Letter Writing

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Introduction

- Much of what will be presented today may appear to be common sense.
- Our experience is that too often common sense is not used when writing important letters or other documents.
- While we want to write a good letter, several factors can interfere.
Introduction

• Factors interfering with good letter writing:
  – Lack of time
  – Pressure
  – Emotional involvement
  – Carelessness
  – Not knowing/understanding relevant procedures and guidelines
• Review policies and guidelines that pertain to the purpose of the letter.
• Use precise language to prevent misunderstanding.
• When possible, mirror the language in the specific policy or guideline.
• Be brief and to the point.
General Comments

• Stick to the facts that lead to your conclusion.
• Cite examples or refer to specific data to support your statements.
• Is your observation quantifiable?
• Avoid overgeneralizations and platitudes.
• Do not refer to anything illegal (FMLA, absences due to illness, gender, ethnicity, age, disability, etc.).
Writing Critical Letters

- Identify specific issue(s) that need to be addressed.
- Review appropriate policies and guidelines.
- Make sure you have applied policies and guidelines consistently to everyone.
- Make sure issues are timely.
Writing Critical Letters

• Describe the behavior that needs attention:
  – Can it be quantified?
  – Refer to pertinent policy or guideline.

• Focus on the primary issue that needs to be addressed. Do not cite everything that needs correcting.

• If possible, in responding to a complaint, resist the urge to respond to everything.
Writing Critical Letters

• Avoid personal and insulting language and overgeneralizations, especially overgeneralizations about character.

• If problem is on-going:
  – Can you support your conclusion that it is?
  – Have you followed existing guidelines in dealing with the problem in the past?
Writing Critical Letters

• If problem is on-going:
  – Do annual appraisals refer to the problem?
  – Are there communications from you or others to the faculty member that address the problem?

• State what needs to be done to resolve the problem.
  – Provide specific and concrete goals.
  – Goals should be reasonable.
  – Ensure that goals address the problem.
Writing Critical Letters

• Indicate that you want the faculty member to succeed and that you hope your comments improve that possibility.
• Maintain confidentiality.
• If uncertain, consult with the dean who has a wider view of policy and procedure.
Third Year Review/Promotion and Tenure/PPE Letters

• Provide full and detailed review of the candidate’s performance.
• Provide independent evaluation but consider the DFRAC recommendation.
• Succinctly amplify points in the DFRAC report where there is agreement and fully explain differences in opinion.
Third Year Review/Promotion and Tenure/PPE Letters

• Provide context of candidate’s work within the discipline and the needs of the department.

• Provide analysis of the candidate’s contributions in teaching, research/scholarly/creative activity, and service:
  – Adhere to departmental and college guidelines in conducting evaluation.
  – Provide supporting evidence/data.
Third Year Review/Promotion and Tenure/PPE Letters

• Discuss aspects of the case reviewers outside the discipline may not be aware of:
  – Accepted standards for publishing
  – Importance of contribution in collaborative activities
  – Quality and impact of venues
  – Significance of citation numbers
  – Significance of teaching activities
Third Year Review/Promotion and Tenure/PPE Letters

• Discuss aspects of the case reviewers outside the discipline may not be aware of:
  – Department student mentoring expectations.
  – Significance of professional contributions
  – Willingness to serve on committees, etc.

• Compose a succinct recommendation statement.
Third Year and PPE Letters

• For Third Year reviews:
  – Consider your letter as important as a promotion and tenure letter.
  – Recommend continuation only for those faculty who, in your judgment, have a legitimate chance to earn tenure.

• For PPE reviews:
  – Reference department expectations and workload policies as these may vary across departments and colleges.
Written Reprimands

• Apply general thoughts presented throughout this presentation.
• Consult with the dean, Legal Affairs, EOS, HR