

Promotion and Tenure at Mississippi State University

Procedures and Guidelines

Office of Academic Affairs

Academic Ranks at Mississippi State University – A faculty member of professorial rank must have a professional or terminal degree appropriate to the discipline (or the equivalent in training and experience), a strong commitment to higher education and to the mission of Mississippi State University, and a willingness to assume the responsibilities and obligations appropriate to a university faculty member.

Tenure/Tenure-track Academic Ranks Include:

Assistant Professor: A faculty member with a terminal or professional degree (or the equivalent in training and experience) in the discipline and a potential for successful teaching, research and/or creative achievement, and service.

Associate Professor: A faculty member who has met the criteria for assistant professor, who has consistently demonstrated an ability to perform at a satisfactory level in teaching, research and/or creative achievement, and service, and who excels in at least one of these. Based upon the criteria established in the departmental promotion and tenure documents, an associate professor is developing a national reputation, and is showing potential for sustained contributions to the university and to his/her profession or field.

Professor: A faculty member who has met the criteria for associate professor, who has consistently demonstrated an ability to perform at a satisfactory level in teaching, research and/or creative achievement, and service, and who excels in at least two of these areas. Based upon the criteria established in the departmental promotion and tenure documents, a professor is expected to have a national reputation in the person's area of expertise.

Defining Excellence – MSU defines excellence for consideration of promotion from assistant to associate professor as scholarly activity in teaching, research, or service that has led to a developing national reputation. MSU defines excellence in consideration of promotion from associate to full professor as scholarly activity in teaching, research, or service that has achieved a national reputation. For promotion to full professor candidates must have a second area of excellence but a national reputation is not required for this area; excellence is judged locally according to departmental, college, and university standards.

Areas of Excellence – The area of excellence follows from the candidate's performance and/or assignment. For promotion to either associate or full professor, the candidate must be rated as excellent in at least one area of scholarship (teaching, research, or service) where he/she is developing (associate), or has developed (full), a national reputation. In cases where a faculty member's assignment has been heavily weighted in one of the three areas – by budget or agreement with the department Head – it is generally expected that this area will be defined as an area of excellence. Similarly, a rating of excellence in an area with a minor assignment will generally not fulfill the area of excellence requirement for promotion from assistant to associate professor.

What is Scholarship? – The general route to a national reputation is scholarship whether it is the scholarship of teaching, the scholarship of research, or the scholarship of service (i.e., the Boyer model). Generally, scholarship follows the patterns below:

- Scholarship is the creation of new knowledge.
- Scholarship requires the expertise of the faculty member within his/her discipline, and the work makes a contribution to the discipline.
- Scholarship must be disseminated in an appropriate way (journals, books, exhibits, conferences, etc.) and be subject to critical evaluation (i.e., peer review).
- Successful scholarship is often recognized through awards, external funding, appointments to positions of responsibility in professional societies, etc.

In this context, service is an area that can be especially problematic. While all faculty members are expected to participate in routine departmental and university service, this type of activity rarely produces anything that is peer reviewed, and it is generally not the type of activity that leads to the development of a national reputation. As a consequence, untenured, but tenure-track, faculty should not be overburdened with routine service duties. Of course this is to be distinguished from the scholarship of engagement which is service-oriented scholarship that generally fulfills the bullets provided above.

Standards for Excellence – Departments may include examples of standards for promotion within their departmental guidelines that provide information about requirements and expectations for departmental endorsement. However, these standards are guidelines since judgment concerning the national impact of a candidate's scholarship will ultimately rest with the individuals involved in the promotion and tenure process (departmental promotion and tenure committee, department Head (or Director), college promotion and tenure committee, college Dean and Provost in making their recommendations to the President.

When to Apply and Time in Rank – The IHL Board requires that tenure-track assistant professors be considered for tenure in their sixth year; failure to apply for tenure during the sixth year will result in a terminal contract for the seventh year. While promotion to associate professor without tenure can be considered before the sixth year, such action is considered "early" and only considered for especially strong cases. The MSU promotion and tenure document states "no specific term in any rank is required for promotion to the next, but a reasonable time must elapse for the faculty member to demonstrate sustained productivity and have it confirmed by annual evaluations." For promotion from associate to full professor, action prior to a candidate's fifth year is considered early and such action will only be considered for especially strong cases.

Credit for Prior Work – Faculty joining MSU who have held tenure-track appointments at peer institutions may be awarded credit toward tenure and will have their probationary periods adjusted accordingly. In this context, previous scholarship may contribute toward tenure and/or promotion; however, an appropriate body of work accomplished at MSU is generally expected as well.

External Letters – External letters will be solicited from professionals in the field who can provide an impartial evaluation of the candidate’s work and accomplishments. Although it is expected that four to six letters will be included in the candidate’s dossier, all letters received must be forwarded with the dossier, and a sufficient number of letters should be requested so as to produce a minimum of three responses. External reviewers should be informed that, insofar as possible, the letters will be treated as confidential and access will be restricted to those involved in the promotion and tenure review process. Candidates may not know the identity of the external reviewers but the general content of the letters should be discussed with the candidate by the department Head or Chair of the departmental Promotion and Tenure Committee.

The external reviewers will generally be tenured professors at MSU peer institutions, or more prestigious institutions, and should not include former advisors or colleagues with whom the candidate has had frequent collaborations (exceptions to the latter may include cases where details about the relative contributions to collaborations may be helpful). Occasionally reviewers may be selected from government or industry but these should not make up the majority of the letters. Generally letters from campus colleagues should not be included except to explain collaborations or where colleagues may have been involved in a formal peer review process (e.g., teaching observation, etc.).

Typically, external reviewers are selected from two lists: one provided by the candidate and the other developed by the departmental (or unit) promotion and tenure committee or the head. At least one of the reviewers should be selected from the candidate’s list although the candidate should not be informed as to the identity of reviewers actually used from either list. The promotion and tenure dossier that is forwarded from the department should include a sample copy of the letter sent to reviewers, and a complete list of the reviewers contacted with brief statements as to their credentials. Also note which reviewers were selected by the candidate.

Finally, potential reviewers should be contacted in advance to secure their participation before sending materials, and they should receive the materials with adequate time to complete the review. Of course external letters will normally focus on areas considered to be scholarship whether that be the scholarship of teaching and learning, the scholarship of research/creative activity, or the scholarship of engagement/professional practice. Other contributions that do not produce materials subject to peer review are best evaluated internally.

What to Send to External Reviewers – The decision concerning materials to be sent to external reviewers should be made jointly by the candidate and the appropriate departmental representative (Head, Committee Chair, or designee). However, at a minimum, the reviewers should be furnished with the candidate’s updated CV and especially any other materials in addition to the CV that address the candidate’s developing or established national reputation. Examples of materials that might be included are portfolios, statements about teaching philosophy, research/creative activity agenda, and/or engagement/professional practice programs.

A copy of the section within the MSU Faculty Handbook that outlines the criteria and guidelines for the promotion and tenure process should also be included. In addition, a succinct statement about the general criterion for promotion/tenure, a statement about confidentiality, and a request for information concerning any past association of the reviewer with the candidate should also be included. (see sample letter below). Internal documents, such as annual reviews by the department Head, or P&T committee evaluations, should not be included.

Sample Letter to Reviewers – Consistency is important in the promotion and tenure process and the evaluation of dossiers at the college or university level is best served by external reviewers responding to similar requests. We ask that all departments use the sample letter below insofar as possible.

-----SAMPLE-----

Dear XXXXX

The department of XXX in the College of XXX at Mississippi State University is considering the promotion (or promotion and tenure, or tenure) of name of candidate to the rank of Associate Professor (or Full Professor), and we have enclosed a dossier that includes a vita and other supporting materials. Your candid evaluation of this candidate's work and accomplishments will be of great help to us in this important process.

While the relevant section of the MSU Promotion and Tenure Document is enclosed (or the whole document, or the Web site), we expect an individual promoted to associate professor to be developing a national reputation and showing potential for sustained contributions to the university and to his/her profession or field (or in the case of promotion to the rank of professor: we expect an individual promoted to the rank of professor to have a national reputation in his/her profession or field). Your evaluation of the quality and quantity of the candidate's achievements, and the impact of his/her scholarship in teaching, research/creative activity, and service/engagement will be of considerable importance to us. And while we consider all of the work and accomplishments of candidates being considered, we give special consideration to work completed while in current rank.

As you begin your letter, would you please describe your relationship with the candidate? We would appreciate knowing whether you know the candidate, and for how long and in what context.

Insofar as legally possible, your letter will be treated as confidential and access will be restricted to those involved in the promotion and tenure review process.

We wish to thank you for your willingness to serve as an external reviewer. Promotion and tenure decisions are among the most important things that we do within the university and your help is greatly appreciated. In order to make full use of your comments we ask that your response be returned no later than insert date.

Forwarding the Completed Dossier – The promotion and tenure dossier that is forwarded from the department should include a sample copy of the letter sent to reviewers, and a complete list of the reviewers contacted with brief statements as to their credentials. Such statements should especially address any cases where a reviewer might be selected from less than a peer institution. Also note whether a reviewer was selected from the candidate's list or the department's list. Of course all letters received must be forwarded with the dossier.