

BASIC SCIENCES

School of Medicine – Vanderbilt University

Guidelines for Letters of Evaluation

Investigator Track:

To assist in the evaluation of the faculty member for appointment or promotion on either the tenure or the non-tenure track, a dossier is prepared and forwarded to the Dean. The dossier contains five elements: the chair's letter of recommendation, a curriculum vitae, the Documentation of Teaching Effectiveness form, the Critical References form, and letters of evaluation. **The purpose of this document is to assist those who prepare dossiers in requesting and obtaining the most effective letters of evaluation.**

Commonly, appointment and promotion dossiers contain more than the recommended number of evaluation letters. A recent audit of 22 consecutive appointment and promotion dossiers indicated that the average number of tenure track letters was 10 and the average number of non-tenure track letters was 9. It should be stressed, however, that the quantity of letters is less important than their quality.

The Faculty Appointments and Promotion Committee (FAPC), has noted that not all letters contain the critical elements needed to support an appointment or promotion decision. As a result, the most frequent reason for deferral of Committee action has been the need to request additional information from additional correspondents. The FAPC offers the guidelines below to ensure that evaluation letters submitted contain information that is most relevant to the appointment and promotion decision.

The critical elements for evaluation letters include:

Choice of Correspondent:

The most effective evaluation letters are from nationally recognized leaders in the relevant area of scholarship. Most commonly, these are from senior faculty members or directors of major research programs. Especially helpful are letters from individuals at institutions of stature similar to Vanderbilt who have not been collaborators and who have not played a significant role in the candidate's training or career development. If the candidate has had a successful collaborative relationship with another investigator, the collaborator may be asked to write in support of the candidate. The collaborator's letter, however, should explain clearly the independent role and the unique contributions of the candidate in the collaborative work. For promotions, it is helpful to have correspondents who are familiar with the culture and traditions within the candidate's discipline in order to put the faculty member's achievements in the appropriate context.

Letters from senior Vanderbilt faculty members are useful, especially when there are special circumstances about the candidate's achievements that are best assessed by intramural correspondents. The suggestions above apply as well.

Correspondent knowledge about the Promotion Process and about Vanderbilt promotion criteria and tracks:

It is essential that correspondents be aware of the Vanderbilt promotion criteria for the Investigator Track ranks. They should understand that tenure is usually awarded at the Associate Professor level. For example, letters from international correspondents, and from scientists within the NIH or industry may submit an inadvertently negative letter because they are unfamiliar with our track and rank system.

Content of Letters

General:

It is helpful when the correspondent describes the basis of her/his knowledge of the candidate, as well as any relevant information that validate the correspondent's ability to make a judgment on an appropriate faculty rank for the candidate, e.g., "I have chaired my Department's Promotions Committee for the past 5 years and am familiar with the promotion criteria at Vanderbilt".

Creativity, independence, and impact:

The best letters of evaluation contain objective evidence of the quality, impact, independence and originality of the candidate's scholarship and professional effort. An objective appraisal of the faculty member's achievements within a percentile range is useful (e.g., "I believe that Dr. Smith's achievements place her within the top 10% of individuals working in this area today."). In addition, it is helpful if the correspondent is able to refer to specific individuals at their own or other institutions who have attained the requested rank and whose qualifications are comparable to those of the candidate. Assessments of teaching and mentoring should reference teaching metrics, trainee attestations, and outcomes of trainees.

Apparent gaps or omissions in the dossier:

It is probably best for correspondents to address directly apparent gaps in a faculty member's dossier; for example, the individual with substantial grant support, but few manuscripts, or vice versa. Other examples would include the individual put up for tenure after a period of lack of productivity, or an individual who has been put forth for promotion early in her/his nine-year probationary period, the promotion might be regarded as premature.

Assessment of the applicant's likelihood of promotion at the correspondent's institution:

Often the best evidence of the quality and impact of a faculty member's scholarship is a clear statement by a credible correspondent from an institution of stature similar to Vanderbilt that the faculty member would be promoted to the proposed rank and track at the correspondent's institution.