

# Promotion and Tenure: Best Practices for Department Chairs

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# Best Practices: Academic Unit Letter

- Provide Context: unit's status, national position, aspirations, directions, needs
- Critical review and analysis of evidence (not simply repetition of the case). Link this assessment to unit criteria.
  - Evaluate quality and impact of scholarly/creative work
  - Evaluate volume of scholarship/creative activity
  - Clarify candidate's contributions to collaborative projects
- Respond to problems in the record – don't ignore them
- Help readers understand the quality and impact of journals/juried exhibitions
  - Citation counts
  - Data on quality of journals/other venues (e.g., rejection rates, if official journal of national association, ranking of presses in the field, etc.)
  - Review of books
  - Competitive grants (and reputation/quality of funding agency)

# Best Practices: Academic Unit Letter

- Comparison to peers nationally (in candidate's cohort or recently tenured cohort)
  - Present comparative data reflecting quality and level of productivity
- Teaching effectiveness
  - Include and discuss summary of teaching evaluations, mentoring activities, peer review or other evidence of teaching/mentoring effectiveness
- Interdisciplinary collaborations
  - Include letter from chair of collaborative unit(s)
    - Clarify nature of collaboration (e.g., research, student mentoring)
    - Evaluation of quality and impact of scholarship from perspective of second field

# Best Practices: Academic Unit Letter

- Clarify unit expectations and disciplinary culture re: individual and joint authorship and disciplinary norms regarding order of authorship
- Clarify process if there are two department votes (e.g., committee and full faculty or all faculty at given rank)
- If committee vote is split, provide both positions in one letter, signed by all (so individual votes cannot be identified by candidate if s/he reads committee letter)

## Example: Good Academic Unit Chair/Director Letter

TO: Denzel Washington, Dean  
FROM: Clint Eastwood, Chair/Director  
RE: Promotion to Associate Professor with tenure for Dr. Beyonce Knowles

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide my interpretation of the credentials of Dr. Beyonce Knowles who is applying for tenure and promotion to Associate Professor in the Department of Best Cutting Edge Discipline at Virginia Commonwealth University. Dr. Knowles was hired by VCU in 2013 after completing her Ph.D. In her 6 years at VCU, Dr. Knowles has significantly exceeded our department's criteria in all three areas of research, teaching, and service. Not only is our departmental recommendation unanimous, but the outside letters of support also are unanimously supportive. I am pleased to strongly endorse these recommendations - in my view; few young scholars have accomplished what Dr. Knowles has accomplished. She has set a new standard for our junior faculty, one that few are able to achieve.

Department Standards for Tenure/Promotion to Associate Professor. To receive a positive recommendation for interim evaluations or for promotion and tenure, the candidate must be evaluated, minimally, as average in research, teaching, and service with an above average ranking in research and teaching. Furthermore, all faculty are expected to conform to a high standard of personal and professional ethics. More specifically, promotion to the ranks of Associate Professor requires demonstration of the following:

- Refereed publications
- Creativity and independence in research
- Demonstrated competence in subject matter as evidenced through teaching and mentoring
- Effective service to Department, College University, and community
- Evidence of professional service and activity (e.g., active participation in related professional associations, editing/reviewing for professional journals, speeches, presentations at national professional conferences)
- National recognition (e.g., recognition by established leaders in the candidate's field of her/his contributions, service on editorial boards or on professional organizations' boards, service of review panels for professional organizations or the government)

## Example: Academic Unit Chair/Director Letter (continued, page 2)

Interpretation of Outside Letters. All of the external reviewers of Dr. Knowles' credentials are successful senior faculty members at major universities, and are scholars of national reputation in Cutting Edge Disciplines or related fields. All of the reviewers know Dr. Knowles professionally, but none have such close associations with her that would endanger an objective evaluation. Significantly, all of the reviewers indicated that Dr. Knowles is worthy of tenure and promotion. Persistent themes in these letters reflect the fact that Dr. Knowles is considered to be: (1) a researcher who had made significant contributions to the field of cutting edge #1, cutting edge #2, and cutting edge #3, and cultural issues related to these, (2) an established scholar who is addressing important topics of scholarship, (3) a researcher whose publications are in highly respected journals with high rates of rejection, and (4) a well-rounded scholar who has served her profession, her students, and her university well.

... Her work is viewed as programmatic, seminal, original, and sophisticated. Importantly, all of the reviewers explicitly recommended that she be granted tenure at VCU and that she would be very likely to achieve tenure and promotion at their institutions, some of which are the finest in the country. Impressively, two of the reviewers are editors of top-level journals. The reviewers also consider Dr. Knowles to have made significant contributions in instruction and service. These are significant sources of support as these individuals are highly experienced in reviewing and evaluating the work of many individuals. As such, it is clear that she is viewed as one of the most accomplished young scholars in the country and all reviewers feel that her potential in the future is even greater...

## Example: Academic Unit Chair/Director Letter (continued, page 3)

Significance/Quality of Research. Dr. Knowles' research focuses primarily on issues related to the linkage of cutting edge discipline with a traditional discipline. In this work, she integrates rigorous conceptual and methodological models that allow her to examine interesting developmental processes. All external reviewers noted the sophisticated and strong theoretical and methodological rigor of her work, and the impact it has had. As noted by one reviewer, "although her vita gives evidence of great productivity, it does not show just how pervasive her impact on the research in her field has been." Impressively, Dr. Knowles has taken on a leadership role in her work - as evidenced by her first-authored publications and her role as a Principal Investigator on a large federal grant that she was awarded. Moreover, this funded work focuses on X, thus contributing to our understanding of diversity and culture.

Dr. Knowles has published a total of 21 peer-reviewed journal articles or book chapters... Importantly, she is publishing her work in some of the top journals in the field (e.g., Cutting Edge Journal, Journal of Cutting Edge Research, and Cutting Edge Quarterly). **These are highly respected journals with rates of rejection 80% or greater, and are the top-ranked journals in her field of study.** Most impressive is the consistency she has shown in both the quality and quantity of her research publications. She also has had significant exposure of her work through her 42 presentations at national meetings, as well as her participation in a number of invited conferences, symposia, and research workshops. Additionally, Dr. Knowles has proven herself to be an excellent mentor of graduate students and evidence of this is provided in the number of students who are co-authors on her papers and presentations...

## Example: Academic Unit Chair/Director Letter (continued, page 4)

An overall picture of Dr. Knowles is that of a highly motivated investigator who is pursuing high-quality lines of research for which she has become highly recognized. Although much of her scholarly work has been a collaborative effort between Dr. Knowles and her mentors from Well-Respected Public University, it would be a mistake to question her independence and autonomy. The fact that she is first author on many of her published pieces, and her role as the PI on her federal grant, attest to her role as a leader in this work. Moreover, she has taken a leadership role in her other work with VCU colleagues and students.

In summary, Dr. Knowles has exceeded the research criteria for tenure and promotion in our department. Her research accomplishments demonstrate that Dr. Knowles (1) has a clearly defined, programmatic, and independent research program, (2) contributes significantly to the knowledge base in her field through scholarly publications in top-quality journals and through presentations in conferences and workshops, (3) is recognized by peers for her contributions to the field and has established a national reputation as an outstanding researcher and scholar, and (4) continues to show progress and promise as a researcher and leader in her field of study. Thus, Dr. Knowles is considerably above average in research quality and productivity



## Example: Academic Unit Chair/Director Letter (continued, page 5)

Teaching. Dr. Knowles has developed into an effective and versatile instructor. She generally teaches two courses each semester; however, at various times she has received course reductions to pursue her research (spring, 2016, 2017, fall, 2018, and spring, 2019). She teaches moderate- and large-sized undergraduate upper-division courses, as well as small, intensive graduate courses.

Our student evaluations consist of two components: (1) a rating of the instructor - focusing on aspects such as knowledge, responsiveness, and respect for students, etc. and (2) a rating of the course - focusing on aspects related to grading, text, level of work, etc. (NOTE: in our evaluation rating system, lower scores reflect better evaluations.) Based on these evaluations, Dr. Knowles has demonstrated consistently positive teaching evaluations. Across all classes, Dr. Francis has an overall instructor rating of 1.36 (out of 5). The evaluation of the class component of her courses averaged 1.61. Based on our 5-point scale (with 3 reflecting average performance), Dr. Knowles is consistently well above average and is generally in the top third of the ratings... More detailed information on the department evaluations is available for the past 3 years (see Table 1). Comparisons of Dr. Knowles' overall ratings the past 3 years revealed that her mean evaluations are generally better than those for the entire department. This is true when comparing her scores for undergraduate or graduate courses. Her evaluation scores also are at about the mean levels of those at the same rank and better than the average ratings for those faculty at the next rank of Associate Professor (see Table 1). Thus, Dr. Knowles is perceived by our students to provide high-quality instruction across a wide variety of courses and assignments. (Table Containing courses, mean teaching evaluations per course compared to department averages ).

The second formal instructional evaluation used in the department is a review of Dr. Knowles' syllabi and course materials. Based on the materials provided, it is clear that Dr. Knowles is an innovative, rigorous, dedicated teacher, who demonstrates a commitment to student success...

## Example: Academic Unit Chair/Director Letter (continued, page 6)

Professional Activities and Services. In our department, we try to limit the service responsibilities and expectations of our junior faculty, particularly in their early years. Despite this, Dr. Knowles has made exceptional service contributions... She has been a valuable member of some of our most important departmental committees ... and has been an active member of some of our search committees.

One of the most important service contributions Dr. Knowles has made is in her commitment to service to her profession. The most visible evidence of this is her role on the editorial board of *Cutting Edge Quarterly*--one of the premier journals in the field...

Chair's Recommendation. Based on the criteria established in our department for tenure and promotion, I strongly agree with our review committee that Dr. Knowles has met and surpassed these criteria. She has established a nationally recognized program of research and scholarship, she is an outstanding instructor and mentor of students, and she is a valuable department citizen who is participating in her scholarly and service responsibilities at the national and state levels. Her record of teaching, research, and service exceeds our criteria for tenure and promotion. All external reviewers concur with this conclusion and recognize the potential for her continued contributions in research, teaching, and service. She is recognized as one of the most promising researchers in her field and her record of accomplishments is considered exceptional.

In addition, our department depends greatly on Dr. Knowles' contributions. Her role in our department is critical to our graduate program and finding someone who is as competent and collegial as Dr. Knowles would be difficult. This attests to the critical significance of Dr. Francis's contributions and value in the department.

In summary, without hesitation I believe that Dr. Knowles' record of performance and accomplishments surpass our criteria for tenure and promotion. I strongly support her application for tenure and promotion and recommend that she be granted both.

# Preparing Strong Files: External Letters

- Selection of reviewers
  - Deciding who to ask:
    - Reviewers from unit's identified peers or equivalent
    - If reviewer is not from a peer school, explain why this reviewer was selected
    - Full professors or other exceptionally well qualified evaluators are best
  - Who *not* to ask:
    - Anyone who has a close relationship with candidate (e.g., dissertation committee member, co-author)
    - The greater the relational distance with the candidate, the better
  - Chair consults with dean prior to final selection of (10) reviewers

# Preparing Strong Files: External Letters

- Strategies to increase probability of quality reviews (evaluation vs. praise)
  - Request detailed analysis and evaluation of the quality of the candidate's scholarship/professional activities and their impact on the candidate's field
  - Compare candidate to others in the field or subfield who are at the same point in their careers
  - Evaluate suitability of tenure and/or promotion based on VCU departmental criteria and at your institution

# ACADEMIC SENATE REQUIREMENTS (4/15/85) FOR SOLICITATION OF OUTSIDE LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

- The chair/director and dean proposes reviewers, and the candidate proposes reviewers. Reviewers ultimately solicited will represent both lists equally. All reviews received will be included in the candidate's file.
- Evaluations are solicited by the unit chair/director from persons of high reputation in the candidate's field.
- The reviewer is asked for a statement regarding his or her acquaintance with the applicant,
- Guidelines with specific questions are furnished to each reviewer so that the evaluations will have a consistent format and can be utilized objectively. Attached is a suggested template for the outside letter; ***units may modify as needed.***
- In order to give the reviewer an opportunity to develop a quality response, the reviewer shall be given at least 45 days to respond; a longer time period for response is strongly recommended.
- External letters are part of the evaluation of research, publication, and creative activity.

## Example #1: External Letter (Positive but not helpful)

Monday July 1, 2003

*Chair Suggested*

Professor Smee  
Chair, Science Department

Dear Dr. Smee:

It is a pleasure to help evaluate Marie Curie for promotion to Associate Professor and tenure at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, VA.

I do not know Dr. Curie personally, but am aware of her work from the literature. The work is relevant to our studies on the significance of neural pathways in \_\_\_\_\_. I believe that her published work is excellent; she uses sophisticated methods to characterize \_\_\_\_\_. I have been particularly impressed with her recent studies in the area of \_\_\_\_\_.

Dr. Curie's published studies are of consistently high quality and the and the systems she has set up are fertile ones. Though her studies represent basic research, they have clear implications for understanding \_\_\_\_\_. Dr. Curie's work is at the cutting edge of research in this area. For all these reasons I strongly recommend Dr. Curie for promotion and would offer a similarly strong recommendation were she being considered for an analogous promotion at my own institution.

Sincerely,

Peter Pan, Ph.D.  
Professor, University of Minnesota Medical School

## Example #2: External Letter (More info, but not very specific)

Dr. Professor Snowflake:

I am writing with my evaluation of Dr. A. W. Peabody's dossier and application for promotion and tenure. Dr. Peabody has established a strong track record of teaching, research, and professional service, and based on those I would consider him to be qualified for promotion to the rank of Associate Professor.

As I have not directly observed Dr. Peabody's teaching or service, I will focus below on his research. However, I think it's worth commenting in passing that Dr. Peabody's CV attests to his strengths in these other areas. Dr. Peabody has taught a large number of courses, ranging from star interpretation to research methods in astrological phenomena to planetary influence. He has chaired more than 21 MA and Ph.D. thesis committees, and served on many others, reflecting his success as a mentor of advanced graduate students. With respect to professional service, Dr. Peabody has an extensive record of involvement in the wider profession (e.g., with the National Astrologers Review Board) as well as service to the university.

Dr. Peabody's research interests have focused on the burgeoning area of the application of the internet in astrological prediction, investigating the extent to which technology inhibits or helps the accuracy of such predictions. Through detailed analyses of the workload of practicing astrologers, Dr. Peabody shows that the internet is an important influence in this area. These findings are especially important for informing current practice in the training of future astrologers. Dr. Peabody has published the results of this research in a Suitably Important Ivy League Press, and in various articles. I expect that this line of research will continue to be profitable for some time to come, and that it will have an important influence on test development.

In sum, Dr. Peabody has developed a reputation for careful scholarship, in addition to his exemplary records in teaching and service. Based on these contributions, he would be eligible for promotion and tenure at other universities that I am familiar with. Please feel free to contact me if you have any additional questions I could help with.

## Example #3: *Excerpt* -- Critical yet Positive Review

**Despite my positive comments, I would be remiss if I didn't point out what I see as some of the problems with Professor Einstein's model.** He makes a rather strong claim that "Heidegger's theory stresses the contextual nature of parenting" (p. xx). Actually, the theory as set down by Heidegger does not make such a claim: rather, it is some of the modern interpreters of the theory, such as William Shakespeare, John F. Kennedy, and Mel Gibson, among others, who have made the case for contextual competence. This may seem like a minor point, but I don't believe it is, because it is at the heart of the growing controversy between contextualists and theorists.

I want to be clear, however, that I am not arguing that Professor Einstein is completely inaccurate in his assertion, since it is possible to find support for the contextual model with a liberal reading of Heidegger, but it is not accurate to say that it is Heidegger's theory per se that supports such a contextualist stance. Somewhat more problematic is that despite his nice discussion of the Biological Aspect of Parenting (BAP) and the need for gynecological tests to take into account of this important construct, I am not able to determine how the BAP actually fits into his model. If the BAP were to be part of the new model he suggests, it would mean that conceiving children and parenting children would not be independent activities. Finally, I cannot agree with his broad claim (p. 555) that "in general, individual parents rely solely on their personal family environment for parenting strategies." While some parenting couples do depend on their families to determine how to raise their children, many couples are more expansive. For example, age, ethnicity, education, and family economics often result in parenting situations in which the participants look for help outside the family boundaries. **Although the book is not without its problems, I continue to believe that it is an important step in theoretically and empirically challenging the intellectual bias against parenting.**

**In conclusion, I would recommend that Professor Einstein be promoted and tenured,** He has produced and is likely to continue to produce a coherent body of research in an area, parenting, that is gaining in importance and relevance as researchers come to recognize the power of parents to affect, directly and indirectly, people's lives.



## Example: Academic Unit Personnel Committee Letter

(Descriptive. Needs more evaluative/critical commentary - IMPACT???)

To: Academic Unit Chair/Director  
From: Academic Unit Personnel Committee

The members of the Academic Unit Personnel Committee unanimously support Dr. Chris Minions application for promotion to associate professor to tenure.

Professor Minions has demonstrated an original, even “cutting edge” research agenda through his well developed record of publications at this point in his career. He is the second author of a book, has published 5 chapters in scholarly books, twelve articles in refereed journals (2 as single author), and another 6 articles and technical reports in non-refereed publications. He has been prolific in writing funding proposals, with 3 funded internally and 1 funded externally. He has delivered more than 60 presentations, half of them as sole author.

Dr. Minion’s instructional activities are equally impressive. He has developed 3 new courses and modified 2 existing courses. He is mentoring 5 doctoral students and serves on the committees of 12 other doctoral students. He has also offered one of his courses as an online course. Dr. Green’s student evaluations of instruction are very strong (most courses in the 4.5-5.0 range, and one in the 3.5 to 4.0 range on a scale of 1-5 where 5 is highest). He has received a college teaching award and observations of his teachings were all very positive.

Dr. Minions has also excelled in the area of service. He has served on 3 editorial boards, as guest reviewer for numerous publications, and as reviewer for 8 books - all indications of the respect in which he is held by the field. He has served on numerous departmental and college committees and 2 University committees. He has numerous community service activities on his CV as well.

Letters from 4 external reviewers who are leaders in the field were received. All expressed overwhelming support for Dr. Minions’ tenure and promotion to associate professor.

## RECORD OF OUTSIDE LETTERS FOR VCU TENURE OR CONTINUING STATUS AND/OR PROMOTION

Candidate's Name: *Minnie Mouse*

Academic Unit: Science

<i>Name of Referent</i>	<i>Affiliation &amp; Position</i>	<i>Peer Inst. (Y or N)*</i>	<i>Reason for Invitation/Professional Qualifications/ Relationship to Candidate</i>	<i>Suggested by: *(check one) Candidate Chair/Dean</i>	
<b>Francis Bacon</b>	Department of Science, Indiana University, Distinguished Professor of Science		Internationally recognized scholar in candidate's field/None		X
<b>Rosalind X. Franklin</b>	Department of Science, Pennsylvania State University, Professor & Head		Internationally recognized scholar in candidate's field/None		X
<b>Alice Einstein</b>	Department of Science, University of California at San Diego, Associate Professor		Internationally recognized scholar in candidate's field/None	X	
<b>Professor Plum</b>	Department of Science, East Stroudsburg University, Associate Professor		Internationally recognized scholar in candidate's field/None	X	
<b>Sir Isaac Newton</b>	Department of Science, University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana, Professor		Internationally recognized scholar in candidate's field/Dissertation Chair	X	