Selection of External Referees for Promotions and Career Reviews.

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Introduction

Promoting and properly reviewing the School’s faculty is arguably the most important action that the School takes in its pursuit of quality and excellence. It is the recognized excellence and dedication of the faculty that will attract the best students, at all levels, and will gain the respect of our peers. A key element of that most critical decision of promotion and reward is the opinion of our competitors and other intellectual leaders of our fields. It is imperative that all our faculty, certainly all tenured faculty, be considered by their respective professions as world leaders, the best or at least among the very best. It is for that reason that we must seek the most honest informed opinion from external referees or letter writers.

Several general principles should guide the selection of letter writers:

1. We must respect their time. To do so we must select them carefully so at no time we find ourselves in a situation of discounting opinions.
2. Letter writers must be able to provide an honest, independent opinion in confidence.
3. Letter writers must be sufficiently informed, and given sufficient time, to provide a letter that goes into substance and detail. Letters full of platitudes are as useless as letters that are dismissive.
4. Letter writers should be credible, with well established reputations and from well-recognized institutions.

Referees selection guidelines and processes

As the above implies, the selection of external referees requires the utmost care on behalf of the candidate and the department. In simple terms, we want to be judged by the best people in a particular field. Therefore, the proposed referees should have a strong record of accomplishments and recognition in their research areas. They should hold the appropriate rank and have the experience to evaluate the proposed action (i.e., a tenure case should be evaluated by tenured associate or full professors, with strong preference for full professors; a promotion to full professor should be evaluated by full professors with sufficient years in that rank). Distinguished referees from industry or national labs are welcomed but letters from academicians should make the bulk of a case.

The expectation is that the referees will come from top-quality institutions whose particular program (in the candidate’s area) is considered of higher stature than UCI’s equivalent program. It is understood, however, that unusual situations may occur where a highly respected individual is in a program not as well recognized as UCI’s, or in a foreign university whose stature may not be obvious. Such selections should be properly documented, as is the case for all the referees. Nevertheless, the set of proposed referees is expected to represent a significant number of highly recognized institutions.

Referees should come from a variety of universities from across the nation and not be confined mainly to University of California campuses. Referees from foreign universities must come from major well-recognized global institutions and must understand the American academic system.
Career-review actions such as Merits to Professor Step VI and Above Scale require a certain number of referees from UC (typically two) who understand these distinctions. However, even in those cases, we expect to see a diversity of institutions represented.

The initial selection of referees is done by the Drafting Committee in consultation with the Chair. Form AP-11 is filled out with the names of the referees and summary of their qualifications to judge the candidate. The statement of qualifications should be written carefully, and should be succinct and to the point (pasting the person’s web site is generally a poor approach). It should include major accomplishments and awards, and explain unusual situations as mentioned above. The recommended numbers of referee letters that are received are as follows: 8-10 for tenure cases; 6-8 for promotions to full professor; 5-6 for other major actions. It is advised that the initial list of proposed referees contain about twice the number required so that a meaningful screening can be done. The candidate should provide no more than half of those names (in the final selection of referees, the majority should come from the Department). Form AP-11 is then forwarded to the Dean’s office.

The Associate Dean and Dean will review the information in AP-11. The review will be based on the guidelines given above and consider the following factors: (1) referees should come from high-quality, competing institutions, and (2) the yield should be very high – failure to write generally has a negative connotation and requesting additional letters is fraught with bias. In the rare situation that the review results in a concern or questions relative to the interpretation and consistent adherence to guidelines the Associate Dean and/or the Dean will consult or seek clarification from the Department via the Chair. In this process, suggestions of additional names (by the department or the dean) for the list may be made. As stated previously the need for clarification/consultation should be a rare occurrence. Chairs and Departments are encouraged to ask questions about guidelines interpretation when any doubt arises about possible letter writers. Consultations, when they occur, are meant to be constructive dialogues with the department leading to the selection of the best possible referees for the benefit of the case at hand. The ultimate authority and responsibility for the selection of external referees rests with the Department.

It is imperative that all departmental communications to/from external referees be done by the Chair’s office. This task should not be delegated to anyone else. It would be inappropriate for the candidate, or any other faculty member except the Chair, to be communicating to potential referees on the subject of the candidate’s promotion.