May 15, 2023

To: Deans, Department Chairs, and Directors
From: J. Michael Collins, Chair, Social Sciences Divisional Committee
Re: Tenure Reviews during the 2023-2024 Academic Year

On behalf of the Social Sciences Divisional Committee, I am writing to alert you to key aspects of the tenure dossier. These are important issues to address with your junior faculty and their mentors, even if you do not have any tenure cases coming up this year in your department/school.

1. **The departmental Chair’s letter is the single most important document** in the dossier. Please take the time to write a concise yet comprehensive review according to the guidelines. Cases that are denied or deferred by the Social Sciences Divisional Committee are often because the Chair’s letter omitted context about the nature of the discipline, the candidate, and the case for innovation and excellence in research, and excellence in teaching or service. The letter must articulate the department’s reasons for supporting the candidate’s promotion and address the future trajectory of the candidate’s continued excellence in research, and teaching/service.

In addition, the Chair’s letter should **summarize the feedback provided from external reviewers and how that evidence contributes to the candidate’s promotion decision.** The letter should address any concerns raised by external reviewers, including any potential conflicts that may suggest a reviewer letter is not an unbiased, external “arm’s length” evaluation. The guidelines require a minimum of five (5) external “arm’s length” letters. The Chair’s letter should describe the reviewer solicitation process. The Committee recognizes that obtaining reviewers is challenging and departments may need to request letters from a large number of potential reviewers to obtain the minimum number of letters. Dossiers may include more than the minimum number of letters, and departments may seek additional letters if any of the letters initially received are not “arm’s length”.

The **Chair’s letter must clearly designate a secondary area of excellence.** This must also include a statement describing how excellence in this secondary area is defined, promoted, and assessed in the candidate’s department. Criteria for excellence in research is often the primary focus of the Chair’s letter, however, **there is an expectation that candidates also demonstrate excellence in teaching or service.** The committee needs to understand what constitutes excellence in teaching/service in the department and how the candidate demonstrates meeting or exceeding those expectations. This is a topic that chairs and mentors should discuss with candidates early in the dossier preparation process.
2. **Reminder on teaching evidence.** Peer reviews of teaching are necessary starting in the first year that the candidate is teaching. It is important for probationary faculty to receive feedback on their teaching so that they can make changes and document improvements over time. The peer evaluation should be based on both a review of course materials (syllabus, case studies, assignments, etc.) and an observation of teaching.

The Social Sciences Divisional Committee encourages these peer reviews to be treated as a critical piece of evidence for the teaching section of the dossier. Departments may consider seeking support from the Division for Teaching and Learning for assistance with reviews and advice on teaching improvements. Peer reviews should occur at least annually, and ideally not always at the beginning or end of the semester when instruction is often more limited. We also encourage using a variety of reviewers, including teaching specialists or teaching faculty, not just tenured research faculty.

Written documentation of each year’s peer evaluation should be included in the tenure dossier. If constructive feedback is given in peer reviews, the Chair’s letter should specify how the candidate used the feedback to improve their teaching.

A [sample peer evaluation form](https://secfac.wisc.edu/documenting-scholarship/) is available on the divisional committee website. See also: [https://secfac.wisc.edu/documenting-scholarship/](https://secfac.wisc.edu/documenting-scholarship/).

3. **Reminder to clarify the candidate’s independent contributions to coauthored research, particularly for cases with a large number of coauthored publications.** The tenure guidelines explicitly request information on the contributions for coauthored publications. This is particularly important when most of the candidate’s scholarship has been coauthored. The dossier needs to show that the candidate is an independent scholar and has developed an area of excellence that is distinct from mentors or senior authors.

The Chair’s letter and the accompanying evidence in the dossier should clarify the candidate’s unique and independent contributions to collaborative research and the role of collaboration in the candidate’s sub-field or discipline. The Committee recognizes that the nature of collaborative work varies by field. If the department or field has norms or standards regarding collaborative or co-authored work, this should be clearly described in the Chair’s letter.

4. **Expectation to include a copy of the department’s tenure guidelines in the candidate’s tenure dossier.** As described in [Faculty Policy & Procedure 7.14.D](https://secfac.wisc.edu/documenting-scholarship/), “Each departmental executive committee shall establish written criteria and standards it will employ in recommending the granting of tenure.”

The Social Sciences Divisional Committee recognizes there may be variation among departments with regard to the benchmarks of excellence, and in the desirable indicators of quantity, quality, and impact of scholarship, teaching, and service. Inclusion of the specific departmental tenure guidelines in the dossier will help the committee to appropriately evaluate candidates, applying the Social Sciences Divisional tenure guidelines in the context of the local standards of the candidate’s department and discipline.
The Committee encourages that internal and external evaluations of candidates focus on the substance of the research, teaching and service, and not overly rely on specific metrics like citation counts or student assessments. Successful dossiers use a wide range of evidence of excellence, with a focus on indicators of quality, originality and the broader contributions of the candidate’s work.

5. **Integrated cases.** The guidelines provide that integrated cases are ones where “the three areas of achievement may be so closely integrated that it is not possible to unambiguously document and assign accomplishments to specific areas.”

The guidelines also include the provision that “it is incumbent upon the department and candidate to demonstrate, with appropriate metrics and supporting documentation, how one activity synergizes with another in a way that creates novel tools, treatments, ideas or knowledge to generate an impact.”

Departments considering an integrated case should consult with the chair of the Social Sciences Divisional Committee as early as possible in the candidate’s tenure clock to discuss the types of evidence that may be included in the dossier. Note also that there are example dossiers available for review.

6. **Reminder about scholarly activity that enhances the Wisconsin Idea, as well as scholarly activity that promotes the inclusion of underserved communities.** The tenure guidelines include a section on scholarly activity that enhances the Wisconsin Idea—meaning work that is performed with, and/or on behalf of, communities. This can encompass community-engaged scholarship specifically, as well as other scholarly activities that promote inclusion.

This does not alter the tenure standards outlined in Section IV of the tenure guidelines, but rather is another way that a candidate can document excellence and the contributions of their work. Note that these forms of scholarship may need more detailed background information for both external reviewers and Divisional Committee members so that they can understand the scholarship involved. This may mean including materials that offer more context on how the candidate performed the work, and how that work relates to community stakeholders.

7. **Reminder on COVID-19 Impact Statements.** Both the candidate and the Chair’s letter have the option of providing a brief statement on how the candidate’s accomplishments in their areas of excellence were impacted by the pandemic. The request for external review letters may also address any impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the process and timing of the candidate’s research, teaching and service.

8. **Streamlined process for senior hires.** There is a “streamlined” process for senior hires who have already have earned tenure at peer institutions or who have very established research, teaching, and/or service excellence (see the tenure guidelines [https://secfac.wisc.edu/tenure/social-sciences-divisional-committee/tenure-documents/](https://secfac.wisc.edu/tenure/social-sciences-divisional-committee/tenure-documents/)).
Before submitting a streamlined case, please first contact the chair of the Social Sciences Divisional Committee. A traditional (non-streamlined) case will be required unless the chair advises otherwise. Streamlined cases require a minimum of three external review letters. Note that departments may need to seek out additional external letters beyond what was submitted as part of the recommendation letters collected during the application process, or plan in advance so that letters are written in a way that can also serve as evidence for a dossier.

Additional Reminders:

- All documents relevant to the submission of tenure dossiers to the Social Sciences Divisional Committee, including the most recent version of the committee’s tenure guidelines and template letters are available at: https://secfac.wisc.edu/tenure/social-sciences-divisional-committee/tenure-documents/

- A number of exemplary dossiers from past successful tenure cases are available for review. To arrange time to look over these dossiers, please contact Divisional Committees Coordinator Michaela Aust (michaela.aust@wisc.edu).

- **Consider submitting your cases early in the academic year.** If there are too many cases for a given meeting, some cases must be postponed to the next meeting. Cases submitted in fall and early winter are less likely to be postponed because of case overload than cases that arrive later in the spring.

The committee welcomes departments/schools to reach out with any questions. The Committee’s priority is that all candidates have a fair and judicious review from this process.

Please contact me (jmcollins@wisc.edu) or Divisional Committees Coordinator Michaela Aust (Michaela.aust@wisc.edu or 263-5741) with any questions or suggestions.