

generous honoraria could motivate “more negative or on-the-fence referees to write,” but there is no substitution for the careful reading of candidates’ files by more senior faculty members and administrators.

Opheim also recognizes the logic of Weyland’s argument. She points out that departments almost surely would be expected to pay for a portion of the honoraria. The money being saved from not investing in poor promotion candidates—that is, the non-incurred costs of the “false positives”—does not lead to the availability of ready, present-day funds for honoraria. Opheim agrees that paying reviewers would “certainly encourage prominent

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scholars” to accept a task not tied to their ongoing research, but she notes that this may be a matter of institutional and disciplinary norms. She found from her experience as associate provost that external reviewers for engineering candidates often wrote critical or negative letters, notwithstanding the absence of any financial inducement.

Having conducted a study of my own department’s promotion process during a 12-year period (which I report in my separate response), I found that the quality and quantity of external letters *are* a significant problem. I am mildly supportive of honoraria, on the principle that external reviewers should receive some compensation for what is a consequential and time-consuming commitment. Twice I have received \$500 honoraria for writing external letters; in neither instance did the honorarium motivate me to write a more thorough or more rigorous letter than I might have otherwise. However, on both occasions, I felt better about writing the letter; I was appreciative of the professional recognition of my efforts, not unlike the honoraria book publishers give for manuscript reviews or those that departments give for program evaluations. I suspect the larger problem, however, is one of numbers: too many letters are being solicited from relatively few qualified senior scholars. I conclude by offering two suggestions as to how the number of external reviewers could be increased.

There is rightly no specified criteria for promotion, given its holistic nature and the unique qualities of each candidate up for promotion. Faculty may conduct their research in collaboration with others or they may work on their own. They may focus on books, on both books and articles, or on articles exclusively. Furthermore, the apparent difference between those who produce at a high rate and those who have a shorter CV may conceal trade-offs between quality and quantity. This may reflect the fact that the volume of published research might depend on the type of research that candidates do, the kind of data they collect, and the originality of their projects, among other factors. Then there are teaching, service, grants, public outreach, community engagement, and other factors that figure in departments’ and institutions’ decisions. Departments, colleges, and universities have their own distinct priorities and promote accordingly. Just as clearly, institutions will use the external-review process in different ways.

#### NOTE

1. External recruitment may be another such an instance, especially as it may coincide with a change in rank, but it is not mandatory or automatic. Annual reviews and post-tenure reviews may be holistic, but they do not as a rule involve a close reading or comprehensive assessment of faculty members’ published scholarship.

#### RESPONSE TO SPOTLIGHT ON PROMOTION LETTERS: REFLECTIONS ON THE CHANGING ACADEMY

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Although this proposal raises an intriguing question related to the present utility of external reviews in promotion and tenure decisions, its conjectures regarding the cause—and therefore appropriate solutions—seem problematic. Kurt Weyland assumes a universal institution while reflecting the perspective of only elite universities, and he presumes that less-stringent evaluations have resulted in uniformly positive assessments of candidate portfolios. The claims made in “Promotion Letters: Current Problems and a Reform Proposal” are empirical—more specifically, external reviews hold less value in decision making because they are now of lower quality and almost uniformly positive. However, the only evidence provided for this claim is discussions with colleagues, personal observations, and references to that “mystical past” when universities were uniquely about quality and the life of the mind.

I am concerned about these references to a time when higher education was so much better because (1) this critique of deterioration and frivolousness is made about every new generation by every aging one; and (2) people like me (based, in my case, on gender and class) typically were not included in higher education. I do not accuse Weyland of this rationale; I simply note that the existence of this more robust, romanticized past as compared to our more contested and messy current reality can rarely be documented. Instead, I suggest that there may be other reasons why external reviews tend to skew more positively than merely a decline in their quality. One change I have observed in more than 25 years as a full-time academic and a department chair at three different types of institutions (i.e., private Midwestern, public Southern historically black, and

Mid-South regional comprehensive) is that we do a better job anticipating who will not proceed successfully to tenure. Most institutions now expect a more rigorous third-year review, which gives faculty members who may not be successful at tenure and promotion the time to migrate to institutions that better fit their academic priorities. At my current institution, the promotion and tenure committee and the department head both provide annual feedback to all tenure-track faculty members. Universities have become more precise at measuring and stating tenure and promotion expectations, and the committees have more precise guidelines as well as training about what they can and cannot consider in their decision making. We also allow for a wider range of types of institutions of higher education and accept a broader definition of a successful and productive academic; this means that the template of what is a promotable or tenurable faculty member allows for more variance. These factors could result in greater self-selection or midcourse corrections prior to tenure decisions or mean different types of academics (those who wish to focus on teaching over research, for instance) can now be tenured.

Another factor that has influenced this landscape is that a wider variance of universities now requires external reviewers as part of the tenure and promotion decision. As more insti-

Because this discussion relies so heavily on personal experience, I find it intriguing that many external reviewers—especially those from more elite institutions—want to determine whether my candidate for promotion could receive tenure at their institution—an unasked for and frankly irrelevant conclusion. We want to know the impact and potential of the candidate's scholarship, and we will decide if that evaluation meets our standards and expectations. As Weyland notes, these standards can hardly be universal.

The proposal for payment that he devises also raises concerns. For a department (like mine) seeking three external reviews for each candidate, the cost is \$6,000. When three of my colleagues go up for tenure and promotion in 2021, I would face an \$18,000 hit to my departmental budget. If this recommendation is only for well-endowed institutions, Weyland should be clear about that instead of assuming a universal scenario. More to the point, in the current system he describes, the strongest candidates (or best connected) are able to garner reviews regardless of their institution. In his "pay-to-play" proposal, there is no merit—merely the best endowed are reviewed. To me, this is an even less-reliable system for the discipline than what we currently embrace. If we collectively agree that we have a problem with the external-review process, then before we endorse a specific solution, we should bet-

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tutions demand these reviews, and because the recent waves of retirements have decreased the ranks of full professors who can meet this need, the pool of faculty capable of providing detailed, thorough reviews may have become shallower. The proposal of paying more for the external review of a faculty member's scholarship than we usually pay for an external program review may change only the nature of the problem, if one exists, rather than resolve it.

I am not sure why the inability to secure reviews of a faculty member's scholarly record does not serve as peer review. If a faculty member comes up for tenure and the department cannot find an adequate number of reviewers willing to evaluate their colleague's research output, the professor's network and significance of their contribution already may have been evaluated.

I have one other concern regarding the presentation of this proposal. Kurt Weyland assumes a perspective on academia in which universities that are "top" house "lead scholars with higher academic standards" and all the remaining academics are merely an "unimpressive list of evaluators." What a narrow and depressing way to view the diverse realm of higher education! Different institutions have diverging missions, and excellent—as well as mediocre—scholars can be found in all types of programs. In seeking reviews for my tenure and promotion candidates, I look for scholars familiar with the research questions on which my faculty publish and who know that literature well. The specific institution where the scholars are housed is less significant than their CV.

ter understand the problem. An empirical question can be better measured and more clearly defined than by mere conversations and reminisces with friends who most likely work in similar environments. The discipline is broader than the relatively few more-elite institutions, and the question of how to best determine the next generation of tenured political scientists is worthy of a disciplinary-wide answer. ■

#### **RESPONSE TO SPOTLIGHT ON PROMOTION LETTERS: A SOLUTION IN SEARCH OF A PROBLEM?**

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I am pleased to have an opportunity to respond to Kurt Weyland's article titled "Promotion Letters: Current Problems and a Reform Proposal." The article addresses an important topic that is fundamental to the tenure and promotion process: the veracity of external-review letters. According to Weyland, external reviews have lost their value because they are disproportionately positive and devoid of thorough and candid critique. To resolve the problem, he recommends that the profession raise the honorarium for reviews to \$2,000. For Weyland, a more generous honorarium likely would give universities "the undeniable right to receive a thorough, professional evaluation, which would dispassionately measure accomplishments and promise, or the lack thereof" and make it more likely that "leading scholars" would be more