Evaluating Faculty Scholarship: What goes into a good letter at the Department Level?

Dr. Stuart Boersma
Former Chair of the Department of Mathematics and COTS Personnel Committee

Context, context, context!

Chair/PC

- What is the faculty member’s “role” in the department and how has the individual’s scholarly agenda supported that role?
- Has the scholarship directly impacted student learning at CWU? If so, please explain and emphasize! Some possible examples include:
  - Involved students in research.
  - Research disseminated to students (special seminars, independent study projects, etc).
  - Research enhanced curricular offerings and/or led to curricular innovation.
  - Scholarly program has provided external funds to university, college, and/or department.
- Has the scholarship had an impact on an academic discipline?
  - Generally how is scholarship done in the discipline? If the research is interdisciplinary, how is the research impacting the field or valued by the department’s discipline?
  - Published/presented in professional venue
    - Brief explanation as to why you know the venue is an appropriate place to disseminate: known journal (impact factor?), lesser known journal (indexed? DOAJ listed? Beall flagged?), regional/national/international meeting of a professional organization.
- Ultimately, the scholarly product should be judged on its content. Has the department done this? The departmental letter must convey to others outside the department and discipline that scholarly products are indeed worthy of their respective classification (Category A, B, other) and inclusion on one’s CV.
- If possible, the quantity and quality of scholarship should also be placed within the context of workload units assigned and historical output of department personnel.

Individual

- Provide enough information for others to address ALL the points above (explain review process, contribution to multi-authored works).
- External letters if desired (they may help shed light on impact and importance of scholarship as well as appropriateness of publication/presentation venues).
- Is it clear to the department the venue for peer reviewed dissemination is appropriate? Will they be able to convey this so it is clear in subsequent reviews?
Some other suggestions for Personnel Letters
Dr. Linda Raubeson, Department of Biological Sciences
Former member and Chair of the COTS Personnel Committee

- Beware of cut and paste errors.
- Explain the faculty member’s accomplishments rather than listing them.
- Indicate how accomplishments align with the criteria. Also place the accomplishment within the context of the discipline. Why is the particular accomplishment important to the discipline?
- Construct a logical argument that the candidate has (or has not) met (or exceeded) the criteria.
- If there is an obvious problem, address it.
- Not every candidate can walk on water, nor do they need to.
- Department chairs should work with your department personnel committee and the applicant to help ensure the file is complete, well organized, aligns to criteria, and uses up-to-date criteria and coversheets. If the candidate refuses the assistance, say so in the letter.

Some Suggested Best Practices for Tenure and Promotion Letters
Dr. Marji Morgan, Dean, College of Arts and Humanities

- All letters should outline accomplishments and shortcomings within the context of department and college standards.
- Be sure to state clearly a general recommendation at the beginning and end of the letter. Recommendation language can be found in the CBA (for 2009-2013, section 21.7).
- Make the candidate’s status clear – early tenure, mandatory year, years in rank if for full professor (5 at Central required), and so forth; (for reappointment make clear which year they are being reappointed for).
- Evaluate candidate’s work in each of three areas in terms of the standards; and in relation to others’ achievements, if appropriate (for reappointment, consider how well a faculty member is progressing towards meeting the tenure and promotion standards).
- Have three distinct sections in your letters – teaching, scholarship and creative activity, service.
- Address letters to the Dean.
- The materials in the binder should be the basis of the recommendation.
- If there are split decisions in the committee, write one letter signed by all committee members, and make all views known.
- Make assignment clear – what is this person’s responsibility in the area of scholarship, creative work, teaching, etc.
- Make mention of quality—not just quantity. What is the status of the press, the journal, the venue? Are they appropriate for the discipline?
- In case of tenure, make mention of evidence of future promise.