

The recommendations contained in this document have been generated by Bradley faculty after analysis of (1) campus-wide survey data; (2) a review of current solicitation practices at Bradley; (3) and a review of the scholarly literature on equitable TPR practices. They should be understood not as a top-down initiative, but as a starting point for campus conversations about revisions to Bradley’s TPR practices.

Why do we need to change the way Bradley solicits external letters for the purposes of promotion?

Patterns of bias in external letters of recommendation are so well documented that Stewart and Valian (2018) among others recommend against using them. Some universities have eliminated them altogether. In a 2024 study by Cervato et. al, while all the R1 institutions they sampled required external letters, only 17% of R2 institutions required them. If institutions want to continue using them, they should take steps to minimize bias.

Elements that may increase or reduce bias in external letters

| Letter elements that may introduce bias | Why this is problematic |
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| Asking reviewer to evaluate teaching performance | Reviewer likely does not have first-hand knowledge of candidate’s teaching and must rely on measures such as student teaching evaluations, which <u>scholarship</u> demonstrates are biased against women, faculty of color and other marginalized groups (Boring et. al 2017, Chavez et. al 2020, Eaton et. al 2020). |
| Asking reviewer to evaluate institutional service | Reviewer likely does not have expertise in levels of service that are expected at the institution or the time and skills required for certain service assignments. |
| Asking them to judge whether candidate would achieve promotion at their institution. | The candidate is not applying for promotion at the reviewer’s institution. They must only be evaluated based on Bradley’s T&P. |
| Asking reviewer to comment on candidate’s “potential” or comparison to scholars at similar career stage. | Both questions solicit subjective judgments without sufficient information required to make them. For instance, factors such as teaching load, service load, start-up packages, sabbaticals, internal funding for research and conferences, and availability of graduate assistants varies greatly across institutions and have a significant impact on faculty research/creative production. |
| Asking them to comment on candidate’s “national reputation” (or similar). | The meaning of “national reputation” (or similar terms) is vague and open to interpretation and is also heavily dependent on reviewer’s own professional networks and currency in the field. (<u>Less than 10% of R1 institutions ask this</u> , according to Cervato 2024 study.) |
| Letter elements that may reduce bias | How this helps reduce bias |
| Using gender-neutral pronouns and language (eg. they/them, the candidate, Dr. Last Name) | Copious scholarship demonstrates implicit bias based simply on pronouns and names. For example, Moss-Racusin et. al 2012 found identical CVs are evaluated very differently if they are given typically masculine or feminine names. Using gender-neutral language helps reduce unconscious bias. (Click her to try the <u>Gender Bias Calculator</u> with your own letters of recommendation/review.) |

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| Asking reviewer to evaluate <u>only</u> candidate’s research/creative production; <u>not</u> their teaching or university service. | This allows reviewer to draw on their expertise in the field and discourages subjective assessments about areas where they lack information and first-hand knowledge. Reviewers may, however, be invited to comment on professional service beyond the institution. |
| Providing instructions on how to evaluate tenure clock variations. | If a candidate has received an extension per institutional policy, reviewers tend to expect greater productivity (eg. six years of publications rather than five years with a usual tenure clock). They should be given specific instruction about not regarding tenure clock extensions as “extra time” for research/creative work. |
| Providing details on institutional context | Providing details on teaching load, service expectations, and institutional supports for research such (eg. research facilities, sabbaticals, course releases, internal funding, and availability of graduate assistants) to provide fuller understanding of the candidate’s research record. |
| Providing details on institutional priorities (eg. tied to mission) | Not all institutions (or fields) view interdisciplinary, collaborative, or student-centered (especially SoTL) research/creative work favorably. Women and faculty of color are more likely to engage in this work. Affirming these as institutional priorities can discourage negative assertions about such work. |
| Including impact statements (eg. COVID, budget cuts) | Impact statements that acknowledge the negative impact of recent events on research/creative productivity should be included to give reviewers fuller context |
| Including note about research on systemic bias in T&P | References to the robust scholarship on bias in T&P reviews can make reviewers more aware of their own assumptions about candidates. |

Processes that can reduce bias when using external review letters

| Processes that can reduce bias | How they can help reduce bias |
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| Use standardized institutional solicitation letter with only minimal customization (eg. names, dates, units, boilerplate language when applicable on extensions, etc.). | A standardized institutional solicitation letter, carefully crafted with all of the above factors in mind should reduce opportunities for (largely unintentional) bias. Allowing customization by chairs or deans increases potential for unintended bias. Additionally, standardizing elements of the letter (including standard page length) allows for more equitable “apples-to-apples” comparisons. |
| Require internal T&P committees to complete their evaluation of the candidate’s dossier <u>before</u> reading the external review letters; and provide them with notes regarding the limitations of such letters and the metrics they often use, such as h-index or other impact factor metrics. | Because of well-documented biases in external letters (and impact factor metrics), they should not be heavily weighted in T&P decisions, and therefore should only be considered as <u>additional information once a full review of the dossier has happened</u> (Madera et. al 2019, Roper 2022, Trix and Psenka 2003). T&P committees should be reminded of scholarship on bias in letters of recommendation so they can be better attuned to potential bias (see ABL 2022, Minor 2023). They should be instructed to focus on evidence rather than tone, and directed not to “read between the lines” of reviewers’ letters. |

References Cited

ABL Anti-racist Tenure Letter Working Group (2022) [How to Write an Anti-Racist Tenure Letter](#).
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- Stewart, A. & Valian, V. (2018). *An inclusive academy: Achieving diversity and excellence*. MIT Press.
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**ADVANCE BU Recommended Solicitation Template:
Initial Approach Letter to External Reviewer**

<date>

Dear Dr. <reviewer>:

As <chair/dean> of the <department-or-college-name>, I am writing to ask whether you would consider serving as an external reviewer for <Dr. or Associate Professor—not Mr., Mrs. Or Ms.> <first-name> <last-name>, who has applied for promotion to the rank of full professor at Bradley University. <Dr. or Associate Professor> <last-name>’s work focuses on <topic area>; and, given your expertise, your review would provide us with a fuller assessment of the candidate’s scholarly work.

As a primarily undergraduate institution, Bradley’s ideal is the teacher-scholar. Therefore, to be appointed or promoted to the rank of Professor a faculty member will have “manifested a deep-seated and on-going commitment to a discipline, to teaching, to research and/or creative production, and to professional service.” And, specifically, the faculty member shall have:

- progressed with published research and/or outside professionally peer reviewed creative production to the point of recognized accomplishments in their field;
- developed a well-formulated, self-sustaining program of research and/or creative production with both immediate and long-term objectives;
- earned recognition from peers outside the University;
- and attained a level of distinction that compares favorably with professors in similar institutions.

Should you agree to serve as a reviewer, we will send you a formal letter of request, Bradley’s expectations regarding scholarship, and an electronic packet of the candidate’s work. And we would ask for your letter of review by <date>. In compliance with Illinois law, identities of invited reviewers and the content of their letters will not be divulged to the candidate. We ask that you let us know if you foresee a conflict of interest based on your relationship to this candidate

(eg. if you are a family member, a graduate school advisor or committee member, a coauthor or a co-investigator, or have a close personal relationship, with the candidate).

I understand that this is likely another task added to an already busy schedule. However, your expertise would provide an invaluable perspective on <Dr. or Associate Professor> <last-name>'s work, for which we would be very grateful. Please let me know if you would be willing to serve in this capacity or if you have questions. I can be reached at <phone number> or via email at <email address>.

Sincerely,

**ADVANCE BU Recommended Solicitation Template:
Instructional Letter Upon Reviewer's Acceptance**

<date>

Dear Dr. <reviewer>:

Thank you for agreeing to serve as an external reviewer for <Dr. or Associate Professor> <first-name> <last-name>, who has applied for promotion to the rank of full professor at Bradley University. I ask that you assess *only* the candidate's scholarly work and service to the profession (eg. their roles in professional societies, editorial boards, review panels, etc.). Please avoid sharing a conclusion about whether the candidate would be promoted to the rank of professor at your own institution. I kindly ask that you email your review letter to me by <date>.

Bradley University guidelines state that to be appointed or promoted to the rank of full professor, a faculty member will have "manifested a deep-seated and on-going commitment to a discipline, to teaching, to research and/or creative production, and to professional service." Please refer to the full departmental and college guidelines attached here. In your review, we ask you to address the following questions.

- How do you know the candidate, and do you foresee any conflict of interest based on your relationship to the candidate? For example, are you a family member, a graduate school advisor or committee member, a coauthor or a co-investigator, or have a close personal relationship with the candidate?
- Has the candidate progressed with published research and/or outside professionally peer reviewed creative production to the point of recognized accomplishments in their field?
- Has the candidate developed a well-formulated, self-sustaining program of research and/or creative production with both immediate and long-term objectives?
- Has the candidate earned recognition from peers outside the University?
- Has the candidate attained a level of distinction that compares favorably with professors in similar institutions?

To provide you with context for your review, Bradley University is a private, mid-sized, primarily undergraduate institution. Tenured and tenure-track faculty typically teach three courses per semester without the support of graduate teaching assistants. While teaching excellence is given the highest priority when evaluating faculty for tenure and promotion, Bradley's ideal is the teacher-scholar who is actively engaged in research or creative production in their field. Therefore, the University provides modest support for faculty research/creative production in the form of lab, technical and studio facilities; small internal grants; and funding for a limited number of professional conferences. Bradley aims to provide students with individualized and experiential learning experiences, opportunities for quality undergraduate research and creative production, high impact teaching, and access to boundary-breaking interdisciplinary learning, and it seeks to create a welcoming, diverse, and inclusive climate for all. Work that supports that mission is highly valued at the institution.

Bradley University recognizes the effects of unintentional biases on teaching evaluations, H-index factors, and external review processes (Boring et. al 2017, Chavez et. al 2020, Eaton et. al 2020, Roper 2022, Cervato et. al 2024, Madera et. al 2019, Roper 2022, Spitzmueller et. al 2023, and Trix and Psenka 2003). We therefore urge external reviewers to be mindful of such systemic biases when assessing the candidate's record.

Attached please find the relevant University, College, and Department tenure and promotion guidelines and a packet containing the candidate's CV and a selection of their work for your review. In compliance with Illinois law (820 ILCS 40/10a), identities of invited reviewers and the content of their letters will not be divulged to the candidate. Please reach out to me at any point with any questions or concerns you might have at [<email address>](#) or [<phone number>](#).

Sincerely,

References Cited

- Boring, A. (2017). Gender biases in student evaluations of teaching. *Journal of Public Economics*, 145, 27–41.
- Cervato, Cinzia, Canan Bilen-Green, Malia Cockrell, Carrie Ann Johnson, Carla Koretsky, and Adrienne Minerick. (2024). External Promotion and Tenure Review Letters at Research-Intensive Institutions: A Critical Communication Analysis of External Review Practices. *ADVANCE Journal* 4 (2).
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