Over the past few years the Rank and Tenure Committee has, in addition to performing its regular duties associated with the mentoring and evaluation of faculty, engaged in a number of discussions regarding current policies/practices (or lack thereof) that have become problematic in the sense that they make it more difficult for the Committee to conduct its business in a timely and effective manner. We are therefore bringing these issues to the attention of the Faculty Senate – and the broader campus community – in the hope that appropriate fixes can be identified and implemented. Although the Rank and Tenure Committee is not a policy-making body we have offered some possible solutions that might help to inform a broader campus-wide discussion.

1. Calendar/Deadlines – Due Dates

Concern: Current R&T timeline for fall semester is untenable.

Background: The official deadlines for Forms A (candidate self-studies), Forms B (departmental evaluations), and letters from Deans are listed in section 2.6.2.2.3. of the Faculty Handbook (FHB). For interim reviews, which the Rank and Tenure Committee conducts in the fall semester, Forms A are due on September 1. Forms B for third-year reviews are due on September 30, while those for fourth and fifth year reviews are due on October 15. Letters from Deans are due on November 1. In addition, the FHB specifies that the chair of R&T will mail out interim review letters by a deadline of December 15.

If these deadlines are employed without modification, the net result is that R&T has a very narrow window – approximately six weeks – to process all of the interim review cases and write the corresponding letters. Given that (i) R&T can hear a maximum of three cases per week, (ii) the review of any case cannot occur until both the Form B and Dean letter are present, and (iii) the writing of the R&T letters involves multiple drafts and extends over multiple weeks, the official FHB deadlines become unworkable whenever there are more than 10 or 12 candidates undergoing interim review. (This occurs pretty much every year; in most years there are ~ 20 interim review cases that are processed by R&T during the fall semester.)

In recent years R&T has responded to this problem by asking Chairs and Deans to submit their Forms B and letters according to an informal, accelerated schedule that allows R&T to begin hearing third-year cases by mid-October. While this has worked (most of the time) as a temporary fix, it has not addressed the underlying problem of an unworkable FHB timeline. It has also been difficult for the Chairs and Deans (who have less time to write their letters) and the R&T chair (who must continually nag Chairs and Deans to adhere to the unofficial, accelerated timeline).

Potential Solutions:

PS.1.1. Adjust the deadlines listed in the FHB so that R&T can begin hearing cases in early October. This would involve earlier deadlines for everybody – candidates, Chairs, and
Deans. Candidates would submit their Forms A before the start of the fall semester and Chairs and Deans would face tight deadlines during the first month of classes. The advantage of this approach is that faculty undergoing interim review would still receive R&T feedback before the winter break, which would allow them to make appropriate adjustments for the spring semester.

PS.1.2. Keep most of the current FHB deadlines and have R&T carry the interim reviews over into the January Term and/or the spring semester, so that interim review letters get mailed out during the month of March. This option would significantly delay the arrival of R&T feedback for candidates undergoing interim review, perhaps not allowing time to make adjustments prior to the next R&T review; it may also require the R&T Committee to work through the January Term, which may prove to be logistically difficult. On the plus side, this option provides a more relaxed timeframe for Chairs and Deans to submit their letters, and it requires fewer changes to the FHB.

2a. Electronic Course Evaluations – Lower Response Rates

Concern: Inadequate response rates to electronic course evaluations.

Background: The switch from hard copy to electronic course evaluations has resulted in a significant drop in the student response rate (please see data from Chris Procello). The Rank and Tenure Committee is extremely concerned that the data being collected electronically might therefore be biased or inaccurate due to the phenomenon of responders self-selecting. Given that R&T relies heavily on course evaluation data as one indicator of overall teaching effectiveness, the decrease in the response rate is very worrisome. In addition, there is also the fear that it will now be much harder – at least over the short term – to identify and assess semester-to-semester trends in teaching effectiveness. For cases where there are apparent shifts in the evaluation data it may be impossible to determine if the shifts reflect actual changes in pedagogical performance as opposed to changes in assessment formats and/or response rates.

Potential Solution:

PS.2a.1. Provide “carrot and stick” incentives to students to encourage high response rates. These incentives might be linked to explicit rewards (or penalties) dealing with access to online grades, very minor reductions in student fees, etc.

2b. Electronic Course Evaluations – Quality of Data

Concern: Lower quality feedback from electronic course evaluations.

Background: In addition to lower response rates for numerical data (i.e., the questions evaluated using the 1-5 point scale), anecdotal evidence exists that there has been a simultaneous decline in both the frequency and quality of written comments. Furthermore,
the environment in which the evaluations are administered has shifted substantially, from a carefully controlled in-class setting (frequently overseen by representatives from the Student Rank and Tenure Committee in undergraduate courses) to unrestricted online access over a multi-week window. The Committee is therefore very concerned that the quantitative decline in the overall response rate has been accompanied by a simultaneous decrease in the quality of student feedback.

Potential Solution:

PS.2b.1. Implement a standardized protocol where electronic evaluations are conducted in-class, under carefully controlled conditions.

3. Elimination of the Confidential File

Concern: Candidates cannot respond to accusations in their “confidential” file, which is not actually confidential due to Chair and Dean access.

Background: As things presently stand, R&T candidates have open access to some parts of their files (Form B departmental letters, Dean letters), while other parts remain off-limits (Student Rank and Tenure recommendations, individual letters submitted by on-campus or off-campus colleagues). The latter items have traditionally been kept confidential in order to encourage candid assessments and to protect letter writers from possible retaliation. While these benefits may indeed result from this approach, there are also a number of problems that can arise. One big problem is that candidates undergoing review can be accused of improprieties ranging from trivial to serious without having the chance to respond. As a matter of basic fairness, this is highly problematic. A second problem is that the “confidential” portion of the file remains open to the Form B Chair, the Dean, and the Provost. Any expectation that a submitted letter will be viewed only by R&T is therefore incorrect. A third problem is that the content of “confidential” letters can sometimes devolve into a litany of interpersonal grievances. While these sorts of (thankfully rare) letters may indeed address the criteria of “collegiality” and the “ability to work well with colleagues,” it is nearly always impossible for the R&T Committee to determine whether or not the accusations being made in the letter are accurate and fair. This can put the Committee in the awkward position of having to assess not only the content of the letter but the motivations and reliability of the letter writer. The typical experience of R&T is therefore that these sorts of letters more often hinder, rather than help, the effective evaluation of the candidate.

Potential Solutions:

PS.3.1. Completely eliminate the “confidential” portion of the file. Notify all letter writers that their letters will be made accessible to the candidate undergoing review. Make the Student R&T Committee letter accessible as well, by following the same process as the Faculty Committee (the letter receives a pro forma signature from the Committee chair,
while the underlying votes of the Committee members and their deliberations remain secret).

PS.3.2. Eliminate the “confidential” portion of the file for all on-campus submissions, while retaining confidentiality for all letters from off-campus.

4. Possible Use of Grade Distribution Data

**Concern:** The candidates, Chairs, Deans, and the R&T Committee are unable to make fully informed assessments relating to grading practices and academic rigor because these assessments do not include grade distribution data.

**Background:** The criteria listed in the FHB under the general category of “teaching effectiveness” (FHB section 2.6.1.) make it clear that faculty undergoing R&T review are expected to implement and maintain high academic standards:

- “Teaching effectiveness is founded upon... the communication of appropriate, high expectations of student performance.”
- “Course syllabi and assignments should reflect clearly defined academic objectives, expectations, and standards.”
- “Promoting intellectual stimulation and providing challenging learning experiences”
- “Through evaluation procedures and grading policies, teachers should communicate that excellence requires... the practice of the rigors and discipline of learning.”

[also: Duties of Department Chairs (FHB 1.4.2.4.1.): “under teaching effectiveness include the candidate’s policies and standards on grading, homework, and examinations/papers.”]

Given (i) these clear directives from the FHB and (ii) the obvious connection between academic standards and grading outcomes, the Committee frequently finds itself in the position of attempting to assess the grading practices of a candidate undergoing review. Since grade distribution data are not presently used by R&T – or by Chairs or Deans, for that matter – indirect evidence is typically employed: course evaluation data from students regarding anticipated letter grades, intellectual challenge, and so forth; data and analysis voluntarily included by the candidate in the Form A; etc. The Committee is very concerned that these indirect assessments may be unreliable, and may lead to general inferences about assigned letter grades that run counter to the actual facts.
A number of Committee members believe that routine access to grade distribution data – in a manner completely analogous to the current processing and sharing of course evaluation results – would greatly improve the R&T process. Candidates, Chairs, and Deans would be able to provide cogent, evidence-based analyses that address the FHB criteria noted above, and the R&T Committee would be able to assess the available evidence in the context of departmental, school, and College-wide norms.

Given that this particular request from the R&T Committee may raise concerns that faculty might face sanction from the Committee for grade assignments that differ from idealized expectations, it should be emphasized that grade distributions, *per se*, have never been included in the FHB criteria for “teaching effectiveness.” These criteria would remain unchanged. The goal in this instance is not to change the rules or enforce arbitrary grading standards but rather to encourage reflection – by candidates, Chairs, and Deans – on grading policies and academic rigor. The hope is that routine, widespread access to grade distribution data will promote thoughtful, campus-wide engagement with this important pedagogical issue.

**Potential Solution:**

PS.4.1. Provide faculty, Chairs, and Deans with grade distribution data for individual courses, along with corresponding department, school, and College-wide means. These data would also be automatically forwarded to R&T. The overall process would be fully analogous to the current distribution of course evaluation data.

5. **Long-Term Oversight of Rank and Tenure Objectives, Policies, and Practices**

*Concern:* Lack of oversight, assessment, and direction for R&T policies and procedures.

While the College has correctly noted – in a wide range of strategic plans and other formal documents – that attracting and retaining a talented and diverse faculty are top priorities, there exists no formal oversight of the R&T policies and procedures that are used to evaluate ranked faculty. The objectives, policies, and practices associated with R&T evaluations have evolved somewhat over the years, but there has never been an ongoing systematic review of these important issues. The R&T Committee believes that it would be helpful and appropriate to implement a “program review” process for R&T. The goals of this process would be to ensure (i) that our R&T objectives, policies, and practices remain aligned with the mission of the College, and (ii) that faculty and administrators stay informed about R&T practices throughout the wider academic community.

**Potential Solution:**

PS.5.1. Establish a new committee, or assign this responsibility to an existing body (e.g., the Faculty Welfare Committee). Determine the preferred frequency of reviews (once every five years?) and explicitly document the issues to be addressed. Formalize all of these new arrangements with appropriate additions to the FHB.
6. Enforcement of R&T Deadlines

Concern: Lack of consequences for late submissions.

Background: As things presently stand, there are no enforceable, FHB-mandated consequences for candidates, Chairs, or Deans who fail to meet the deadlines specified in the FHB. This creates huge problems, both in terms of R&T being able to plan out a feasible schedule for hearing cases, and also as a matter of simple fairness to individuals who submit their materials on time.

Potential Solutions:

All of the potential solutions discussed by the Committee were viewed as impractical, unenforceable, or “cures” that might cause more harm than the underlying “disease.” But this issue continues to be a serious problem and further campus-wide discussion is needed.

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Respectfully submitted by the 2013-2014 Rank and Tenure Committee,

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