

LETTERS OF REFERENCE GUIDELINES

College of Human Medicine

MSU specifies guidelines, processes and procedures for external letters of reference for [tenure system faculty](#), [fixed term faculty](#) and [academic specialists](#). The College of Human Medicine uses these guidelines for letters of reference for faculty in all appointment systems. Departments should use the following College of Human Medicine guidelines in addition to MSU guidelines, processes and procedures.

Purpose

The purpose of letters of reference is to provide evidence during the promotion review process that individuals seeking promotion, tenure, and/or continuing status have achievements and performance level that is comparable with faculty at peer institutions for the rank or action sought.¹

Reviewers

Letters of reference should be from leading scholars in the relevant discipline at peer institutions. The reviewer must:

- Hold the academic rank for which the candidate is being considered², or higher.
- Be professionally capable of evaluating the candidate's scholarly work objectively and commenting on its significance in the discipline.
- Submit the letter on institutional letterhead with signature.

Letters must predominantly represent persons other than collaborators. In no case may those who served as primary dissertation chair or major advisor for post-doctoral research be chosen as reviewers.

Confidentiality

University policy states that all letters soliciting evaluation for promotion and tenure recommendations must include the unit's statement on confidentiality. The College of Human Medicine uses the university's suggested language:

Your letter of evaluation, as part of an official review file, will be held in confidence and will not be disclosed to the faculty member under consideration or to the public except as required by law or University policy. In all such instances, the information made available will be provided in a form that seeks to protect the identity, privacy and confidentiality of evaluators.

Departments who wish to deviate from this language must consult the university policy for the university's expectations and the procedure for review of the revised statement. See https://hr.msu.edu/policies-procedures/faculty-academic-staff/faculty-handbook/confidentiality_ref-letters.html

¹ Academic specialists may or may not have effort allocated to research/scholarly activity. When they do not, letters should be solicited from individuals with a record of and reputation for distinguished performance in similar areas of the mission. External letters should comment on internal activities as well as relevant external service, outreach or other forms of external engagement related to the area(s) of effort. They would compare achievements to individuals filling similar roles at peer institutions.

² In the case of specialists, which is a system unique to MSU, external reviewers "...should be from leading professionals/scholars in the relevant discipline..." but may be from any appointment system. ([Academic Specialist Handbook, 4.3.4.](#))

Solicitation of Letters

Soliciting letters of reference and providing materials to the referees is solely the responsibility of the department chairperson. Candidates must not discuss their case with prospective or actual external evaluators at any stage of the review process.

The department chairperson shall:

- Specify the number of potential evaluators to be suggested by the candidate
- Specify a proportion or number of letters of reference to be solicited from persons suggested by the candidate
- Determine which of the potential referees will be asked to provide letters of reference
- Add names not on the candidate's list

The process of soliciting letters of reference must incorporate the following principles and procedures and must be applied uniformly to all faculty in the unit.

The request to a referee must include:

- The unit's statement on confidentiality
- A request to disclose any potential conflicts of interest
- A description of the candidate's assignment, including, for example, the percentage of the appointment devoted to research/scholarly activity, teaching, service, etc.
- A request to assess
 - The candidate in comparison to others in his/her cohort nationally
 - The extent and quality of the scholarship of the candidate, including its contribution to the discipline
- The following additional resources
 - The curriculum vitae
 - The Reflective Essay (and the COVID-19 Impact Statement if submitted as a separate document)
 - A representative sample of the candidate's scholarly work; candidates may also choose to submit evidence of quality of their work in teaching and/or service
 - The applicable promotion criteria (college and department)

College Requirements by Appointment System

Tenure System

For reappointment to the second probationary period, external letters of reference are not required.

Assistant Professor (or Associate Professor without tenure) to Associate Professor with tenure

- Minimum of 4 and maximum of 6 external letters
- Of the total number of letters submitted with the dossier, at least two letters should have been nominated by the chair independently from the candidate's recommendations
- Letters must come from reviewers in the tenure system who hold the rank of tenured Associate Professor or higher

Associate Professor with tenure to Professor

- Minimum of 4 and maximum of 6 external letters
- Of the total number of letters submitted with the dossier, at least two letters should have been nominated by the chair independently from the candidate's recommendations
- Letters must come from reviewers in the tenure system who hold the rank of tenured Professor

Research System

For reappointment in this system, letters are not required.

Assistant Professor-Research to Associate Professor-Research

- Minimum of 4 and maximum of 6 external letters
- Of the total number of letters submitted with the dossier, at least two letters should have been nominated by the chair independently from the candidate's recommendations
- Letters must come from reviewers who hold rank of Associate Professor or higher

Associate Professor-Research to Professor-Research

- Minimum of 4 and maximum of 6 external letters
- Of the total number of letters submitted with the dossier, at least two letters should have been nominated by the chair independently from the candidate's recommendations
- Letters must come from reviewers who hold rank of Professor

Health Programs, Fixed Term, and Non-Prefix Community Based

For reappointment in these systems, letters are not required.

Assistant Professor to Associate Professor

- Minimum of 4 and maximum of 6 letters
 - At least one letter must be external
 - Other letters may be internal or external
- Of the total number of letters submitted with the dossier, at least two letters should have been nominated by the chair independently from the candidate's recommendations
 - At least one of the two letters nominated by the chair must be external
- Letters must come from reviewers who hold rank of Associate Professor or higher
- External letters
 - For health programs and fixed term faculty, external letters must be from reviewers outside of the MSU appointment system.
 - For non-prefix community-based faculty, external letters must be from reviewers outside of MSU appointment system and outside the appointment system of the applicant's primary employer.
- Internal letters
 - For health programs and fixed term faculty, internal letters are from faculty in the University who are knowledgeable in the candidate's particular field and expertise
 - For non-prefix community-based faculty, internal letters can be from faculty in the university or appropriately ranked faculty at in the applicant's primary employer.

Associate Professor to Professor

- Minimum of 4 and maximum of 6 letters
 - At least two letters must be external
 - Other letters may be internal or external
- Of the total number of letters submitted with the dossier, at least two letters should have been nominated by the chair independently from the candidate's recommendations
 - At least one of the two letters nominated by the chair must be external
- Letters must come from reviewers who hold rank of Professor
- External letters
 - For HP and FT faculty, external letters must be outside of the MSU appointment system.
 - For non-prefix community-based faculty, external letters must be outside of MSU appointment system and outside the appointment system of the applicant's primary employer.
- Internal letters
 - For HP and FT faculty, internal letters are from faculty in the University⁵ who are knowledgeable in the candidate's particular field and expertise

- For non-prefix community-based faculty, internal letters can be faculty in the university or appropriately ranked faculty at in the applicant's primary employer.

Academic Specialists

In the continuing system, for reappointment to the second probationary period, external letters of reference are not required. Letters are also not required for reappointment in the fixed term system.

Award of Continuing Status (continuing system only)

- Minimum of 3 and maximum of 6 external letters
- Of the total number of letters submitted with the dossier, at least two letters should have been nominated by the chair independently from the candidate's recommendations
- Letters should be from leading professionals/scholars in the relevant discipline. Generally, they should be a leader in the field *in the relevant functional area*.
- For specialists, "external" means external to the unit, college, or university. External reviewers can be appointed at MSU, but not within the specialist's department or unit.

Promotion from Specialist to Senior Specialist (continuing system or fixed term system)

- Minimum of 3 and maximum of 6 external letters
- Of the total number of external letters submitted with the dossier, at least two letters should have been nominated by the chair independently from the candidate's recommendations
- Letters should be from leading professionals/scholars in the relevant discipline. Generally, they should be a leader in the field *in the relevant functional area*.
- For specialists, "external" means external to the unit, college, or university. External reviewers can be appointed at MSU, but not within the specialist's department or unit.

Prefix Community-based

For reappointment or promotion in this system, external letters are not required. For promotion, a letter of support from a supervisor directly knowledgeable about performance in the educational, research and/or service missions of the college must be included.

Guidance on Strengthening the Impact of Letters

As faculty and chairs consider options for letter writers that will strengthen the case, they should keep in mind the following principles:

- External letters are stronger support for a case than internal ones because of the implication of greater independence. Internal letters from outside the department are stronger than letters from within the department for the same reason.
- Technically, someone who used to be at MSU at the same time as the applicant but is now elsewhere meets criteria to be an external reviewer, but avoiding such a person would strengthen the case, again because of the implication of greater independence.
- The principle of selecting external reviewers to achieve a more independent assessment must be balanced with selecting reviewers who understand the dimensions of the applicant's work upon which they will comment.

Revision History

October 20, 2021 – (K. Hodges) Updated to include guidance for Academic Specialists as endorsed by CAC.

May 3, 2022 – (K. Hodges) Revised guidance for number of letters in dossiers that must be recommended independently by chairperson, as recommended and endorsed by the College RPT Committee.

June 19, 2023 – (K. Hodges) Minor edits for clarity on the numbers of types of letters required in HP, FT and NP cases. Language revisions to align with revised text in the Academic Specialist Handbook distributed by the Office of the Provost in May 2023. Incorporation of existing language about prefix cases from the prefix promotion guidelines. Guidance on strengthening impact added.