

I. An Administrator's Guide for Personnel Cases

Helpful personnel letters contain the following types of information:

- Explanations of the criteria for success in the particular field. How appropriate is the press that published this person's work? What is the meaning of, for example, being given 20 nights of viewing time at different observatories? Is a regional conference invitation to speak as appropriate or important as a national one? In a professional, service-oriented field, how important is "applied" as compared to "pure" research? What are the norms for success, particularly in emerging fields?
- Information about the best journals and publishers or other outlets in the field for disseminating scholarship. Where does the candidate's work appear?
- The departmental letter should not identify extramural reviewers directly or indirectly (by professional standing, institutional affiliations, or role in the candidate's career). All such information should be given on the coded list of the referees. The only referee information that the departmental letter should contain is the number of extramural letters requested, the number received, and the number that are UC familiar. These numbers should NOT include any specifics about which were chosen by the department vs. candidate, or which are UC familiar.
- Evidence showing the national impact of the candidate's work on practices in the field.
- Descriptions of any award or fellowship won by the candidate explaining its prestige in the field, the level of competition, and what the award is likely to mean to the future of the candidate.
- Evaluative and descriptive comments about the quality of the candidate's department and college service. Was the candidate a good committee member or simply a noncontributor on several committees? Did the candidate use initiative in serving UCSB, the community, or the profession? Was the service well chosen, was it well done, did it make a valuable contribution, did it tie in with the candidate's research?
- Description of any unique characteristics of this person's work as related to the department's goals. Are there reasons that UCSB needs to make a special effort to reward the individual? On the negative side, was there evidence that the candidate's interests and allegiances lie elsewhere or are counterproductive to the outlined goals of the academic unit?
- Explanations of the particular role that the candidate fills in the academic unit and a judgment of how successfully the person fills that role. In a role or a field where there was

no possibility of making a nationally recognized contribution, good letters explain why this is the case and give the basis for judgment used in the academic unit.

- Descriptions of special challenges faced in teaching. For example, did the candidate teach large lecture sections of required courses, which usually get lower student ratings than do smaller classes? Did the candidate develop new courses or have an unusual number of preparations? Were the courses taught off-campus or under other unusual circumstances?
- The significance and importance of technical reports and field guides that may be published under conditions of less than rigorous peer review.

The evaluative comments below may help those responsible for supporting letters:

On Documentation of Teaching Effectiveness

- Supplement student comments with information about how the faculty in the department are evaluated and compared with each other.
- The data submitted to demonstrate teaching effectiveness should include a summary and some indication of how well the faculty member scores in relation to colleagues. Departmental averages on critical questions should be listed for comparison.
- The documentation and evaluation should not be inconsistent. For example, the chair's letter rates teaching effectiveness as outstanding but the evaluations show that she is only a solid or good teacher.
- Diligence in the teaching mission is an essential characteristic for UC advancement. Are low ratings due to technical weaknesses or disinterest and lack of concern?
- Do not praise a faculty member's personality without also showing a relationship to the specified criteria.

On Documentation of Scholarly Productivity

- Whenever possible, provide evidence for the acceptance of in-press items.
- Include information on the quality of the journals in which the faculty member publishes. Which are first and second levels? What are the acceptance rates? How are specialty journals viewed?
- If a decision to recommend the faculty member for promotion is largely based on a book, include copies of reviews.

- If statements made on other candidates from the same department indicate that publishing a book is necessary for promotion to full professor, an explanation should be given if the same criteria are not appropriate to this faculty member's specialty.
- All units need to show the criteria on which their faculty are judged. The department should provide information to show that the faculty member has a national reputation or even how a national reputation is judged in a particular discipline.
- Especially in cases where there is a minority report or mixed vote, there is a need for careful explanation and documentation.

On Extramural Letters

- Care should be taken to ensure that the appropriate language from the Red Binder is used to solicit letters on candidates at different ranks.
- Letters should be analytical as well as honest. If a number of the letters give no detailed analysis of the candidate's work, the department should consider soliciting additional letters before submitting the case. This will avoid delay once the case reaches reviewing agencies.
- All promotion cases should include at least two letters from reviewers who are "UC familiar;" in other words, who are or were UC faculty and understand the criteria for advancement at the University of California.
- For merits or appointments to Professor Above-scale, letters from international scholars are an important indicator of the required scholarly qualifications. It is also highly desirable to have letters from faculty familiar with these steps and their criteria. Letters from Assistant or Associate Professors are rarely appropriate for candidates for the full professor level, unless there are unusual circumstances. The case can also be considerably strengthened by the solicitation of letters from National Academicians, Royal Society Fellows, endowed chair professor, medal winner, etc. If letters from UC-familiar faculty are not possible, please indicate why.
- Any extramural letter received via email should include the email and the attachment.
- The letters should be coded to match the list of reviewers contained in the case (e.g., if Professor Smith is Reviewer A, Professor Smith's letter should be clearly marked "A").
- If peer comparisons are provided, it is very helpful to know where the peers are located and what is their rank.

On Giving a Balanced Presentation of Strengths and Weaknesses

- Address any weaknesses or cyclical events in the candidate’s publication record.
- Include an explanation of cryptic or paradoxical statements, e.g. “...is a strong teacher although appearances in class are irregular,” or of any statement that conflicts with other comments or is otherwise unsubstantiated.
- Whenever possible, negative votes should be explained in the departmental letter on the basis of the faculty discussion of the case. If the chair is unable to ascertain the reasons for negative votes, there should be a statement to that effect in the letter. Abstention votes should be recorded with the clear understanding they will not be considered as “positive” votes.
- If there is a minority report, it should be forwarded with the case and commented upon in the Department’s letter.

On the Focus of the Supporting Letter

- The letter should address the current state of the academic field and clearly tie this explanation to evaluation of the faculty member.
- Avoid focusing on any circumstances that set this case apart from other similar cases. For example, an explanation of why the department chose to recommend the faculty member for tenure this year instead of last year gives an unnecessarily negative slant when compared to other candidates for tenure.
- Provide concrete information, explanations and specific reasons, rather than using generalized adjectives such as “good,” “bad,” “outstanding” without substantiation.
- Include all components of evaluation in the letter. Addressing only research and service and omitting teaching, for example, can leave the impression that there are negative reasons for the omission.

On Preparation of the Case

- One-of-a-kind materials should be numbered to match the candidate’s biobibliography. As necessary, pertinent pages should be marked on each item.
- Any work done in collaboration with others outside the research group should be explained with regard to the role and contribution of the candidate. This is particularly important in cases with a large amount of co-authored work. A clear explanation within the departmental letter will forestall further inquiries from reviewing agencies.
- Departmental letters proposing new appointments should not contain detailed discussion of the search or recruitment process for the position. This information belongs in the OEO/AA report required to bring candidates to campus for interview and in the summary of

recruitment activities submitted with the case. The letter should contain a thorough explanation of the vote on the candidate.

II. Practical Suggestions for Writing Letters

- Careful phrasing should be exercised in recommendations. There should be no ambiguity, and the reports should be consistent with the matters discussed at the meeting. Clarify such ambiguous statements as “We need new blood,” which could be interpreted as meaning the unit is seeking a “younger” faculty member, when the committee's intention was actually that the unit needs new enthusiasm or new direction, regardless of the age of the person who delivers it.
- Prepare reports so that they reflect the true reasons for a recommendation, whether that recommendation is positive or negative. Avoid cryptic remarks. Give specific details and substantiation for a recommendation. For example, “weak publications” needs further fleshing out — why are the publications weak? Is it that they do not relate to the field in which the faculty member teaches or the academic specialty that the person fills in the academic unit? Is the quality of the press or the periodical in question? Is the argumentation not well developed, etc.? Or, conversely, if the publications are strong, for which reasons?
- Collegiality is a permissible factor in personnel decisions to the extent that it is not a pretext for illegal discrimination and conforms to the framework of departmental needs and the expected service contributions of the faculty. When this factor is at issue, it is better to face it head-on rather than to “invent” other reasons for a negative or positive recommendation. In litigation, it is always easier to substantiate a truthful statement than one that is used to mask or substitute for the truth.
- Your recommendations should be complete as submitted, with sufficient detail so that you will know, perhaps several years in the future, why you made a particular recommendation. You should not place yourself in the position of trying to add information after the fact in order to explain what you meant several years earlier.
- There is the tendency to give less attention to positive recommendations, the rationale being that the individual is so well qualified that there is no perceived need to prepare a detailed substantiated report. However, positive reports may also become subject to investigation and should be prepared with the same completeness and care given to negative recommendations. Lack of uniformity in the preparation of both negative and positive evaluations can result in allegations of disparate treatment of those receiving negative evaluations.

- Avoid hyperbole in your evaluations. Do not overstate accolades or criticism. Exaggeration can be construed as an indication of bias, both positive and negative. Sound professional judgment with sufficient substantiation for that judgment is the most desirable approach.
- Do not discuss your recommendations casually outside the setting of the confidential personnel meeting. Deliberations are expected to take place exclusively under the protection of confidentiality provided by the University policy. Information should not be given or comments made to those who have no right to know and are not part of the process.

III. Useful Excerpts from Administrators' Letters

- “Dr. Blank's delayed start as a researcher is understandable in a professional discipline such as ours. Dr. Blank came to academia directly from the profession. To his credit, he re-tooled, networked, and struggled diligently to establish a research agenda. His publication record, in terms of quality – and quantity – has exceeded my expectations.”
- “No other member of this faculty has been able to raise so many issues that are so central to the otherwise diverse pursuits of the many subfields of this discipline. Dr. Blank was hired to do precisely this – to teach and write about _____ – and he has carved out a way to do so that is particularly helpful to those of us in other specializations.”
- “Dr. Blank’s student evaluations during his six years on the faculty have consistently been in the upper one-third of all faculty. His only sporadic low ratings occurred in, a large lecture class, where student ratings normally are lower.”
- “Among both student and faculty reviewers, there was unusual agreement about what Professor Blank’s specific strength is: namely, the ability to make students understand and critique arguments and then construct their own. She cultivates this ability through what is sometimes termed the ‘Socratic method,’ pushing and questioning students in the classroom, getting them to the heart of issues without forcing her own answers on them. Students wrote that they did not feel threatened or denigrated by this. On the contrary, an unusual number remarked that she was able to challenge and respect them at the same time. The statistical summaries, as well, show her strength in teaching students to develop their own ideas.”
- “Since coming to UCSB in 1990 from a quite different situation – in which she taught heavily and research and publication were not stressed – she has developed a distinctive and coherent program of writing, which, as the letters testify, is leading to major contributions to her field.”
- “Each of the outside evaluators said something mildly critical about Professor Blank’s outspoken and assertive manner, yet they all recommended tenure. Their mixed reactions

are similar to those of students and faculty in the department. Whether taking a class from Professor Blank or working on a committee or doing research with him, one can't help but be affected, sometimes negatively, by his personal style. Nevertheless, the majority of our personnel committee agreed with the consensus of the outside evaluators that, although he is sometimes abrasive, on balance his sense of commitment and the vigor with which he attacks his work is a good thing. Note the statement from Professor Far-away that he has more faith in the honesty of a nationally appointed panel because Professor Blank is a member."