

if people were willing to be more directly negative or if more negatively inclined people were induced to write. Generally speaking, however, sandwiched between the opening “throat-clearing” paragraph and the concluding line that almost invariably recommends promotion, referees offer ample clues to their real feelings about the case. Does the writer critically engage with the candidate’s work and try to explain why it is important, or influential, or even wrong-headed (a good sign)? Or does the letter merely recite the contents of the candidate’s CV (a bad sign)? Is the tone enthusiastic (good) or dutiful (bad)? Is the candidate someone who was already familiar to the writer before the evaluation request (good), or does the letter open with something like, “I’d never heard of Professor X before, but based on the dossier you sent me, he seems to be pretty smart” (bad)? It is the faculty’s responsibility to read these letters with care and sensitivity to create a well-rounded picture of the candidate’s quality and standing in the field, not simply to tally votes and approve an appointment once a candidate’s file accumulates the requisite number of “ayes.” Paying honoraria for evaluations, as Weyland suggests, might generate a wider range of evaluations. Even then, however, positive letters likely would still come in a range of varieties, and the responsibility for careful reading and reasoned judgment would remain.

There are also other valuable sources of information in the letters. As Weyland notes, it is often possible to make inferences about the candidates from the patterns of acceptances and declinations of invitations to review. If one has written to the right people—that is, to external colleagues who are themselves leading figures in a candidate’s precise area of scholarship, where she or he can be reasonably expected to be a known figure—and many of them refuse to write, that alone is an indicator of the candidate’s standing. To be sure, as Weyland argues, this type of inference from silence might not be necessary if more people were induced to write—but the level of responsiveness from the subfield community can still be telling. Moreover, a case for which an institution must approach too many people in order to obtain the requisite number of letters to move forward, or for which leading figures in the field consistently decline to write, generally merits close scrutiny; something deeper is probably amiss.

Finally, useful letters often compare the candidate to others in the same field (i.e., sometimes referees are explicitly asked for comparisons, and some institutions provide a list of comparators). Many people find these comparisons off-putting, but they can be helpful in locating a candidate within an array of scholars working on similar topics to assess impact and professional standing. Tenure review is almost unique among familiar peer-review processes in academic life in that it focuses attention on a decision about a singular case, which leads departments and academic leaders to lean on something that appears to be an absolute standard (i.e., whether the candidate is “above the bar,” to use a common metaphor). However, other common peer-review processes—for example, evaluating grant applications or papers submitted to a journal—also involve relative judgments. Not only is this submission fundable (or publishable), but is it also among the best so that it merits the allocation of a scarce resource (e.g., money or pages)? We should think about tenure evaluations in the same way: Are the candidates among the best in their field? Again, even generally positive letters can provide useful guidance.

I am not suggesting that institutions should not consider paying honoraria for writing letters (as some already do). This approach might provide, as Weyland suggests, enough incentive

for more negative or on-the-fence referees to write and to express a broader portfolio of views. Inducing more honest (and, thus, presumably mixed) language from referees might render it easier for departments, promotion and tenure committees, and academic leaders to make difficult calls in borderline cases. However, given what is at stake—for both the candidate and the institution—tenure decisions merit more careful consideration than simply totaling up pro and con recommendations in letters. Ultimately, we should remember that external-review letters are a supplement to rather than a substitute for our own careful and critical judgment. ■

RESPONSE TO SPOTLIGHT ON PROMOTION LETTERS: AN OPTION WORTH EXPLORING

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The suggestion that external reviewers of tenure and promotion candidate files, in general, have become less discerning is an important issue for the discipline. My perspective on this question comes from being a senior administrator and serving several years as associate provost. Thus, my comments are more general and comparative in nature.

There are two questions to address: Is there a self-selection process that results in generally positive and less-useful external reviews? Would a significant honorarium for reviewers reverse or ameliorate this trend? There indeed may be self-selection toward more general and/or positive reviews. My discussions with deans and chairs over the years, as well as in deliberation of this proposal, lead me to suspect that reviews tend to be positive, that reviews for borderline candidates are more difficult to solicit, and that at least some reviews resemble recommendation letters rather than critical analyses of a promotion portfolio. That said, there often are significant nuances in external reviews that give pronounced clues. A borderline candidate who meets minimum standards often elicits a lower level of enthusiasm even though the review is positive.

To a certain extent, the tendency toward positive reviews is unavoidable. The primary culprit is the trend toward academic specialization. Faculty hired in tenure-track positions are encouraged to focus on a specific “body of work” and become part of a national network of scholars to attain maximum visibility and prestige. This necessarily means that at least some letters likely will be solicited from a select pool of colleagues reluctant to criticize someone they know or with whom they have worked. 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. Many chairs tell me they have fewer borderline tenure candidates than in previous years.

The suggestion that senior scholars may be hesitant to take on borderline cases because they fear liability issues cannot be dismissed. Confidentiality notwithstanding, many states—including Texas—interpret public-information statutes as allowing unsuccessful candidates access to external reviews. In theory, this may lead to defamation suits; in practice, lawsuits based on external comments are rare. However, if someone is concerned with legal liability, an honorarium is not likely to make a difference.

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.

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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

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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