

The University of Tennessee
Promotion and Tenure Process Review
External Review Committee Report
August 27-29, 2019

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CONTEXT of the VISIT:

The University of Tennessee Board of Trustees, in 2018, expressed interest in the standards for tenure and promotion, the consistency of the tenure process, and the rigor associated with tenure evaluation. The June 2018 review of tenure cases across the University of Tennessee System revealed inconsistencies in the process and procedures, the completeness of the dossiers, the thoroughness of evaluation at the various levels of review, and the perceived rigor of the processes. As a result, then President Joe DiPietro directed the initiation of the engagement of an external review committee to examine promotion and tenure decisions across the UT System. With the retirement of President DiPietro, a new interim President, Mr. Randy Boyd was appointed and the number of trustees was reduced from 27 to 11, all of whom were new to the Board. Because the current Board of Trustees recognized the long term and significant investment of University resources made at the time of a positive tenure decision, the Board requested the external review of the promotion and tenure processes across the UT System be conducted. The review team consisted of Marlene I Strathe, Chair, Ronnie D. Green and Mark Arant and the team conducted the site visit on August 27 – 29, 2019.

PURPOSE of the VISIT:

The purpose of the external review was to examine promotion and tenure processes and procedures currently in place across the UT System. Specifically, the team was asked to identify areas of improvement, establish areas of concern, and identify best practices and/or recommendations for improving promotion and tenure processes and procedures. Four thematic areas of best practices, as Identified by the American Council on Education, the American Association of University Professors, and the United Educators Insurance Risk Retention Group, included **(1) Clarity in Standards and Procedures for Tenure Evaluation, (2) Consistency in Tenure Decisions, (3) Candor in the Evaluation of Tenure-Track Faculty, and (4) Caring for Unsuccessful Candidates.**

STRUCTURE of the VISIT:

Prior to the on-site visit external review team members received a variety of written materials for review including the faculty handbooks of the four campuses; UTK, UTC, UTM and UTHSC. The by-laws for the respective campuses were also made available as well as annual summaries of the campus tenure evaluations for the previous three years, the results from a 2017 faculty tenure survey and the UT Board of Trustees Policy on Academic Freedom, Responsibility and Tenure. The campus profiles, including mission statements, and peer and aspirational institutions were also made available for review prior to the site visit.

During the visit, the review team met with stakeholder groups from across the system including members of the University Faculty Council, Chancellors and Chief Academic Officers, Academic Deans, three members of the UT Board of Trustees, Department Heads, the UT System General Counsel and campus general counsels, and President Randy Boyd and UT System Leaders. The visit concluded with a private meeting with President Boyd followed by an oral report to the UT System Leadership.

COMMENDATIONS:

The external review team found areas for which the UT Board of Trustees and the UT System Leadership should be commended including:

- (1) The UT Board of Trustees interest in and willingness to not only examine, but learn about the processes, including the promotion and tenure process, involved in the evaluation of faculty members' performance. Individuals not familiar with faculty evaluation processes in higher education may have inaccurate, incomplete and in some cases misinformation about faculty evaluation and the role of evaluation in the awarding of tenure. The UT Board's interest is refreshing and commendable.
- (2) The direction given by the UT System Office to the campuses in moving toward the standardization of process steps across the system including common review points, college level review committees, by-law revisions to align with system policies, external reviews, and the inclusion of peer reviews of teaching performance. This System leadership has been very positively received by the respective campuses, with little evidence of resistance to these changes.
- (3) The University Faculty Council structure which focuses on campus representation both to and from the System Office. The UFC structure fosters policy and process communication and the most recent revisions to the post tenure review processes are an excellent example of the effectiveness of this Council.
- (4) The involvement of University Counsel in policy development. While ensuring due process, University Counsel is to be commended for balancing the due process requirements against creating bureaucratic complexity which can discourage candor in the evaluation process and delay timely decision making.
- (5) The standardization of the appointment period to six years. Standardizing the appointment period allows for tracking of cohort groups at the time of entry into the UT System. UT Board action only on early or expedited review, coupled with the increased standardization of processes across the system will bring greater consistency to the decision- making processes.

OBSERVATIONS:

In addition to the areas the team identified as commendable, the opportunity to interact with colleagues from each of the four campuses permitted the team to make some campus- based observations which, in turn, influenced some of the recommendations arising from the visit. Of greatest importance and significance are the differing campus missions and historical faculty evaluation processes.

UTK: The University of Tennessee at Knoxville is the most mature of the campuses in terms of faculty evaluation criteria and processes. UTK has a very highly centralized and well-established professional development program for department chairs and faculty regarding the evaluation processes. UTK has also had the longest history with the use of external reviewers, although there is current emphasis on the greater use of reviewers from aspirational as well as peer institutions. Because of the size of the UTK campus, considerable autonomy exists at the departmental level leading to greater variability regarding the communication of key steps and information regarding the evaluation processes.

UTC: The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga is a campus moving from a primarily commuter/urban campus to a more residential emphasis. With regard to faculty expectations, there is an increased emphasis on scholarship and community expectations. There are very clear administrative expectations

at UTC about strengthening faculty performance, particularly in the areas of scholarship and public outreach. UTC has experience with external reviewers but there is variability across the colleges in how they are selected and the number to be required. The college deans have been very active in moving toward more standardized processes including by-law revisions and the inclusion of evaluative statements in the faculty evaluation processes.

UTM: UTM is the most recent of the campuses to address the requested standardization changes, including external reviewers of which they have very limited to no experience to date. UTM has had an historical emphasis on teaching which is an area that external reviewers have not often been asked to address. UTM has much smaller academic units with limited numbers of individuals in the upper ranks. This results in faculty having to assume multiple roles including faculty evaluations outside of their disciplinary areas, serving as mentors, and engaging in departmental governance including by-law revisions, etc. A clear need exists in supporting UTM in the needed professional development opportunities to fully implement the desired changes and move the institution to the next level.

UTHSC: The faculty mix at the UTHSC is very different from any of the other campuses with only about 30% of the faculty tenure-track/tenured. Other faculty included clinical, non-tenure track, and affiliate appointments. UTHSC has very strong administrative expectations for faculty performance and demonstrates committed centralized leadership to standardize the processes within UTHSC. There is an emphasis of increasing the use of external reviewers from aspirational as well as peer institutions. The UTHSC expressed some concern with the required documentation needed for expedited reviews, particularly as they seek to hire experienced faculty members at the upper ranks of associate professor and professor.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Based on the review of various documents provided to the team members and the information gleaned from the interviews with various stakeholder groups, the following recommendations are made in relation to each of the thematic areas of best practices to be addressed at the individual campuses.

Clarity in Standards and Procedures for Tenure Evaluation

- Standardize the minimal contents of the candidate materials portfolio to be reviewed as identified by the System, with additional materials required as specific to the respective campus.
 - No promotion and tenure portfolio should be advanced for review until all required materials are included.
- Develop portfolio templates which communicate to tenure track faculty indicators of performance in the areas of teaching, research and service and which can become a cumulative record of faculty performance over the appointment period.
- Establish clear guidelines, including time reference points, when and what materials may be added to a portfolio, when rebuttal letters may be submitted, when portfolios may be withdrawn, and the appeal procedures available to an unsuccessful candidate.
- Establish clear guidelines for the identification of external reviewers, including the number of reviews required, the criteria for reviewer identification, and the materials to be submitted for review. No promotion and tenure portfolio should be advanced for external review until all required materials are included.

- Provide annual professional development workshops for all department chairs/heads and deans regarding the criteria for faculty performance and the processes for both annual and promotion and tenure evaluation reviews.
- Provide annual professional development workshops for all faculty, with a focus on those identified as undergoing promotion and tenure review, to communicate the criteria for faculty performance and the processes for both annual and promotion and tenure reviews. Provide examples of completed portfolios appropriate to the individual campus.
- Develop formalized mentoring programs for early career faculty members including the delineation of mentor assignments and the expectations for both mentors and mentees.
- Identify the unit/person responsible for ensuring the accuracy of the materials submitted in the portfolios. No portfolio should be advanced beyond the department level until portfolio accuracy is validated.

Consistency in Tenure Decisions

- Conduct annual retrospective reviews of the annual reviews and promotion and tenure processes, with a focus on monitoring the progress of System entry cohort groups.
 - The retrospective reviews should focus on personal characteristics such as gender, race, disability, and national origin as well as expectations at the time of hiring.
- Review those individual cases where differences existed regarding the candidate's performance to determine if greater clarity is needed in communicating expectations or processes to either the candidate or those responsible for the reviews.
- Standardize a time frame for a campus review of annual promotion and tenure processes (e.g. every 3 years).

Candor in the Evaluation of Tenure-Track Faculty

- Provide annual training to all department chairs/heads regarding conducting the annual review and providing evaluative letters regarding the faculty member's performance during the review period. Sample evaluation letters should be provided which identify performance strengths, areas of concern, and specific recommendations for improvement. Provide chairs/heads with examples of letters with serious faculty concerns and the appropriate communication of those concerns.
- Initiate conversation in the UFC to discuss changing the annual evaluation rating scale to a 3 - point scale; Satisfactory with Recommendations, Satisfactory with Concerns, and Unsatisfactory.
 - Consider the mid-year review to recommend one of the following; Continue Contract with No Concerns, Continue Contract with Concerns, Continue Contract with Serious Concerns, Do Not Continue Contract. The intent of this recommendation is to move away from the 'halo' effect of the 5- point scale and provide a contract out before the end of the total contract period.
- Provide strong central administrative support for all review levels making candid and professional decisions about individual faculty performances.

Caring for Unsuccessful Candidates

- Develop, through the professional development work with chairs/heads, a culture of formative evaluation designed to enhance the performance of the faculty member as well as contribute to the strength of the academic unit.

- Conduct exit interviews with all tenure-track cohort group members leaving the System, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, to identify their experiences in the UT System and provide any support or assistance as they pursue new opportunities.

In addition, the team believes the UT System has an excellent opportunity to provide the newly appointed board members a professional development opportunity focused on ‘Understanding the Evaluation of Faculty Performance in Higher Education’. We would recommend the System consider providing a study session which would include information regarding the following:

- Performance Expectations at the Time of Hire
- Institutional Differences in Expectations and Criteria
- Annual Evaluation Processes
- Mid-Year Contract Reviews
- Promotion and Tenure Portfolios
- External Reviewers
- Review Process Steps and Review Responsibilities
- Final Decisions
- Post Tenure Review

We would also recommend that the UT System consider adopting a ‘tracking system’ which would monitor ‘entering System cohort groups’ through the appointment contract period to determine reasons for faculty attrition as well as faculty promotion and tenure success. The annual retrospective reviews of individual campuses would provide invaluable information regarding the effectiveness of the faculty evaluation systems.

SUMMARY

The members of the external review team are very appreciative of the opportunity to participate in this University of Tennessee System Review of the Promotion and Tenure Process. We enjoyed the opportunity to visit with colleagues from across the UT System and were impressed with their candor, their insights, and most of all their commitment to the University of Tennessee. We sincerely hope our observations and recommendations may be helpful as you continue to move the UT System forward.