

Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on External Letters of
Support for Promotion and Tenure within IANR
February 3, 2009

Committee Members:

Don Adams, West Central Research and Extension Center [WCREC] – Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture/NU Vice President/IANR Vice Chancellor's Council [VCC]

Jay Barbuto, Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communication/College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources Advisory Council

Fred Baxendale, Entomology/Committee on Policy for Appointment and Promotion [CPAP]

Jim Brandle, (Chair) School of Natural Resources/CPAP

Rolando Flores, Food Science and Technology-Food Processing Center/VCC

Marilyn Fox, Hall County Extension-Southeast Extension District/IANR Liaison

Committee

Rick Funston, WCREC- Animal Science/CPAP

Julie Johnson, Child, Youth and Family Studies/VCC

Nancy Lewis, Nutrition and Health Sciences/College of Education and Human Sciences Faculty Advisory Council

Roger Mandigo, Animal Science/CPAP

Walt Schacht, Agronomy and Horticulture/CPAP

Charles Shapiro, Northeast Research and Extension Center – Haskell Ag Laboratory/IANR Liaison Committee

Anne Streich, Agronomy and Horticulture/CPAP

Kim Todd, Agronomy and Horticulture/Extension Faculty Advisory Committee

Brett White, Animal Science/Agricultural Research Division Advisory Council

Gary Zoubek, York County Extension-Southeast Extension District/CPAP.

In early October, Vice Chancellor John Owens appointed the ad hoc committee to review the IANR policy on the use of external letters for promotion and tenure decisions within the Institute. We were asked to: **compare and contrast the benefits and liabilities of external reviews as a required part of IANR's continuous appointment (tenure) and promotion process** and to present its findings to the Vice Chancellor's Council meeting in February

The Committee recommends that:

- 1) the decision of whether to require external letters of support for promotion and tenure within IANR be left to the faculties of the individual units within IANR;
- 2) each department or unit engage in an in-depth discussion of the merits of requiring letters in their respective units;
- 3) the IANR Committee on Policy for Appointment and Promotion develop Institute guidelines for seeking external letters; and

- 4) each unit develop departmental policy within IANR guidelines which will govern the solicitation and use of external letters of review in the promotion and tenure process within each unit and that this policy be approved by the faculty of the unit.

In reaching this recommendation, the Committee identified a number of assumptions, benefits, limitations and consequences of seeking external letters of support. There were a number of views expressed and we have tried to reflect the diversity of opinion in identifying those issues which might be considered by departments or units as they discuss whether or not the unit would require external letters.

1. The units within IANR represent a wide variety of disciplines and functions (teaching, research, extension and outreach, scholarly service and direct service to their stake holders - for example, the Nebraska Forest Service). In several of the larger units, there is also a wide variety of both discipline and function.
2. Within a unit, any policy on external letters should be consistent for all faculty within the unit seeking a specific action - for example, tenure, promotion to Associate Professor, or promotion to Professor. It is possible that individual units might decide to require letters for promotion to Professor but not for tenure and/or promotion to Associate Professor.
3. External letters may come from either individuals who have a working knowledge of the candidate's work or from review of information sent to the reviewer by the Departmental P&T Committee. As such, they can provide independent review of the candidate's achievements, provide information which strengthens a case for tenure or promotion, provide information of potential weaknesses of the candidate, and provide a measure of the national reputation of the candidate.
4. External review provides an opportunity for faculty within IANR to be recognized by their peers in that reviewers with expertise in the candidate's field but who may not be familiar with a candidate's work will have an opportunity to assess a candidate's work and thus recognize the abilities of the candidate and the stature of the IANR.
5. External letters provide verification of the impact of the candidate at the national and international levels. This impact verification comprises: (1) identification of the national and international relevance of the field of work (research, teaching and extension) of the candidate; (2) characterization and verification of common issues presented by the candidate (i.e. funding availability, relevance of selected topics, journal usage, etc.); and (3) evaluation of the impact of a given discipline in the scientific community and/or benefit to the stake holders.
6. There was considerable discussion and disagreement over whether or not external letters tend to be more relative to those with large research appointments. Faculty with large teaching or extension appointments may be disadvantaged either by a lack of national recognition or by the lack of a national reputation of the reviewer. Would comments made by a Nebraska rancher or farmer on an extension faculty be considered in the same light as those made by a leading national researcher on a research faculty member?

7. The question of whether external reviewers know a person better than the internal P&T Committees was discussed briefly. The point was made that every faculty member is reviewed annually by their P&T Committee and a report on "Progress toward Promotion and Tenure" is provided to each faculty member and the Unit Administrator. Some of the committee felt that these long-term records provide a better indication of the accomplishments of the faculty member than a one time review by an external reviewer.

8. External reviews are often viewed as "objective evaluations" of a faculty member's performance; however the potential for abuse of the review process is still present. Extreme care must be taken in the selection of reviewers. It is possible to select an external review panel so as to give a predetermined response, either positive or negative. In the end, the promotion and tenure process is dependent on the integrity of the Unit's P&T Committee.

9. The issue of faculty time involved in the process was also raised. This applies both to the members of a Unit's P&T Committee as well as the time of the external reviewer. Many of the committee have served in this capacity and noted the time it takes to carefully review a file and to prepare a letter of review. As more demands are made on faculty time for the review process, other activities are impacted.