

**Report of the College of Arts & Sciences ad hoc Committee on Policies and Procedures  
regarding the Retention Process for Probationary Faculty  
January 25, 2011**

**Executive Summary**

On 10/5/10, Dean Bursten charged a committee composed of tenure-line faculty from all three ranks and all four divisions of the College to 1) establish the meaning of a positive faculty vote on the retention of a probationary faculty member and 2) to recommend as needed best practices for the policies and procedures pertaining to the retention process for probationary faculty in the College. The Committee solicited the views of department heads and, through the department heads, of tenured faculty, about the retention process and the meaning of the faculty vote. Response was robust, and deeply informed the committee's deliberations.

The committee concluded that the annual retention review process has two principal goals, neither of which is now consistently understood or addressed across the College. These are: 1) to engage the voting faculty in a deliberate appraisal of their probationary colleagues' performance, so that their decision clarifies the unit's shared sense of needs and mission rather than being perceived as a rubber stamp or a waste of time; 2) to give to the probationary faculty member an accurate, concrete and constructive assessment of that individual's progress toward meeting departmental criteria for tenure.

**Recommendations:**

- 1) That the following statement on the meaning of the "yes" vote on retention i) be distributed to voting faculty along with the probationary faculty members' materials, and ii) be read at the faculty meeting where the vote is held.

*"Since tenure is granted only by explicit action of the Board of Trustees, all other votes and evaluations in the process are advisory. The vote and evaluation of the tenured faculty are advisory to the head and to the dean. Since the faculty does not see the completed dossier, including external evaluation letters, until the tenure dossier is assembled, no sure inference can be made from a retention vote about whether the faculty will be able to support the application for tenure. Within this context, your positive retention vote means that you believe that it is reasonable to assume that the individual will be granted tenure if certain explicitly specified performance objectives are met before the faculty vote on the tenure dossier."*

- 2) That probationary faculty members' materials be made available to the voting faculty in hard copy and through secure web site at least two weeks before the meeting at which the retention vote is held.
- 3) That the report of the tenured faculty's discussion use the supplied fixed format (*See "Specific Recommendations," #3, below*) to ensure the clarity and continuity of the record, and that this document not simply duplicate any faculty mentor report.
- 4) That successive annual evaluations at all levels use clear and consistent performance criteria. Under no circumstances should new or different performance criteria be introduced at the time of the tenure vote.
- 5) That the process for mandatory peer review of teaching comply with all prescriptions of the *Faculty Handbook* and *Manual for Faculty Evaluation*, and exclude the faculty mentor as a formal evaluator. Departments whose processes exceed those requirements should be encouraged to continue to do as they are doing.
- 6) That an updating of the dossier required for the enhanced review be allowed to satisfy the reporting requirement for subsequent retention reviews.

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**Membership:**

Prof. Katherine Grzywacz-Jones (Physics), David Houston (Political Science), Nathan Sanders (EEB), Gerald Schroedl (Anthropology), Urmila Seshagiri (English), Deborah Shmerler (Art), Christopher Craig (Classics)(chair), Associate Dean John Zomchick (ex officio).

**Background:**

Dean Bursten established this committee because of these concerns: a) There seems to be no common understanding among the faculty, or in some cases within the faculty of a given department, about what a positive annual retention vote for a probationary faculty member means. b) This lack of consensus or clarity has led to unpleasant surprises. A probationary faculty member might assume that an unbroken succession of positive retention votes by the tenured faculty would indicate that there would be a positive tenure vote. In several cases, a uniform set of positive annual retention votes has been followed by a negative faculty recommendation on the tenure dossier. c) In this landscape, the new language in the current [\*Manual for Faculty Evaluation\*](#), Section I.B.1.c, concerning the different meaning of a positive faculty vote in the enhanced review and subsequent reviews could be easily misconstrued. The Dean accordingly felt it imperative that all stakeholders have a common understanding of what the annual faculty retention process is meant to accomplish, and of how the process can most effectively proceed.

**Charge:**

Accordingly, on 10/5/10, Dean Bursten charged the committee to 1) establish the meaning of a positive faculty vote on the retention of a probationary faculty member and 2) to recommend as needed best practices for the policies and procedures pertaining to the retention process for probationary faculty in the College.

**Procedure:**

To insure a proper knowledge base for our deliberations, the committee distributed on 10/13/10 an email questionnaire to solicit the views of department heads on the way that annual retention votes are handled in their units and to ask for suggestions on how the process might be improved. The committee further asked the department heads to distribute to their tenured faculty another questionnaire asking them to characterize what a “yes” retention vote on a probationary faculty member meant to them. Further faculty response was solicited at the Arts & Sciences Advisory Council meeting on 11/16/10. Response to these queries was robust, with 14 department heads and 74 faculty members answering. The faculty responses, while thoughtful and well considered, revealed both a wide range of views and, in a few instances, a skepticism about the usefulness of the annual retention process. The committee met twice, on 11/9/10 and 12/6/10, to discuss

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these widely varying responses, to come to consensus on general conclusions about the current landscape, and to frame recommendations.

**General Conclusions:**

The annual retention review process has two principal goals, neither of which is now consistently understood or addressed across the College. These are: 1) to engage the voting faculty in a deliberate appraisal of their probationary colleagues' performance, so that their decision clarifies the unit's shared sense of needs and mission rather than being perceived as a rubber stamp or a waste of time; 2) to give to the probationary faculty member an accurate, concrete and constructive assessment of that individual's progress toward meeting departmental criteria for tenure.

To address both of these goals, it is important to note that the required annual yes-no vote is not helpful without the voting faculty's feedback in the form of the group's concise and well reasoned assessment of the probationary colleague's strengths and weaknesses, as well as recommendations for needful future actions if the probationary faculty member is to be successful. This well considered feedback, combined with that of the department head and of the dean, is essential for the successful functioning of the process. At each level--voting faculty, head, and dean--it is key that the feedback be internally coherent; changes in the evaluation of a probationary faculty member from year to year must be supported by a clear rationale that is consistent with the statements and expectations contained in previous evaluations.

There is broad concern among voting faculty to streamline the annual retention process. This concern was echoed as well by the probationary faculty member on the committee. As long as the annual retention process is mandated in its present form by the [\*Faculty Handbook\*](#) (Sections 3.8.2, 3.11.3.4) and the [\*Manual for Faculty Evaluation\*](#) (Section I), there is little that can be done to reduce the annual time commitment of all involved. Recommendation #6 below is one small improvement.

**Specific Recommendations:**

- 1) In order to clarify to all concerned the meaning of a positive retention vote at every point in the process (whether before or after the enhanced review stage), this statement should be circulated to voting faculty with probationary faculty materials before the annual retention vote, should be copied to the probationary faculty member when circulated, and should be read at the meeting in which the faculty discussion and annual retention vote take place:

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*Since tenure is granted only by explicit action of the Board of Trustees, all other votes and evaluations in the process are advisory. The vote and evaluation of the tenured faculty are advisory to the head and to the dean.*

*Since the faculty does not see the completed dossier, including external evaluation letters, until the tenure dossier is assembled, no sure inference can be made from a retention vote about whether the faculty will be able to support the application for tenure.*

*Within this context, your positive retention vote means that you believe that it is reasonable to assume that the individual will be granted tenure if certain explicitly specified performance objectives are met before the faculty vote on the tenure dossier.*

2) To ensure timely access of voting faculty to probationary faculty member's materials:

*A probationary faculty member's materials should be made available to the voting faculty at least two weeks before the meeting at which the discussion and vote are held. No faculty member should ever have to abstain from discussion or voting because of lack of prior access to these materials.*

*As a best practice to ensure ease of access for all voting faculty, these materials should both be posted electronically on a secure, password-protected site and be made available in hard-copy in a location easily accessible to all voting faculty.*

3) In order to sustain the integral importance of a serious faculty discussion to the retention process mandated in the [Faculty Handbook](#), Section 3.11.3.4, and to facilitate continuity in charting the probationary faculty member's progress:

*The report of the tenured faculty's discussion that accompanies the report of their vote should be in summary (bullet point) rather than narrative form. This report should contain, in this order:*

- a) a specific and concrete list of the probationary faculty member's strengths, including recent contributions in the fields of teaching, research/scholarship/creative activity, and service*
- b) A specific and concrete list of the areas in which the probationary faculty member is expected to show progress/improvement before the time of the faculty's tenure vote.*
- c) An accompanying list of specific actions that, in the judgment of the faculty, would help to advance that progress/improvement.*
- d) Any supplemental narrative that the faculty may wish to add. This narrative should not be in the form of a raw transcript, but should be cast by the faculty member charged to record the meeting in a form that reflects the substantive concerns of the faculty.*

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***NOTE: According to the appendix on the best practices on faculty mentoring in the [Manual of Faculty Evaluation](#) ( p. 70), the faculty mentor is to serve as an advocate. Accordingly, the faculty mentor's report, while it may contain some information that the voting faculty wishes to include in their report, is not co-extensive with that report. If the faculty mentor or mentoring committee does offer a written report, it should be clearly labeled as such and should be included in part d.***

- 4) Consistency of judgments is necessary at each decision-making level in the annual retention process and, subsequently, in the evaluation of the tenure dossier, in which the annual retention reviews are included. The probationary faculty member should have no reasonable grounds for surprise at the criteria that inform a decision at any level.  
Accordingly:

***The four independent advisory decisions in the College's retention and tenure process, the tenured faculty's, the head's , the College Promotion and Tenure Committee's (for tenure only) and the dean's , must take account of the performance criteria set forth in the probationary faculty member's previous retention decisions. Under no circumstances should new or different performance criteria be introduced in evaluations and decisions at the tenure stage.***

- 5) To address significant differences across departments in the peer review of teaching:

***Mandatory peer review of teaching during the probationary period should, at a minimum, be conducted in accordance with the instructions and best practices recommendations of the current [Manual for Faculty Evaluation](#), Section IV.B.3.b and pp. 62-63. Because the best practices appendix on faculty mentoring in the [Manual for Faculty Evaluation](#) (p. 70) makes clear that the faculty mentor is primarily an advocate, the probationary faculty member's faculty mentor should be excluded from a formal role in this mandated evaluation of teaching.***

***There are also in place in several departments more frequent and less formal processes to help probationary faculty improve teaching. Some require participation of the faculty mentor while others do not. Nothing in this recommendation should be taken to discourage the continuance of these extra efforts to help the probationary faculty member improve her/his teaching.***

- 6) To help streamline the process within the structure dictated by the Faculty Handbook and the Manual for Faculty Evaluation:

***In the construction of the "pre-dossier" for the enhanced retention review described in the [Manual for Faculty Evaluation](#), Sections I.A.2.a and I.B.1.a, the committee recommends that probationary faculty members be guided by the available templates for the construction of the promotion and tenure dossier. These templates can be found***

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*in Appendix B of the Manual for Faculty Evaluation and on the College of Arts and Sciences website, at this location:*

*<http://www.artsci.utk.edu/faculty/DossiersTemplates.pdf>. In order to minimize labor for the probationary faculty member, the enhanced dossier, updated annually as needed, should satisfy the probationary faculty member's reporting obligation for all subsequent retention reviews.*