliciting and Using External Review Letters
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What is the institutional purpose of external letters of recommendation for tenure and promotion?

If...	Then...
To provide research expertise in specialized subdiscipline or creative production	Limit external evaluation to quality and impact of research or creative production.
To provide an unbiased assessment of candidate's record	Take purposive actions to recognize and minimize bias when soliciting and using letters of recommendation.

Patterns of bias in external letters of recommendation are so well documented that Stewart and Valian (2018), among others, recommend against using them; and some universities have eliminated them. Indeed, in a 2024 study by Cervato et. al, while all the R1 institutions they sampled required external letters, only 17% of R2 institutions required them.

Common elements in solicitation letters (adapted from Cervato et. al 2024)

- TPR criteria (university, college, department)
- Request to judge whether the candidate satisfies those criteria (often just research/creative production)
- Statement about the confidentiality (or not) of the review letter
- Additional language, when relevant, about tenure clock extensions, COVID impact, and DEI activities
- Request for description of reviewer's (personal and professional) affiliation with the candidate

Elements that may introduce bias	Why this is problematic
Request to evaluate teaching performance	Reviewer likely does not have first-hand knowledge of candidate's teaching and must rely on measures such as student teaching evaluations, which scholarship demonstrates are biased against women, faculty of color and other marginalized groups (Boring et. al 2017, Chavez et. al 2020, Eaton et. al 2020).
Request to evaluate institutional service	Reviewer likely does not have expertise in levels of service that are expected at the institution or the time and skills required for certain service assignments.
Request to judge whether candidate would achieve tenure/promotion at reviewer's institution.	The candidate is not applying for tenure/promotion at the reviewer's institution. Candidate must only be evaluated based on the T&P criteria where they are applying.
Request to comment on candidate's growth potential or comparison to other scholars at similar career stages.	Both questions solicit subjective judgments without sufficient information required to make them. For instance, factors such as teaching load, service load, start-up packages, sabbaticals, internal funding for research and conferences, and availability of graduate research and teaching assistants varies greatly across institutions and have a significant impact on faculty research/creative production.
Request to comment on candidate's national reputation.	The meaning of "national reputation" (or similar terms) is vague and open to interpretation and is also heavily dependent on reviewer's own professional networks and currency. (Less than 10% of R1 institutions request this in Cervato 2024 study.)

Elements that are neutral or may reduce bias	How this helps reduce bias
Use of gender-neutral pronouns and language (eg. they/them, the candidate)	Copious scholarship demonstrates implicit bias based simply on pronouns and names. For example, Moss-Racusin et. al 2012 found identical CVs are evaluated very differently if they are given typically masculine or feminine names. Using gender-neutral language helps reduce unconscious bias. (Try the Gender Bias Calculator with your own letters of recommendation/review.)
Request to evaluate ONLY candidate’s research/creative production; NOT their teaching or institutional service.	This allows reviewer to draw on their expertise in the field and discourages subjective assessments about areas where they lack information and first-hand knowledge. Reviewers may, however, be invited to comment on professional service beyond the institution.
Instructions on how to evaluate tenure clock variations.	If a candidate has received an extension per institutional policy, reviewers may tend to expect greater productivity (eg. six years of publications rather than five years with a usual tenure clock). They should be given specific instruction about not regarding tenure clock extensions as “extra time” for research/creative work.
Details on institutional context	Providing details on teaching load, service expectations, and institutional supports for research such as start-up packages, research facilities, sabbaticals, course releases, internal funding for research and conferences, and availability of graduate research and teaching assistants gives reviewers fuller understanding of the candidate’s research record.
Details on institutional priorities, tied to mission (eg. interdisciplinary work, collaborative work, student research)	Not all institutions (or fields) view interdisciplinary, collaborative, or student-centered (especially SoTL) research/creative work favorably. Women and faculty of color are more likely to engage in this work. Affirming these as institutional priorities can discourage negative assertions about such work.
COVID impact statements (for tenure cases) and/or reminders of research on systemic bias in T&P reviews	COVID impact statements that acknowledge the negative impact on research/creative productivity should be included for all tenure cases, and should include acknowledgment that the pandemic had disproportionate impacts on women and faculty of color. Additionally, references to the robust scholarship on bias in T&P reviews can make reviewers more aware of their own assumptions about candidates. (Eg. “In order to protect against the kind of biases documented by X 2022 and Y 2019, we request that you consider...”)

Elements that should be used with caution	Why caution is necessary
Reviewer’s confidentiality	It is common practice to safeguard the confidentiality of external reviewers and restrict access to review letters, and there are understandable reasons for this. Indeed, some reviewers may decline to participate if their confidentiality is not protected. However, lack of transparency results in lack of accountability, and therefore has the potential for bias.
Requests for evaluation of candidate’s DEI work	If commitment to DEI is an institutional priority, it is useful specify that and to ask reviewers to comment on any DEI elements of the candidate’s research/creative work and/or their service beyond the institution. But (as above) they should not be asked to comment on institutional service. There is also research that suggests that faculty of color are disadvantaged by an over-emphasis on DEI in their letters of recommendation (Spitzmueller et. al 2023).

Processes that can reduce bias	How they can help reduce bias
Use standardized institutional solicitation letter with only minimal customization (eg. names, dates, units, additional boilerplate language when applicable on tenure clock extensions, etc.).	A standardized institutional solicitation letter, carefully crafted with all of the above factors in mind should reduce opportunities for (largely unintentional) bias. Allowing customization by chairs or deans increases potential for unintended bias. Additionally, standardizing elements of the letter (including standard page length) allows for more equitable “apples-to-apples” comparisons.
Require internal T&P committees to complete their evaluation of the candidate’s dossier <u>before</u> reading the external review letters; and provide them with notes regarding the limitations of such letters and the metrics they often use, such as h-index or other impact factor metrics.	Because of well-documented biases in external letters (and impact factor metrics), they should not be heavily weighted in T&P decisions, and therefore should only be considered as additional information once a full review of the dossier has happened (Madera et. al 2019, Roper 2022, Trix and Psenka 2003). T&P committees should be reminded of scholarship on bias in letters of recommendation so they can be better attuned to potential bias (see ABL 2022, Minor 2023). They should be instructed to focus on evidence rather than tone, and directed not to “read between the lines” of reviewers’ letters.
Give careful thought to selection of experts to serve as reviewers.	The experts that senior faculty select to serve as reviewers are likely to be those in their own professional networks, which may replicate long-standing biases. Additionally, Yan et. al 2024 demonstrate a male bias in recall of expert names, which may lead to a disproportionate number of male reviewers.

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