

# Common Biases in the Promotion and Tenure Process

**To help develop an inclusive versus exclusive mindset, below is a list of common biases that may prevent P&T committees from examining the merits of a candidate. Embracing an inclusive mindset will help the committee focus on the reasons why a candidate should be promoted instead of looking for why they should be denied.**

## **Affinity Bias**

This bias refers to the tendency to want to work with someone who is like us culturally and demographically, someone we like, and who we can socialize with. It results in the inability to effectively assess the candidate's experience and qualifications. If the candidate is liked, they are often evaluated positively and given a low bar to meet. If the candidate is not liked, they are evaluated negatively and subjected to a high bar and shifting standards.

### **Solutions:**

- Diversify P&T committees to ensure multiple and diverse perspectives.
- Create a standardized agenda for the meeting to ensure that the same dimensions are discussed in the same way and order.
- Display P&T criteria and read each standard for research, teaching, and service before discussing and evaluating each area.

## **Confirmation Bias**

We often seek out and assign more weight to evidence that confirms our initial assessment of a candidate and ignore or devalue evidence that contradicts this assessment. Thus, we filter out information that contradicts our current view, which

leads to a biased interpretation of a candidate's dossier.

### **Solutions:**

- Provide each P&T committee member with the opportunity to share their evaluation to ensure diverse and contrary perspectives are heard.
- Ask committee members what would happen if they made the opposite decision, have them gather data to support the alternative decision, and have them compare it with data used to support the initial decision.

## **Contrast Effect**

We tend to compare the current P&T case to the one(s) that recently happened. By doing this, we are shifting the standard with each new case because we are comparing them to other candidates instead of judging them based on predetermined standards.

### **Solutions:**

- Avoid looking at past dossiers to see how the current candidate compares as this can result in them being viewed as worse or better than they really are. Instead, use the P&T criteria to evaluate the candidate on their own merit.
- When evaluating multiple candidates, schedule separate meetings for each candidate and have sufficient time in between them. Ensure adequate time and attention for evaluating each candidate.

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## **Groupthink**

Groupthink leads to faulty decisions because consensus is reached without a thorough and critical evaluation of alternative opinions, ideas, or perspectives. It often occurs when a group wants to avoid or minimize conflict and seeks harmony. During P&T meetings, the most powerful and loudest voices may dominate while those with less power may not feel safe or comfortable dissenting and may be fearful of giving a divergent opinion.

### **Solutions:**

- Create a standardized evaluation form and have committee members independently and anonymously rate the candidate both quantitatively and qualitatively before meeting to discuss the candidate.
- Share each member's evaluation with the committee to ensure all perspectives and relevant facts are heard.

## **Evaluating Collegiality**

During the P&T discussion, a candidate's collegiality is frequently brought up. Often, this phrase lacks a clear definition and simply captures affinity towards or likeability of the candidate. We tend to favor candidates who are like us and agree with us. Thus, candidates who disagree with or question committee members are often perceived as less collegial. This is especially true for "outspoken," "blunt," or "opinionated" women and faculty of color.

### **Solutions:**

- Eliminate discussions of collegiality or provide an explicit definition with examples of collegiality and incivility.
- Rate collegiality from a variety of perspectives including administrators, peers, students, and staff.

## **Assumptions about Collaboration**

When junior or underrepresented faculty collaborate with senior or dominant group faculty on research, we tend to assume the senior or dominant group member did the majority of the work and the junior or minoritized faculty member is incapable of doing independent research. For example, men receive more credit for collaborating with women than women do for working with men, collaborative research involving women is usually attributed to men, and women are less likely than men to receive tenure when most of their work is co-authored. Downgrading collaboration can also penalize those engaged in interdisciplinary research.

### **Solutions:**

- Ask candidates to detail their role and contribution on research projects instead of making assumptions about the distribution of work.

## **Subfield Bias**

Subfield bias occurs when mainstream research or research in the center of a field is perceived as more important, prestigious, and valued than research that is seen as on the margins or is in less mainstream subfields. This bias results in certain topics, approaches, methodologies, and samples

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seen as more worthwhile than others. Women and people of color are more likely to conduct research on the margins or in subfields due to their social identities, backgrounds, and personal experiences.

## **Solutions:**

- Ensure the P&T committee has members who research a wide range of topics and use a variety of methodologies. If the committee lacks this diversity, seek external reviewers who research topics and use methods similar to the candidate.
- Avoid relying on metrics that benefit research published in mainstream outlets (e.g., impact factors) and consider alternative measures that assess broader, societal impact.

## **Ignoring Differences Across Disciplines**

We often apply the standards of our discipline to other disciplines because it is what we are familiar with. However, we need to question our preconceived assumptions about what comprises research productivity, especially when evaluating candidates outside of our discipline. We also need to avoid assuming that differences in disciplinary standards represent a lack of research knowledge or rigor.

## **Solutions:**

- Acknowledge that standards can vary across disciplines and clarify the norms of a particular discipline.
- Evaluate the research on its own merits. Consider whether the work is innovative, impactful and of high quality.

## **Penalties for Stopping the Tenure Clock**

There is a tendency for committee members to penalize certain candidates for stopping the tenure clock than others. For example, the tenure success rate for male candidates increased whereas it decreased for women after stopping the clock for parental leave. P&T committee members may expect those who paused the clock to have a record that exceeds others or assume they are not a fully committed scholar.

## **Solutions:**

- Acknowledge in the P&T process that candidate dossiers will look different due to life circumstances and the context of a candidate's specific career.
- Remind P&T committee members that research, teaching, and/or service is not expected during leave.
- To allow for flexibility and to maintain excellence in scholarship, evaluate a candidate's record based on quality instead of quantity.

## **Misinterpretation of Publication Gaps**

Candidates may have temporary gaps in their publication record due to parental, medical, or other types of leaves. These personal circumstances can decrease research productivity. Also, publication gaps may not represent a lack of scholarly work. Engagement in applied research, qualitative work, grant submission, learning new research methods or analyses, and so forth may result in "gaps" before the payoff in

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terms of publications can be realized given their time-consuming nature.

## **Solutions:**

- Remind P&T committee members that gaps are quite common and normal, and that they should focus on long-term contributions.
- Encourage candidates to provide a brief explanation for the gap, so committee members do not make negative assumptions.
- Remind external reviewers that candidates should not be penalized for taking university sanctioned leave and that the leave period should not be evaluated as part of their record.

## **Overemphasis on “Objective” Measures of Scholarship**

Making determinations about the quality of publications can only be determined by directly reading the candidate’s work. Relying on proxy indicators such as journal lists, journal impact factors, citation counts, and grants received can be misleading, especially for research in new or emerging fields or interdisciplinary work. Women’s research is cited less often than men’s even when published in high quality journals and men engage in more self-citations. Impact factors do not assess the quality of a particular article or the review process and tend to favor short-term rather than prolonged impact. Additionally, White or male researchers are more likely to secure grant funding than their Black or female counterparts.

## **Solutions:**

- Acknowledge the biases associated with each metric.
- Use multiple metrics of impact.
- Only use a metric if it can be explained how the measure shows impact.
- Consider using “nontraditional” metrics such as media coverage, number of downloads, classroom use, awards and recognition, adaptation to public policy.

## **Assumption that Teaching Evaluations are “Objective”**

Students apply more stringent and different criteria when evaluating professors who are female, of color, or speak with an accent. Female faculty must show competence and friendliness to be judged as competent and women of color are more frequently challenged or disrespected by students in the classroom, which can affect evaluations.

## **Solutions:**

- Acknowledge the biased nature of student evaluations and use them as only one metric of a more comprehensive review of teaching.
- Use many measures of teaching effectiveness such as teaching philosophy, innovative teaching methods, syllabi, curriculum development, unsolicited qualitative comments, improvement over time, mentorship of students, professional development, and teaching awards.
- Conduct peer observations of teaching and include a summary of the observation in the dossier.

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## **Undervaluation of Service**

Women, especially women of color, perform significantly more service than men, which results in less time for research. This service also tends to be more internal and less visible rather than external and more visible, which does not result in as much recognition or expansion of professional networks. BIPOC faculty are often expected to mentor students of color and serve as the diversity representative on committees, which reduces time for research.

### **Solutions:**

- Adjust expectations to align with formal as well as informal job duties. For example, if a candidate is assigned or expected to dedicate more time to teaching and service, they will have less time for research and need to be evaluated with this in mind.
- Include an area in the dossier to recognize diversity, equity, and inclusion contributions made related to research, teaching, and service.
- Encourage candidates to list all service activities including unassigned and invisible service that is often expected of women and BIPOC faculty.

## **Overreliance on External Letters**

Assumptions may be made that scholars at higher prestige universities will be better at evaluating a candidate's dossier even when scholars at a lower prestigious university are better positioned to evaluate their research. This issue may be exacerbated when evaluating interdisciplinary work. Also, external reviewers often use more standout adjectives to describe men and express

greater confidence in their research and ability whereas they often emphasize women's strong work ethic and potential as teachers.

### **Solutions:**

- Select external reviewers based on their knowledge of the candidate's research area and methodologies and not their titles or institution's reputation.
- Seek a diverse representation among external reviewers.
- Use bias checking software to identify biased language in external letters.

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## **Recommended Readings**

Advance Office for Faculty Equity, UMASS Lowell. Best practices to address bias in the promotion and tenure process. <https://www.uml.edu/academics/provost-office/faculty-success/advance/personnel-practices/best-practices-bias-personnel-decisions.aspx>

Chaudhari, A. M. W., Menon, T., & Ford, D. (2023). Have you seen these 10 terrible tenure decision making patterns? *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*.  
<https://www.diverseeducation.com/opinion/article/15635182/have-you-seen-these-10-terrible-tenure-decision-making-patterns>

Stewart, A. J., & Valian, V. (2022). *An inclusive academy*. MIT Press.