

May 19, 2015

To CAS Department Chairs:

On behalf of the outgoing and incoming Promotion and Tenure Committees, we write to express the committee's concern with the implications of UMW's online course evaluation system and to urge departments and department chairs to take a more active role in mitigating them. Most online evaluations now have unsettling low response rates, rendering the quantitative data—both for individual courses and for departmental and college-wide averages—virtually meaningless. As a result, P&T cannot rely on these scores as useful measures of teaching effectiveness, a point the committee has communicated to both the Provost and the Dean of Arts and Sciences. Those seeking promotion—particularly those seeking tenure—must find alternative indicators of their qualities as educators. There are many, including peers' classroom evaluations, descriptions of innovations and activities in APRs, reflection on students' qualitative evaluations, and syllabi and assignments that illustrate effort and dedication to student learning, all of which P&T recognizes as demonstrable evidence of teaching effectiveness.

Based on the review of tenure files over time, some departments are quite clearly adept at mentoring junior faculty and helping them build broad and effective bases for tenure. Others, however, are less effective. In the recent past, some candidates from the latter have been able to make their cases for teaching based almost entirely on student evaluation scores. Given the problems with the online evaluations, this is no longer the case: candidates who use such a strategy would seriously harm their chances for promotion and tenure. The inability of our current student course evaluation system to provide adequate information demands that departments take a stronger role in helping junior faculty develop their tenure portfolios.

Toward this end, P&T would like to highlight first the importance of mentorship, particularly sustained mentorship. Such sustained mentoring will help junior faculty members develop as educators, plan research agendas within the demands of heavy teaching and service loads, and build multifaceted cases for teaching, scholarly, and service effectiveness. Second, the committee would like to emphasize the importance of the APRs. The FAAR-APR process may seem pointless given the demise of merit pay increases, but it continues to have a vital function with respect to promotion and tenure. P&T pays very careful attention to the APRs, as these can help illustrate a candidate's qualities and, importantly, their evolution over time. Robust descriptions thus can be essential elements in each candidate's file.

We hope that you will work within your departments to construct or improve upon your mentoring plans for junior faculty.

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