



**MEMORANDUM**

December 6, 2018

Memo to: All Full-time Faculty  
From: Mary Clark, Interim Provost   
Re: New Standards for Assessing Objectivity in External Letters for Tenure and/or Promotion

Together with the Deans, and in consultation with the Chair of the Committee on Faculty Actions, I have revised our existing standards for determining whether an external letter reflects an objective assessment of the body of work under review. This revision is intended to bring our standards in line with the majority of our peer institutions and to remove barriers to professional development that our previous standards might have inadvertently erected.

These revised protocols reaffirm the University's commitment to the highest standards of integrity in our tenure and promotion process. As before, letters whose authors are deemed to have a conflict of interest in the tenure or promotion process will be disqualified. However, these protocols also recognize the importance of professional networking in the development of a faculty member's career. As such, letters whose authors have no direct professional or personal interest in the outcome of the faculty actions at issue, and are thus deemed able to offer an independent judgment, will be permitted.

cc: Christine Chin, Dean, School of International Service  
Nancy Davenport, University Librarian  
John Delaney, Dean, Kogod School of Business  
Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy, Dean, School of Education  
Jill Klein, Interim Dean, School of Professional and Extended Studies  
Camille Nelson, Dean, Washington College of Law  
Jeff Rutenbeck, Dean, School of Communication  
Peter Starr, Dean, College of Arts and Sciences  
Jonathan Tubman, Dean, Graduate Studies  
Jessica Waters, Dean, Undergraduate Education  
Vicky Wilkins, Dean, School of Public Affairs

*Attachment*

## **Standards for Obtaining Objective External Letters for Tenure and/or Promotion**

The Faculty Manual requires “a minimum of five letters” solicited from external reviewers and included in a tenure and/or promotion file. “The external reviewers should be nationally or internationally respected individuals whose area of expertise qualifies them to speak with authority about the candidate and whose professional and personal relationship with the candidate is such that the external reviews can provide an objective review.”

To that end, external reviews must be obtained from individuals who have no direct professional or personal interest in the candidate’s career. The solicitation letter should ask potential reviewers to disclose potential conflicts of interest that might inhibit their ability to assess the candidate’s work objectively. The letter template at the following link can be used to solicit objective external reviews:

<https://myau.american.edu/academics/DAA/Pages/default.aspx?LinkID=465>

As part of their professional development, candidates may well have built professional relationships with distinguished senior colleagues who may be asked to review a file. As such, it is understandable that some reviewers may have previously read, seen, commented on, blurbed, or reviewed a candidate’s work; appeared on a conference panel with the candidate; edited a book or journal that included the candidate’s work; observed or met candidates at various venues; been invited by the candidate to give a talk or participate in a book incubator at American University or elsewhere; or socialized with the candidate at professional meetings. These interactions in themselves are professional in nature and do not disqualify the external reviewers from opining on the candidate’s qualifications.

### **Disqualified External Reviewers**

In contrast, some potential external reviewers would not be able to be objective in their review of the file. Chairs, deans, and members of the CFA must exercise judgment to determine if such a conflict of interest is present, and should consult with one another and with the Dean of Faculty and the Provost when they are uncertain as to whether a conflict of interest exists.

By way of example, the following types of individuals would be disqualified in most cases from serving as external reviewers because their relationship to the candidate would be deemed too close to allow for an objective assessment of the candidate’s work:

- Co-authors, co-editors, or project collaborators
- Dissertation advisors or committee members
- Former professors, graduate school mentors/advisors, former students
- Relatives or personal friends
- Present or former department or unit colleagues

**Letters that may necessitate solicitation of an additional letter**

If an external letter writer discloses a potential conflict of interest, the chair or dean may solicit an additional distinguished reviewer to write a letter for the file to ensure the minimum of five letters is met. The original letter would remain in the file for action under a subsection entitled “Disqualified Letters.” Disqualified letters are not sent to the candidate in redacted form (if applicable) and should not be referenced in reports from the Rank and Tenure Committee, chair and dean.

This policy goes into effect immediately and supersedes all previous policies on arm’s-length reviews.