

## CFA's Final Recommendation on External Review Process for Faculty Promotions

TO: Steering Committee  
FROM: Committee on Faculty Affairs  
RE: External Review Process for Faculty Promotions  
DATE: April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2018

### **Background:**

On December 6, 2017, Steering sent CFA a charge regarding external review letters used as part of the process for promotion to professor. The charge noted a concern that had been raised by some faculty members regarding a change in the most recently approved (2017) Reappointment and Promotions Document (“RPD”). As noted in the charge, this concern centered on the fact that certain stakeholders in the promotion process - Deans, the Provost, the President, and some members of a candidate’s PRC - would now have access to unredacted external review letters (and thus know the identity and institutional affiliation of the author) where in the past the procedures stated that the identity of external reviewers would be removed from letters prior to the candidate receiving a copy. Given that these procedures were written and implemented at a time when the candidate’s materials were in paper form and the entire dossier was physically moved through the promotion evaluation process, many campus members inferred that the reviewer’s identity was anonymous to the Candidate, Dean, CPTC, Provost, and President. Under the 2017 revised procedures, external reviewer identities would still be hidden from the candidate, but the other parties have access this information. This change was prompted by testimony raised in an open forum held to address revisions to the 2017 RPD in which certain members of the campus community felt strongly that the identity of external reviewers should be known to deans and other stakeholders. As such, the 2017 RPD contains the following stipulation on page 58:

“Copies of reviewers' reports shall have the name and any other information identifying the reviewer removed, after which the report is provided to the faculty candidate for review and response. The original, unredacted documents shall be accessible to the PRC, Dean, CPTC, Provost, and President.”

This specific change was not highlighted during the approval of the RPD. Therefore after the RPD was approved through the governance process, faculty members expressed concern to Steering that they did not have an opportunity to provide feedback on this significant change to the promotion process. Steering issued a charge to CFA.

## **Charge:**

Steering requested that CFA “take testimony from the faculty and consider its decision to provide the original, unredacted external review letters to the dean, the CPTC, the provost, and the president”. CFA was also asked to solicit testimony from the Dean’s Council and from the Provost. After collecting testimony “CFA should then determine whether its recommendation from May, 2017 should be changed and complete a final recommendation”. Further, “if CFA determines that this recommendation should be changed, the committee should make all edits necessary to Section IV of the RPD, and these should be included in the final recommendation.”

## **Final Recommendation:**

As directed by Steering, CFA collected testimony from the various stakeholders listed in the charge. Testimony from the Dean’s Council was solicited through its CFA representative, Jane Wong, and testimony from the Provost was solicited through its Academic Affairs representative, Ieva Zake. Testimony was collected from the faculty through email, a Qualtrics survey, and an open forum held on April 18th, 2018 (Deans also provided testimony at the open forum and via the Qualtrics survey). These efforts yielded 3 emails, 41 Qualtrics responses, and 12 comments stated at the forum. In the process of collecting testimony, CFA offered four possible suggestions to the issue about the identity of external reviewers:

1. Go back to the original process and make it clear that unredacted letters do NOT enter into the promotion process (thus only the PRC chair would know the identity of the reviewers).
2. Keep change made in the 2017 RPD - the external reviewers are blind to the candidate but revealed to the other evaluators.
3. Everyone (including the candidate) knows the identity of the reviewers.
4. Deans participate in the process of populating the list of external reviewers, but the evaluators (except the chair of the PRC) do not know the identity of the final two selections.

The testimony collected by CFA revealed the following: a) the Deans felt strongly in keeping Option 2 above; b) the Provost felt that given the lack of consensus among campus members that it was best to preserve the policy that was approved last year (Option 2); c) there was a fairly even split among members of the campus community with two large groups in favor of options 1 or 2, with two smaller groups in favor of either options 3 or 4.

CFA carefully considered all the testimony and deliberated at length. The consensus opinion among CFA members was that Option 3 would be the best external review procedure for TCNJ. CFA arrived at this opinion for the following reasons:

- Option 1 (blind review) was problematic because the Deans and some faculty members argued that the external reviewer’s identity was important for “contextualizing” the letter. Although there was disagreement on this position, the value that some members of the campus community put on this information could not be denied. In addition, several stakeholders (including faculty, several deans and the Provost) noted that it is extremely difficult to preserve the anonymity of external reviewers. Testimony also revealed that the procedures were inconsistent across campus in that some candidates had unredacted letters, while others did not. Alternatively, campus members persuasively argued that the principle advantage of this option is that a blind process eliminates the possibility that the reviewer’s identity or institution could bias evaluations. That is, experts will work at a variety of institutions and represent every demographic group. There is ample evidence that shows people are influenced (either consciously or unconsciously) by this type of information.
  
- Option 2 (blind to only the candidate) was problematic because it disadvantages the candidate in the event that the candidate chooses to write a rebuttal to an external reviewer’s letter (a crucial step in the external review process). Members of the campus community argued persuasively that the external reviewer’s identity was important to “contextualize” the letter. Option 2 creates a process where the candidate is deprived of significant information that is available to those evaluating the candidate (PRC, Deans, CPTC, Provost, and President). Just like the Deans and the Provost argued for information “parity” in the promotion evaluation process, a lack of information parity for the candidate could not be justified in CFA’s deliberations. Option 2 opens the possibility that the reviewer’s identity or institution could bias evaluations. Alternatively, the principle advantage of Option 2 is that it creates the opportunity for evaluators to contextualize review letters.
  
- Option 4 (Deans participate in the reviewer selection) was problematic because the Deans argued that they often do not have expertise in the fields in which their faculty work and could not contribute substantially to reviewer selections.
  
- Option 3 (external reviewer identities are revealed to all) was the least problematic option.
  - Option 3 weaknesses:
    1. CFA recognizes that revealing the identity of external reviewers to all stakeholders in the promotions process (including the candidate) risks the possibility that review letters may be less candid or that a potential reviewer would be less inclined to write a letter. However, the Ad-hoc Committee on External Review (2007) surveyed 21 peer institutions and found that the majority of these institutions (70%) revealed the external reviewer’s identity to the candidate. This suggests that it is common practice to reveal the reviewer’s identity; therefore, revealing reviewers’

identities is likely to have a negligible impact on the overall process. In fact, the RPD has language that indicates external review letters are only one part of the process and are meant to inform - but not determine - the promotion evaluation.

2. Option 3 opens the possibility that the reviewer's identity will bias evaluations. This weakness is unavoidable if campus members want the reviewer's identity to contextualize letters, and it also applies to process currently in effect (Option 2). CFA believes that this weakness can be addressed by adding additional language to the RPD to provide evaluators guidance for using reviewer identity to contextualize letters.

- Option 3 advantages:

1. Option 3 addresses the original concern that the external reviewer's identity is important to "contextualize" the letter. Importantly, Option 3 ensures that all evaluators, including the candidate, will have access to the same information (information parity in promotion evaluation) and the ability to contextualize the letter.
2. Option 3 will create a system in which the information for all promotion candidates is uniform. That is, the external reviewer's identities will be revealed for all reviewers for all promotion candidates. Under the 2017 RPD process, the identities for the external reviewers "shall be accessible". Therefore, Option 2 establishes a process where external reviewer identities will be revealed for a subset of reviewers and candidates based upon requests. At the open forum, campus members expressed a desire for a uniform process that could be implemented, and CFA determined that an unequal process was problematic. It is important to note that there is a campus history of striving for a uniform promotion process to ward off situations where evaluators consider candidates with different information. For example, TCNJ had an optional external review process prior to 2011. CFA noted at that time in their recommendation to adopt external review (governance documents 2008-2009) that candidates with and without external review created a problem for the CPTC because the candidates' information was not uniform. The current CFA reasoned that candidates with and without external reviewer identities revealed would be similarly problematic. Option 3 eliminates this significant problem by establishing a uniform process for all promotion candidates. Retaining Option 2 **also** requires submitting redacted letters to the electronic system while at the same time making un-redacted letters accessible to promotion evaluators. Bypassing the electronic system in this way might require changes to MOA #114, which governs electronic submission of promotion materials. At a minimum, procedures for sharing those

letters would need further development of the procedures described in the 2017 RPD.

3. Option 3 is the least controversial. There was a strong divergence of opinion regarding Options 1 and 2. Selecting one of these options would prove unpopular with a large segment of the campus community. CFA did not receive strong opposition to Option 3.
4. Option 3 will be simple to implement. The RPD will require minor revisions, and the un-redacted letters will be submitted by the candidate to the electronic system. Those are the only changes that are needed.

Given this careful deliberation of the evidence, CFA determined that Option 3's advantages outweigh the weaknesses and that it was the best option available. Option 3 satisfies the Dean and Provost's concern for information parity in the promotion evaluation process. Option 3 extends this information parity to the candidate. It will ensure that the information for all promotion candidates is uniform at all levels of the evaluation process. Option 3 was the least controversial and easiest to implement and maintain. Importantly, CFA believes that disadvantages of this process (the possibility for bias to contaminate evaluations, or that review letters might be less candid) can be addressed by including additional language in the external review instructions in the RPD document.

Based on this reasoning, CFA recommends that the external review process be altered to Option 3 - reviewer identities are revealed to all campus members. If this process is adopted, the relevant section of the RPD (Section IV, on page 56 of the 2017 RPD) will need some minor modifications, which are noted in bold font below:

1. Background section p. 56 of the 2017 RPD - "The PRC, deans, CPTC, and Provost are expected to use the external reviews as only one piece of their evaluation of the candidate's scholarly/creative/professional activity. The letters are meant to inform, not determine, the promotion decision. **External reviewer identities are revealed to enable contextualization of the review letter. Evaluators should pay particular attention to the content of the letter and respect the fact that expert reviewers come from all demographic groups and work at a variety of institution types.**
2. On Page 57, Process step #5 "Reviewers Evaluations"  
".....If external reviews are not received by that date, the reviewer will be contacted by the PRC to request immediate submission of the report. **Copies of reviewers' reports shall have the name and any other information identifying the reviewer removed, after which the report is be provided to the faculty candidate for review and**

**response. The original, unredacted documents shall be accessible to the PRC, Dean, CPTC, Provost, and President.** Should a reviewer fail to submit a report or submits a report too late for the candidate to have 14 days in which to make a response prior to the PRC's meeting to make its recommendation, the PRC will treat the candidate's application as complete and non-submission of the outside review will not be deemed prejudicial to the candidate.”

3. On page 58, Process step #7 “Use of Reviewers’ Reports”  
“The PRC, deans, CPTC, and Provost must evaluate the entire body of the candidate’s scholarly/creative/professional activity. The letters are meant to inform, not determine, the evaluation of the candidate’s scholarly/creative/professional activity. More specifically, the letters should describe the evidence that suggests the candidate has established a sustained pattern of achievement and evaluate how the candidate’s scholarly/creative/professional activity has matured.<sup>23</sup> The PRC, deans, CPTC, and Provost should consider the reviewers’ report as only one piece of evidence when determining whether or not the candidate has satisfied the criteria for promotion. **External reviewer identities are revealed to enable contextualization of the review letter. Evaluators should pay particular attention to the content of the letter and respect the fact that expert reviewers come from all demographic groups and work at a variety of institution types.**”
  
4. On page 73, Section “VI. Letter to External Reviewer for Promotion to Rank of Professor Only”  
“...The Department Promotion and Reappointment Committee requests your evaluation as a peer reviewer of the scholarly/creative/professional activity of this candidate. The ~~contents of the~~ reports of the peer reviewers are shared with the candidate, ~~although the identity of the reviewer is kept confidential;~~ and the candidate has the right to respond to the reports as part of the promotion application. If you are willing to serve as a peer reviewer, your review must be received no later than August 15, [year].”

If CFA’s recommendation is implemented, converting from a “blind” to an “unblind” external review process raises important issues. CFA recommends that the unblind process be implemented for the 2019 promotion process because letters to external reviewers for the 2018 promotion process have already been issued. These letters tell reviewers that we keep their identity hidden from the candidates. Importantly, external review letters can be used for a period of 3 years (2017 RPD, p. 58, step #5). This means that a process must be established for any letters gathered between 2015 to 2018 (including the spring/summer 2018 external review letters). CFA recommends that the PRC can write to the external reviewer and ask whether the external reviewer agrees that his or her identity can be revealed to the candidate after explaining our process switched to an “unblind” review. If the external reviewer agrees to have his or her

identity revealed, the letter submitted in the candidate's dossier will be the un-redacted version. If the external reviewer does not wish to have his or her identity revealed, then it will remain blind to the candidate but "accessible" to the Dean, CPTC, Provost, and President.