



Summer 2024

To: Deans, Department Chairs, and Directors
From: Ricki Colman and Vincent Cryns, Co-Chairs of the
Biological Sciences Divisional Executive Committee
Re: Tenure Review Documents 2024-2025

Successful promotion of assistant professors to the academic rank of associate professors with tenure is one of the most important responsibilities of department chairs and senior faculty. The most recent version of the Guidelines for Recommendations for Promotion or Appointment to Tenure Rank in the Biological Sciences is posted on the divisional committee website: <https://secfac.wisc.edu/tenure/biological-sciences-divisional-committee/tenure-documents/>. Please consult these detailed guidelines before and during the process of assembling a tenure dossier. Below is some specific guidance regarding the tenure process. Please share this letter with your assistant professors who are on the tenure track, their mentoring committees, and your department's executive committee.

Mentoring: It is critical that assistant professors have active and engaged mentors. Please ensure that mentoring committees are established for all assistant professors at the beginning of the first year of appointment. We recommend that each assistant professor's mentor committee should include at least one associate professor who has recently navigated the promotion and tenure process within the same division at UW-Madison. Mentoring committees should meet at regular intervals and provide written feedback to the candidate and the department executive committee and other relevant department leaders. We also suggest additional or refresher training for faculty mentors. Each year we hold workshops for assistant professors and mentoring committee members, which provide the opportunity to ask questions about the tenure guidelines and best practices for mentoring. In addition, staff in the UW-Madison Delta Program (<http://www.delta.wisc.edu/index.html>) may help set up mentor training. It is the chair's responsibility to make sure that every candidate is in a position to succeed and ensure that they can have relief from their departmental duties to deliver invited presentations, serve on grant panels, and perform other activities expected of tenured faculty. The chair should confirm that mentoring committee members are willing to commit the time necessary to actively and effectively mentor the candidate, including performing peer teaching evaluations, providing feedback on grant applications, and reviewing the tenure dossier prior to submission. Letters from a peer reviewer who evaluated the candidate's teaching at more than one time point are highly encouraged.

Independence: Assistant professors must establish a record of independent scholarly activity. If a significant proportion of the candidate's scholarly activity is in collaboration with postdoctoral mentors, current faculty colleagues, or a multidisciplinary team of investigators, the candidate's critical role and independent contributions must be clarified and highlighted in the tenure document. Non-arm's length letters from collaborating faculty and prior mentors should also address this issue. The suggested format for requesting non-arm's length letters is provided in the tenure guidelines.

Divisional Committees

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Tenure Clock Extensions: Tenure clock extensions can be requested and are readily granted to faculty members when something beyond their control occurs that could adversely affect their academic work. Extensions are automatically approved for parental responsibility for a new child, but the request to the Office of the Provost must be made in writing. After approval, the candidate can decide whether or not to use the extension. The Biological Sciences Divisional Committee has the same expectations for tenure whether or not extensions are granted or used. The chair's letter should note if the candidate received clock extensions **but should not reveal** the specific circumstances for those extensions.

COVID-19 Impact Statement: All candidates should provide a one paragraph "COVID-19 Impact Statement" that describes how the trajectory of their work in the area of excellence and/or significant accomplishment was affected by the pandemic. For example, a major grant or source of funding was lost due to work interruption or research restrictions. It also is acceptable for the candidate to state that COVID-19 did not substantially affect, or had a positive effect on their trajectory of work.

Outside Letters: Letters of evaluation are a very important component of the dossier. For all letters of evaluation included in the tenure document, the qualifications of the letter writers, their institutional association, and relationship with the candidate must be described clearly. Letters from experienced faculty or other academic leaders are required. It is necessary to list those individuals who were asked but declined to provide letters of evaluation and their stated reasons. The candidate may suggest referees; however, the ultimate selection of letter writers is the responsibility of the department mentoring committee and department chair. At least half of the letter writers should not have been suggested by the candidate. The number of letter writers chosen from the candidate's list and the department's list must be described. The letter from the chair soliciting outside letters of evaluation cannot be prescriptive or leading. A suggested format modeling the neutral tone for this letter is provided in the tenure guidelines. A representative copy of the letter sent to solicit outside evaluations must be included in the tenure dossier. A letter of request that fails to be neutral in tone may lead to a request for additional letters and delay the candidate's consideration for promotion. Letter writers should provide an evaluative assessment of the candidate's accomplishments during the probationary appointment period, not a letter of recommendation or a simple summary of accomplishments. When soliciting outside letters, department chairs should ensure that the inclusive dates of the probationary period under consideration are explicitly stated.

At least five (5) letters must be "arm's length" and come from nationally recognized experts in the candidate's field. More letters are acceptable, but the total should not exceed eight (8). If under unusual circumstances more than 8 letters are received, all of them must be included. Arm's-length experts are scholars who have never published with the candidate, had a significant research collaboration with the candidate, shared grant funds or other financial interests with the candidate, or worked at the same institution with the candidate. Arm's length does not preclude people who have professional acquaintance with the candidate, such as speaking together at meetings, serving together on editorial boards or grant panels, or exchanging research materials. No more than three (3) "non-arm's length" letters are allowed, except under exceptional circumstances. Non-arm's length letters that detail a candidate's unique and independent contributions are highly recommended, especially when the candidate has worked on large and/or multidisciplinary projects or has collaborated extensively with a previous mentor or advisor, to clarify the independent nature of the candidate's work. Additional letters that are non-arm's length may also be valuable to document the impact of a candidate's activities when the dossier is submitted as an integrated case. Letters from peers evaluating teaching are required and do not count toward the total number of letters.

Division of Time: If the candidate's actual activities and division of time differ substantially from those described in the letter of appointment, the chair's letter should provide an explanation. This may be important for faculty with clinical responsibilities that have changed since the time of hire, especially for candidates who have changed tracks since initial appointment.

Excessive Service Obligations: The tenure guidelines state that: “Departments must ensure that probationary faculty, particularly those of under-represented groups, are not required to take on more committee service and advising responsibilities than their peers, potentially compromising their ability to develop a strong record of scholarly accomplishments.” Given the recent success of cluster-hire initiatives in which interdisciplinary faculty have been recruited to campus, it is especially important to monitor the progress of assistant professors who may have to answer to more than one department for teaching or service needs so that these faculty don’t shoulder undue or unequal burdens.

Preparing the Document: It is the responsibility of the department chair to ensure that the tenure dossier is prepared correctly for presentation to the Biological Sciences Divisional Committee. There are two ways to make a case for promotion: 1) excellence in one area (research, teaching, or outreach/extension) with significant accomplishment in a second area (research, teaching, outreach/extension, or service); and 2) an integrated case in which the candidate’s overall impact on the field results from the integration of work across two or more areas.

The chair’s cover letter is critical to this process and should describe the expectations for a successful tenured faculty member in their discipline or department and how the candidate meets these expectations. In other words, the chair’s letter provides the necessary context for evaluation of the dossier. The chair’s letter should (i) highlight the candidate’s scholarly contributions to their discipline and the factors predicting that the candidate will continue to make strong contributions in their areas of excellence and significant accomplishment; (ii) educate the committee about discipline-specific practices; (iii) clarify non-traditional career paths that the candidate may have taken, and (iv) directly address potential limitations/weaknesses in the dossier, including explanations of any mitigating circumstances such as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. If this is the first cover letter you have been tasked to prepare as department chair, please do not hesitate to ask for advice from former members of the divisional committee or contact the divisional committees coordinator (divisional@secfac.wisc.edu) in the Office of the Secretary to view sample dossiers and sample chair’s letters.

Improper or lax preparation of the tenure document is unacceptable as it can detract from the well-earned scholarly accomplishments of the candidate. The tenure guidelines provide clear instructions for assembling documents for a complete dossier. A well-prepared dossier ensures that the candidate receives the fairest evaluation possible; missing or incomplete documentation can create problems and delays in assessing the merits of a case for promotion. Please use the [Checklist of Materials for Tenure Recommendation](#) when preparing tenure dossiers. The primary purpose of the checklist is to avoid delays in making the tenure recommendation. The Biological Sciences Divisional Committee evaluates each candidate based only on what is included in the tenure dossier. The committee will not seek additional information about the candidate through either web-based searches or communications with references.

Streamlined cases: Many senior hires have long since achieved the qualifications for tenure at UW-Madison. Preparation of the same type of dossier that an assistant professor submits for promotion burdens candidates and departments and can hinder the hiring process. Moreover, the difficulty of obtaining student or peer teaching evaluations and other historical teaching data from other institutions also leads to dossiers that cannot be completed with the same level of detail as for candidates with years of experience teaching here on campus. To overcome these challenges, the Divisional Committee offers a streamlined process for compiling dossiers in the case of senior hires to be appointed with tenure. Please see the tenure guidelines for more information.

Sample dossiers and chair letters are available for review in the Office of the Secretary of the Faculty. Please contact Michaela Aust (michaela.aust@wisc.edu or 608-263-5741 with questions or to schedule an appointment to view sample dossiers.)

Thank you for helping ensure that our assistant professors on the tenure track have the best chance to be promoted at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.