

Report of the Special Faculty Committee on Promotion and Tenure Processes
Final Report
June 2010

I. Charge to the Committee

In January 2009 Chairman of the Faculty Bish Sanyal created a special faculty committee to review MIT's promotion and tenure processes and charged it as follows:

The committee is charged with a high level review of the process of, *not the intellectual and educational standards for*, granting tenure. Such standards of excellence in each field are determined by individual departments and schools. The task force is fully aware that there may be variation in the process of tenure and promotion among the five schools due to differences in academic areas. This review is not intended to homogenize such variations, but to identify general principles for ensuring transparency and fairness. The task force's recommendations will be advisory and presented at a full faculty meeting after consultations with department heads, deans and senior administrators at MIT. The task force will consider the following

(i) What are the best practices of the five schools at MIT regarding how tenure and promotion cases are put together to ensure fairness, confidentiality and efficient use of faculty time? Are there modifications of the review process necessary to respond to the new trend of dual appointments across departments?

Are there any procedures followed at other institutions comparable to MIT that we might adopt to enhance the impartiality of the tenure and promotion process?

(ii) What form of mentoring, by whom, and at what stage can MIT make the tenure process more transparent to junior faculty members? Since tenure track faculty at MIT usually proceed through three steps (first, reappointment; then promotion to Associate Professor without tenure; and finally promotion with tenure) what form of mentoring and feedback and by whom is most useful at each stage?

(iii) Is there a need to improve the process by which grievances related to promotion and tenure process are currently addressed at MIT? Do the established procedures ensure impartial scrutiny of grievances and fairness, as well as confidentiality of the review process?

Our committee met throughout the Spring 09 term and explored how these issues are addressed in the five Schools. We reviewed survey data on mentoring and promotion processes contained in the 2008 Faculty Quality of Life Survey. We also were briefed and advised by Deputy General Counsel Mark DiVincenzo on MIT's grievance procedures and similar procedures followed in peer institutions. Our conclusions and recommendations follow.

II. An Opening Comment on Heterogeneity: Natural and problematic aspects

A promotion and tenure process and decision for an MIT faculty member begins in a department, and if positive, moves to the council of the School in which the department sits, and if positive there, moves to the Academic Council.¹ The general criteria for a positive decision are excellence in teaching, research, and service. Because of the differences among disciplines, there is a natural heterogeneity in the details of the decision-making processes in the various departments and schools. This review is not intended to homogenize such variations, but to identify general principles for ensuring transparency and fairness in the process.

The committee examined these practices and found departmental and school differences for a) mentoring junior faculty; b) choosing the writers of the reference letters for promotion; c) the voting process on promotion decisions; d) the length of the candidate's personal statements; e) the use of photographs in the case; and f) the role of department heads and deans. These differences may affect the actual process and final outcome. All of these will be discussed in this report.

The heterogeneity among academic disciplines comes clearly into focus at the School Council and Academic Council levels. However, these councils have a great deal of experience and understanding of the issues mentioned above. With the increase in the number of faculty whose scholarly work is in an interdisciplinary area, these issues will become more important and the decision making more difficult at all levels.

III. Discussion of issues

a) Communicating Process and Procedures at Point of Hire

When a faculty candidate is considered for hire by a department, the head of the department should communicate to that person expectations and standards for a successful career in the academy as well as the various processes and procedures for promotion at MIT. Moreover, the department head has the responsibility to ensure that this information is communicated again once the faculty member is at MIT. Although this is almost always done in an informal manner, we believe that each school and department should have a written statement on promotion and tenure processes available for the candidate at the time of hire. Special care should be taken to communicate clearly expectations regarding the timing of possible promotion and tenure reviews for faculty hired with several years of prior academic or professional experience since the standard timeline may not apply in these cases.

Faculty members with dual appointments are in an unusual situation. The standards for promotion and tenure are the same for other tenure-track faculty appointments, except that the distribution of teaching and service may naturally be

¹ The Sloan School operates as a single department. Therefore, throughout this report the terms department and school are used interchangeably in reference to Sloan's practices.

different due to the candidate's appointment in two units. For a dual faculty member's promotion case to advance, at least one unit must endorse the case.

b) Mentoring

We found the state of mentoring to be a significant concern: there is no uniformity among schools on the mentoring process and not all faculty follow their department's mentoring process uniformly.² Specifically, the Faculty Quality of Life Survey revealed (1) a great deal of heterogeneity in mentoring among departments and schools, (2) relatively low rates of satisfaction with formal mentoring, and (3) higher rates of satisfaction and importance attached to informal mentoring.

It is clear that often the formal process is not working well. However, most junior faculty have informal mentors, which suggests that the candidate should play a role in choosing a mentor along with the department (or division) head.

Some Schools and departments have both a mentoring committee and a review committee for junior faculty members and there is overlap in membership of these two groups. There are faculty members who serve on both the mentoring and the review committees. It was suggested that having a mentor on the review committee provides a natural and useful communication link between the faculty member being considered for promotion and the review committee.

We believe that mentoring of junior faculty is a critical issue and the guidelines for the mentoring process (i.e., choosing mentors, changing mentors, etc.) should be made more uniform throughout MIT. Some practices that warrant consideration include:

- i) Mentoring should begin at the point of hire with clarity about the responsibilities and expectations of both the mentor and the mentee;
- ii) Allow for a mentoring *committee* (i.e. 2-3 mentors, one of whom is the principal mentor);
- iii) The faculty member should be allowed to change mentors, in consultation with the department head;
- iv) The mentor should have a voice in the promotion review process either as a member or a non-voting member;
- v) The department head has the responsibility for ensuring that there is good communication between the mentor and faculty member;
- vi) Schools should recognize excellence in mentoring;
- vii) The mentoring process should be highlighted at the New Faculty Orientation;

² The report of the Initiative on Faculty Race and Diversity (available at: <http://diversity.mit.edu>) identified very similar issues about mentoring. Our recommendations also are quite similar to and/or complement those included in the Initiative's report, with one exception. The Race Initiative Report calls for the mentor to be an advocate for the candidate rather than a member or participant in the review committee. This issue will be discussed further next fall in a paper on mentoring practices that will be prepared by a group of experienced mentors from different departments.

viii) The department head's letter to the School Council proposing promotion or tenure should include the name(s) of the mentor(s) as standard information.

c) Letters for promotion for associate w/o tenure, tenure, and full professor

There are a number of issues regarding reference letters for promotion. These letters are normally requested by the department or division head for all promotions at MIT (Assistant to Associate without tenure, Associate without tenure to Associate with tenure, and Associate with tenure to Full Professor). There are differences between the MIT process and those at most universities in the US, where there are only three professorial ranks, and this causes problems for some letter writers and some promotion cases.

The choice of letter writers is normally made by a committee appointed by the department head. Most departments ask the candidate to suggest some letter writers and, according to Institute-wide policy, add other names chosen by the committee. The candidate is also asked to inform them if there are individuals whom the candidate prefers not be contacted. How this latter request is dealt with by the department head or committee varies and has been a point of contention in some promotion cases. The committee believes there should be an MIT guideline on this issue. The committee believes the candidate's request should be honored unless the department head, in consultation with the review committee, determines there are good reasons not to do so.

Once the letters begin to come into the department head, there is no explicit instruction about when the letters should be read. The committee felt that department heads should wait until they accumulate a substantial number of letters before circulating them to the members of the promotion committee to avoid the first few letters causing judgments to be made before all the data are in hand.

Committee members had concerns about the differences in letters written for women and men candidates as well as for other groups (e.g. different cultural and language groups). These concerns are based on evidence suggesting that letters for successful men and women candidates differ in significant and gendered ways: more personal commentary (with potential positive or negative connotations) for women than men; shorter letters with less specificity for women than men; more emphasis on ability in men's letters compared to effort for women. In general, there are more "standout" words in letters for men and more doubt raisers in women's letters.³ Committee members and department heads should be made aware of this evidence and take care to not allow such differences to influence their judgments.

There is no standard practice among departments and schools regarding who is able to read the letters (both internal and external). The committee felt that all tenured

³ These findings are based on a discourse analysis of over 300 letters for Professors of academic medicine: Trix, F, and C. Psenka (2003) "Exploring the color of glass: letters of recommendation for female and male medical faculty," *Discourse and Society*, 14(2), 191-220. See also, Watson, C. (1987) "Sex-linked differences in letters of recommendation," *Women and Language*, 10(2), 26-8.

faculty in the department should be able to see the full dossier and express their opinions of candidates for promotion without tenure and promotion to tenure. Full professors should be able to see the full dossier and express their opinions of all candidates in all cases. In some departments, the writers of the *internal* letters are not identified in order to provide more freedom to the letter writers for the departmental discussions on promotion. Some concern was expressed over this practice. Speculation over the identities of such letters may carry over and negatively affect interpersonal relationships within departments.

There is a concern about the increased level of difficulty in obtaining letters from the outside writers, particularly when the field of the candidate is either rather specialized or interdisciplinary. The concern is with the number of times letters are asked of outside referees, sometimes in a relatively short span, causing the response rate to be low. One way to alleviate this concern would be to eliminate the need for external letters when faculty members are promoted from Associate Professor with tenure (AWIT) to full professor or doing away with the AWIT rank altogether (i.e., promoting directly to Full Professor from AWOT). The committee felt that removing the AWIT rank would reduce the number of letters and make little difference to a career. This would, however, have financial implications: when a faculty member receives tenure, there is normally a 10% salary increase, and another 7% salary increase when a faculty member is promoted from associate to full professor. Moreover, if the AWIT rank were to be removed, the time of consideration for tenure should probably be changed. For example, Harvard, Yale, and Carnegie Mellon University operate this way and the time frame for tenure ranges from nine to 10 years. Alternatively, the promotion from AWIT to Full Professor could proceed without external letters. The committee recommends that the Academic Council consider whether it is necessary to require outside letters for AWIT to Full Professor promotion cases.

As departments become increasingly interdisciplinary, obtaining letters from outside sources is a challenge. There are fewer people to ask for a letter, and the return rate can become small. Committee members may lack sufficient knowledge of the different fields involved to determine the appropriate mix of letter writers. These problems may cure themselves with time; however, until then, special attention should be given to these issues by decision-makers at all levels.

d) Department voting

Which department members vote on a promotion differs from department to department: in most departments, all eligible faculty (as defined above) vote, while in some departments, a smaller group of faculty (perhaps only those in a sub-discipline) vote. The latter is a sensible process in large departments as long as *all* eligible faculty who have read the case have a chance to express their opinions to the voting group.

In addition, in some departments the vote is secret and in others, it is not. It is thought by some that secret balloting, like anonymous internal letters, encourages more freedom of expression. Others disagree and are concerned that secret balloting allows

senior faculty to vote no without explanation. The committee did not come to a consensus about this issue.

e) Dossier sent to external reviewers

There should be a reasonable uniformity (i.e. for all promotion candidates within a unit department or section) of the dossier sent to external reviewers. In addition to the cv and publication list, the personal statement and some pertinent examples of productivity in research and teaching should be included. The department head should choose these with the help of the candidate and the members of the promotion committee.

f) Personal Statements

All departments require candidates to prepare personal statements outlining their research, teaching, and service activities and achievements. Committee members observed that the length of personal statements have escalated over time. In Sloan it appears that too much time is put into the personal statements. In some cases these statements have grown to 20 pages or longer. Some schools and departments have stringent limits on the length of personal statements. For example, Architecture has a 5-page limit. While the personal statement is an important element of the case, it should be concise. Committee members discussed what the personal statement should do and agreed that it should convey the focus of the candidate's prior, current, and future research and teaching activities. Readers of the statement who may not be deeply versed in the candidate's specific field of research should be able to understand the central questions the candidate is addressing, why they are important, and what specifically the candidate seeks to contribute to this body of research.

Committee members found the School of Architecture and Planning's description of what is desired in a personal statement to be particularly useful as a model for other Schools and Departments to consider:

"This is a succinct statement by the candidate of her/his research, practice, or other creative accomplishments, and her/his long-range career objectives at MIT as related to teaching and to research or creative activities. This statement should be approximately two to five pages."

g) Pictures

Academic Council requests a copy of the candidate's photograph when reviewing cases. Photographs are sometimes required at the school council level as well. While the argument could be made that images would aid in recognition of a candidate, committee members agree with social science evidence suggesting that pictures can encourage stereotyping.⁴ The committee suggests that the practice of requiring a photograph be discontinued.

⁴ Professor Chappell Larson has studied this issue extensively and provided our committee with a review of the research evidence documenting how appearance may bias performance assessments. See

h) Grievance Procedures

The committee reviewed section 9.6 of MIT *Policies and Procedures*, describing grievance procedures for staff and faculty and focused specifically on the subsections outlining procedures governing faculty promotions and tenure. Based on this review, discussion of experiences with past grievance processes, and discussion with Deputy General Counsel Mark DiVincenzo, the committee concluded the procedures are not sufficiently spelled out, not well understood, allow for too much discretion on the part of the Provost that may lead to inconsistent application of the procedures, lack clear standards for appeal, and provide no provision for faculty who observe irregularities/problems to come forward. We discuss these issues below and include in Appendix 1 suggested revisions to Section 9.6 designed to address each issue.

Section 9.6 of *Policies and Procedures* provides a general overview of complaint policies for staff, students, and faculty. If a faculty member wants to dispute a promotion or tenure decision, he or she may seek advice or request a review within the academic lines of supervision in the relevant department and school or with the Faculty Officers. A faculty member can also request a review of the process by the Provost. The Provost then decides whether the process warrants a review. If so, the Provost (in consultation with the faculty officers) normally appoints an Ad-Hoc committee composed of senior faculty to conduct the review. The complainant is aware of the committee membership and may have some say in the committee make-up. The Ad-Hoc committee is charged with finding facts and answering certain questions so the Provost can decide whether the process followed by the department, school, and academic council was “fair and adequate”. The committee is not charged with reviewing the decision (on tenure or promotion). The committee reports its findings to the Provost who, in consultation with the President, is responsible for making the ultimate decision as to whether the process was fair and adequate. The Provost evaluates the report and presents it and his decision to the complainant. (This is not called for in P&P).

There was some discussion about a complainant writing a letter requesting review but then supplementing the letter with additional claims alleging discrimination of some kind. There was also discussion about the use of the Independent Investigative Panel

for example, Lenz, Gabriel, and Lawson. 2009. “Looking the Part: Television Leads Less Informed Citizens to Vote Based on Candidate Appearance”. Working Paper, MIT Department of Political Science. [People who know little about politics but are exposed to visual images of U.S. Senate and gubernatorial candidates disproportionately vote for the more competent-looking candidate in actual elections. Appearance-based ratings do not correlate with candidates’ educational achievement or performance in office.] Little, A.C., R. P. Burriss, B. C. Jones, and S. C. Roberts. 2007. “Facial appearance affects voting decisions”, *Evolution and Human Behaviour* (28):18-27. [In a laboratory experiment, subjects were more likely to cast hypothetical ballots for candidates whose appearance had been experimentally manipulated to subtly accentuate facial features associated with apparent competence.] Mobius, M. M. and T. S. Rosenblat. 2006. “Why Beauty Matters”, *American Economic Review*, 96: 222-35. [In a laboratory experiment where true ability is known and unaffected by physical attractiveness, “employers” are more likely to reward attractive-looking “workers” and to judge them as more capable.]

(IIP) process The IIP is comprised of the Faculty Officers. The Faculty Officers in turn can appoint a special panel to investigate the case.

Overall the grievance process is not well understood by faculty members and needs to be more transparent. Only two sentences in Section 9.6 refer to the specific policies pertaining to a faculty member complaint regarding promotion or tenure processes. The committee suggests that a separate section in Policies and Procedures be created for grievances involving faculty promotion or tenure processes.

The committee recommends that the discretionary and broad based nature of the review and the roles and responsibilities of the review committee that oversees the complaint process be clarified and strengthened. Specifically, more precise definition is needed of the standards for appeal (“adequacy and fairness”).

The committee considered whether there should be a separate grievance process for cases involving allegations of discrimination. While committee members believe a separate process is not necessary, special care should be taken in such cases to assure the review committee is composed of individuals who are known to be well educated in the sources and types of conscious and unconscious bias that can influence promotion and tenure processes and judgments.

Appendix 1 contains a draft of the committee’s recommended review procedures that would replace the relevant part of the current Section 9.6 of Policies and Procedures.

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Appendix 1

REVIEW PROCEDURES REGARDING FACULTY PROMOTION AND TENURE DECISIONS

An individual who is not promoted, or is a tenure candidate who is considered but not advanced at the department or School level, or is not awarded tenure should be informed of the right to a formal review by the Provost, and if applicable, at the same time, notified of the status of his or her MIT appointment when he or she is notified of the promotion or tenure decision.

An individual should first try to resolve any concerns he or she may have about the promotion or tenure decision at the relevant department or School level. If such concerns are not resolved, the faculty member may request that the process that led to the decision be formally reviewed. However, efforts should be made to resolve the dispute informally should continue even after the formal process is underway.

The purpose of a formal review is to determine whether the process in making the promotion or tenure decision was adequate and fair. The review process is not to reevaluate the merits of a promotion or tenure candidate's case.

The basis for deciding whether the process was adequate and fair shall be limited to determining whether there were significant procedural errors that substantially affected the outcome, and in addition in a tenure case, whether a standard for deciding tenure was used that significantly differed from the Institute's single standard for tenure described in MIT's Policies and Procedures and applying the different standard substantially affected the decision made.

An individual can submit a written request for a formal review to the Provost (the "Review Requestor or Candidate") within 60 days after being notified in writing of the decision not to promote or award tenure. If filed subsequently, the Provost may deny the review request as untimely. The filing of such a request does not extend any notice of appointment termination period. The review requestor must identify any and all grounds for the request for a review since there is one single review of such decision.

The Provost will decide if a review will be undertaken after making a preliminary review of the request to determine whether the request provides one or more appropriate grounds for review. In making that decision, the Provost may consult with whomever the Provost decides is appropriate.

After consulting with the Chair of the Faculty to the extent the Provost determines appropriate, the Provost will appoint an ad hoc faculty committee of three senior faculty (naming one as chair) and notify the review requestor of the names. If the review requestor believes that any of the ad hoc committee members could not participate as an objective fact finder, he or she should timely write to the Provost explaining his or her

reasons, and the Provost, in his discretion, will decide if there is a need for an alternate appointment.

The ad hoc committee will review, using the preponderance of the evidence (more likely than not) test as the standard of review, whether the process was adequate and fair. It is not the role of the ad hoc committee to reevaluate the judgment of the merits of the candidate's promotion or tenure case.

In order to determine whether the promotion or tenure process was adequate and fair, the Provost will provide a written charge to the ad hoc committee that normally will ask the committee to answer the following type of questions, if applicable:

- a. In reviewing a tenure decision, was the standard applied in that decision, one that differed significantly from the single standard for tenure set out in [Section 3.2](#), and if so, did such deviation substantially affect the outcome;
- b. Did the process in consideration of a promotion or tenure case deviate in any significant way from the standard processes provided for such promotion or tenure cases that substantially affected the outcome;
- c. Was the process for consideration of the promotion or tenure case significantly influenced by one or more factors unrelated to the evaluation of the promotion or tenure candidate which indicates an inappropriate bias in the decision making process, and if so, did that influence substantially affect the outcome; and
- d. Any other questions the Provost identifies that relate to a review of the fairness and adequacy of the process that led to the decision not to promote or not to advance or award tenure.

The ad hoc committee has complete discretion as to the review process it undertakes. Upon completion of its fact finding, the ad hoc committee shall report in writing to the Provost, its findings and the reasons for those findings. These findings should be directly responsive to the questions in the Provost's charge so the Provost can determine whether the process was adequate and fair.

The Provost will review the ad hoc committee report and make a final decision. In making that decision, the Provost will consult with the President and additionally, may consult with whomever the Provost decides appropriate. If the Provost finds the process was not fair or adequate, he or she should establish an internal mechanism to reconsider the decision. The Provost will inform the requestor of the decision in person and in writing. The Provost's decision is final and there is no further or other review of a promotion or tenure decision.

The following shall serve as guidelines for the timing of the review process:

- within ten (10) working days, acknowledgement of the request for review should be made;
- within twenty (20) working days from the receipt of the review, the Provost should appoint an ad hoc committee and inform the review requestor of the appointment and the procedures to be used in his or her case;
- the ad hoc committee should seek to complete its review and issue a report to the Provost within seventy-five (75) working days of receiving the case from the Provost,
- the Provost should communicate his/her decision to the review requestor in writing within ten (10) working days from the time he or she received the report.

The Provost may extend or otherwise modify these guidelines at the request of the ad hoc committee or for other appropriate reasons after informing the review requestor.

This entire review process, including the identity of the members of the ad hoc committee, should be kept confidential. Any information obtained in the review process should be kept confidential. However, information obtained in the review process may be disclosed to individuals who have been consulted by the Provost or the ad hoc committee as part of the review process, as long as each is informed of his or her obligation to maintain its confidentiality and agrees in writing to keep the information confidential. In addition, the ad hoc committee may disclose information to those whom they interview or from whom they otherwise obtain facts during the review to the extent the ad hoc committee believes such disclosure is necessary to a complete and thorough review. In such cases, the ad hoc committee will instruct the recipient of information of the need to maintain confidentiality of the information. The ad hoc committee will not disclose confidential recommendation letters or provide information from a confidential evaluation letter submitted in connection with a promotion or tenure case, if such information discloses the identity of the person or reasonably would be expected to lead to the identity of the evaluator.

The review requestor and any individual from whom the ad hoc committee seeks information for the review (the “participant”) may select an advisor who can accompany the individual to any discussion, or appearance before the ad hoc committee. The advisor must be a member of the MIT faculty but may not be a family member or an attorney, although parties may consult with a family member or an attorney during the course of the review. The role of the faculty advisor is to provide support, guidance and advice; he or she, therefore, may not directly participate in the review, or communicate with or otherwise address the ad hoc committee or the Provost regarding the review. The review requestor or other individual participating in the ad hoc committee review may not disclose any confidential information regarding the review to his or her faculty advisor, family member, or attorney unless the review requestor or other participant instructs that person to keep such information confidential.

The ad hoc committee will provide a final report to the Provost. In addition, the committee will provide a summary of its findings with no confidential information. When

the Provost sends written notification of his or her decision to the review requestor, the Provost may also provide the summary of findings if the review requestor agrees in writing not to disclose the summary or any information contained in the summary, except to an advisor, attorney, or family member but only on the condition that those individuals will agree in writing not to disclose any information obtained.

The materials gathered during the course of the review, the ad hoc committee's report and the decision of the Provost will be kept in the Provost's office for at least seven years.

Participation in this voluntary review process does not suspend or postpone any deadline established by law or regulation for initiating any external legal process.