

External Reviews within the Context of the Library Promotion and Tenure Process

Angel Clemons and Tyler Goldberg

Abstract

External reviews are part of the promotion and tenure process for faculty at many institutions of higher education. The authors examined external review writing within the context of the academic library faculty promotion and tenure process by surveying 1849 librarians at 166 libraries. Librarians were asked to respond to quantitative and qualitative survey questions on several aspects of the external review process: participation in the process, qualifying as an external reviewer, the writing process, and demographics. The authors received 379 responses. Survey results provide information from the perspective of librarians who write external reviews, and show similarities with external reviewers in other disciplines.

Introduction

External reviews are used widely in the tenure and promotion process for faculty at institutions of higher education. External review can be defined as “a review of [a] candidate’s supportive documentation for promotion, tenure or appointment conducted by persons external or outside the candidate’s university.”¹ Oftentimes, a candidate’s tenure or promotion portfolio will contain solicited letters from experts in his/her area of specialty who are asked to comment on the quality and impact of the candidate’s body of work. These letters assist the promotion and tenure committee in evaluating the candidate’s performance and qualifications for tenure and/or promotion. Reviewers are expected “to make an assessment that is candid and fair, based on professionally relevant criteria, and first-hand knowledge; to disclose any personal relationship with the candidate being evaluated; and to respond in a timely fashion.”²

External reviews are mandatory for promotion to Associate Professor and Professor and for tenure at the University of Louisville.³ The University of Louisville Libraries’ Personnel Committee compiles a list of potential reviewers and solicits suggestions of external reviewers from the candidate. The Personnel Committee selects the three reviewers from the pool whose qualifications and responsibilities most closely match the position or rank to which the candidate is seeking promotion. The external reviewers who are selected must never have collaborated on research with the candidate, and cannot be more than casual acquaintances. Names are redacted throughout the process with only the Libraries’ Personnel Committee and Dean, and the University Administration seeing the unredacted letters.

In examining letters written by external reviewers over several years, the authors became interested in the behavior of external reviewers in a process that is time consuming for the candidate, the institution’s promotion and tenure committee, and the reviewer. The authors were familiar with a study done by Tracy Bicknell-Holmes and Kay Logan-Peters, which focused on the procedures used by Association of Research Libraries (ARL) member libraries to conduct external reviews.⁴ However, there was no information from the perspective of librarians who write external reviews. This paper provides

more information on this process from the perspective of librarians who write external reviews. By surveying librarians, the authors' goal is to fill a gap in the literature concerning external reviews in the promotion and tenure process in academic librarianship, and compare their findings with those of other disciplines that have studied the external review process.

Literature Review

Many articles have been written about the tenure process for academic librarians, though very few have addressed specifically the external review aspect of the tenure process. Only one substantial and critical piece of literature provides an overview of the external review process for academic librarians seeking tenure or promotion. Bicknell-Holmes and Logan-Peters, in their SPEC Kit *External Review for Promotion and Tenure*, surveyed librarians at 123 ARL libraries in order to evaluate "how external reviewers are identified and asked to participate in the review process, what instructions are given to reviewers, what materials are included in candidates' portfolios, and the criteria for evaluating candidates' portfolios."⁵ Almost two-thirds of surveyed institutions responded (63%), of which only 49% required external reviews. Approximately half of respondents had faculty status and tenure, or equivalent, appointments. The study found that for almost half the responding institutions, "external reviews are to be unbiased evaluations or critical assessments of the candidates."⁶ A small percentage of institutions expected that the reviews would be a positive evaluation of the candidate. Typically reviewers received the candidate's curriculum vitae (CV), the institution's promotion and tenure standards, and copies of published works or other scholarly materials. Less often, institutions sent a summary of accomplishments written by the candidate, information about service activities, and other job related materials. A very small percentage of institutions did not send the candidate's CV but instead asked the reviewer to comment on their personal knowledge of the candidate. Reviewers were most often asked to evaluate the candidate in the area of research (89%), and less often in the areas of service (66%) and job performance (33%). Approximately half of the respondents gave the reviewer between two weeks and one month to complete the review. Bicknell-Holmes and Logan-Peters concluded, based on a comparison of what the reviewer was asked to evaluate versus the documentation provided, that "the majority of respondents (76%) provided sufficient evidence of the candidate's performance in each area they ask the external reviewer to evaluate."⁷

Four other relevant studies regarding external reviews for promotion and tenure have been conducted outside the field of library science – two in accounting, one in nursing, and one in political science. Lyn Reilly, et al. assessed "the external review practices used at National League for Nursing accredited baccalaureate and higher degree programs in nursing in the USA which award a doctoral degree."⁸ Reilly sent 53 surveys, and received 34 usable responses. The survey covered topics ranging from procedures used to make promotion and tenure decisions to the advantages and disadvantages of external review. The majority of responding institutions utilized the external review process in making promotion and tenure decisions. The procedures for most institutions included sending the candidate's CV, copies of publications and/or abstracts, and the institution's promotion and tenure criteria. Typically, institutions chose two to eight reviewers, and gave them, on average, six weeks to complete the review. The advantages of the process that survey respondents cited most often were that it decreased personal bias, allowed judgment by peers who are experts in the candidate's discipline, and provided objective data and additional information to those making the promotion or tenure decision. The disadvantages cited most often were that it increased the workload of reviewers, added time and costs to the promotion and tenure process, and required the institution to find knowledgeable and qualified reviewers.

Bill Schwartz and Richard Schroeder conducted a similar study from the perspective of faculty members in accounting who serve as reviewers.⁹ They sought to discover answers to the following questions: “How do reviewers approach the process? What are they asked to do? What types of recommendations are they making? In short, are ERs [external reviews] really accomplishing their objectives?”¹⁰ Their goal was to evaluate “(1) the prevalence of external reviews in the promotion and tenure process, (2) how individuals are chosen to perform external reviews, (3) the areas of evaluation for external reviews, (4) the basis upon which external reviewers conduct their evaluations, and (5) the identification of any problems external reviewers might encounter.”¹¹ Schwartz and Schroeder sent 728 surveys to administrators and professors at Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) accredited institutions and received 338 usable responses. Schwartz and Schroeder found that 54% of the respondents had completed a total of 602 reviews in the last two to three years, with the median number of reviews being one. Almost half of the reviews completed assessed only the research of the candidate, while 26% assessed teaching, research, and service. Institutions sent promotion and tenure criteria for half of the 602 reviews written. The reviews were based most often either “on the reviewer’s personal evaluation of the adequacy of performance without specific guidelines” (26.9%) or on the question of whether “the candidate would be granted tenure and/or promotion at the reviewer’s institution” (16.1%).¹² Interestingly, Schwartz and Schroeder discovered that only 7% of the reviews were considered negative and “very few individuals from any of the schools were willing to give what they considered an unfavorable review.”¹³ This completely negates the perceived advantage of an objective, unbiased review (also found in Reilly, et al.). The respondents were asked also to comment on perceived problems with the external review process. The two most frequently mentioned problems were not being given enough time to complete the review and not receiving the institution’s promotion and tenure criteria or, if received, having only a vague understanding of the criteria by which to evaluate the candidate. Based primarily on the lack of negative reviews and the lack of institutional criteria being sent, Schwartz and Schroeder concluded that “the results of this study indicate that the process may not be functioning as anticipated.”¹⁴

Shelley Rhoades-Catanach and David E. Stout extended the work of Schwartz and Schroeder by further analyzing accounting faculty’s participation in the external review process through a content analysis of departmental criteria sent to external reviewers during the promotion and tenure process.¹⁵ Rhoades-Catanach and Stout requested copies of information sent to external reviewers (e.g., cover letters, promotion and tenure criteria) from 118 institutions. Thirty-eight institutions responded, of which only 35 used external reviews as part of their promotion and tenure process. Rhoades-Catanach and Stout analyzed the materials in the following areas: performance evaluated (i.e., teaching, research, service), benchmarking practices, evaluation criteria, and materials sent to external reviewers. They found that all institutions requested that research be evaluated in the external review process. Additionally, 40% of the institutions requested that teaching be evaluated and 30% requested that service be evaluated. In terms of benchmarking, the reviewers were asked most frequently (51.4%) to evaluate candidates based on “others at the same level with which reviewer is familiar.”¹⁶ One fourth of the institutions did not provide a benchmark, while 17.1% asked whether the candidate would receive promotion or tenure at the reviewer’s institution. Most often, institutions communicated evaluation criteria for research to reviewers, including contribution/importance of research to the literature, quality of publications, and potential for future research activity. Institutions varied in the materials they sent to reviewers by which to assess the candidate. Most institutions sent both the candidate’s CV and copies of published research papers. Less often, institutions sent a statement by the candidate regarding his/her research stream, teaching evaluations, and a discussion of the relative importance of research at the institution.

Surprisingly, only 8.6% of respondents received a copy of the institution's promotion and tenure guidelines.

Kay Lehman Schlozman reported on a joint study conducted by the American Political Science Association's (APSA) Committee on Professional Ethics, Rights, and Freedoms and the APSA Committee on Departmental Services. The study was comprised of two surveys, one of APSA members who were full professors (i.e., reviewers) and the other of departmental chairs of APSA members (i.e., requestors). Schlozman's goal was to evaluate "the process by which external letters are solicited, written, and used" within the discipline of political science.¹⁷ Almost two-thirds of reviewers who responded received a request to write a review within the previous 12 months, and 56% of them agreed. Reviewers spent an average of 10.6 hours writing reviews for tenure cases and nine hours for promotion cases. Responses revealed that the burden for writing reviews was unevenly placed on faculty from departments with Ph.D. programs, specifically female faculty, and most often those who were active researchers or who engaged in APSA service. According to the requestors of external reviews, a candidate's documentation was sent the majority of the time, with most reviewers being asked to accept or decline the review first. Like previous studies, "comments appended to the questionnaires suggest that external letters tend to be positive."¹⁸ From the results, Schlozman defined six responsibilities of requestors that would make the process "fair and professional as well as respectful of the experience of the candidate under consideration": 1) choose competent professionals with no known biases, 2) do not send materials until a request to review has been accepted or rejected, 3) give the reviewer sufficient time to respond, 4) define how review letters will be used and how confidentiality will be handled, 5) share the final promotion or tenure decision with the reviewer, and 6) request letters conservatively due to the burden on reviewers.¹⁹

With the University of Louisville Libraries' process in mind and these five studies as a foundation, the authors were interested in discovering how academic librarians who write external reviews approach the writing process. The following sections outline the approach taken in selecting and surveying librarians and discuss the results from that survey.

Methodology

Sample Population

The target population for this research study was librarians at academic institutions with both faculty status and tenure. The authors used the list of "Librarians with Faculty Status and Tenure"²⁰ in *A Guide to the Professional Status of Academic Librarians in the United States (and Other Places)* and corroborated it with the list of "Academic Libraries with Tenure Track Positions" compiled by the Mississippi State University Library.²¹ Only those institutions that were listed as having both faculty status and tenured, or equivalent, positions were included in the population. The authors identified 188 library systems and examined each library's website for a listing of personnel by title. Of those 188 libraries, 166 had usable personnel directories. Usable personnel directories listed librarians by title and contained email addresses for those librarians. The total target population for this study was 4259 librarians.

The authors selected librarians in each directory whose titles implied one or more of the following positions: Librarian, Head, Dean (including Assistant and Associate Deans), Director, Curator, Archivist, and Professor (including Associate Professors). The authors felt that these librarians would most likely be tenured or at a rank eligible to write reviews. The authors took the personnel list of each institution

and assigned a number to all qualifying librarians, beginning with one and running sequentially to the end of that institution's list. If the list had less than ten qualifying names, all were included in the sample. If the list had 11-20 qualifying names, the authors selected every other name bearing an even number. If the list had greater than 20 qualifying names, the authors selected every third name, beginning with the second name on the list (i.e., 2, 5, 8, 11, etc.). This method was used in an effort to elicit an equal percentage of responses within institutional size category. The final sample included 1885 names.

Instrumentation

The authors created a 37-question survey designed to gather information about the following aspects of external review writing: participation in the external review process, qualifying as an external reviewer, the writing process, and demographics. The survey targeted for inclusion those librarians who had written an external review for a librarian seeking promotion and/or tenure at another institution. The survey was designed to elicit both factual and subjective responses and contained a mix of both quantitative and qualitative questions [Table 1]. The majority of questions (92%) used a nominal scale and the remaining questions were open-ended and designed to gather follow-up information on the other questions. The authors input the survey instrument into the Survey Monkey website,²² tested it among a small group of librarians at their institution, revised it according to comments and suggestions received during testing, then sent it out via email to librarians in the sample.

Table 1
Survey questions

Have you ever written an external review for a librarian seeking promotion and/or tenure at another institution?
Approximately how many external reviews have you written since you have been employed at your institution?
Have you ever declined to write an external review?
What were your reasons for declining to write an external review? (Select all that apply)
Based on the last external review that you were asked to do, were you asked to supply a vitae to the requesting institution?
Did you have a current vita that you could readily supply?
If you did not have a current vita to supply, what did you do?
How were you selected to perform the external review?
Did the requesting institution send you specific instructions for completing the review?
What one piece of documentation sent by the institution did you find most helpful in writing your review?
Did you take the time to search for and read publications authored by the candidate, but not provided in the documentation supplied by the institution?
What did you think your role was as external reviewer?
Why did you adopt the role (i.e., advocate, neutral, critic) that you answered in question #5?
How much time did the institution give you to complete the review?
Did you feel that the institution gave you enough time to complete the review?
How many hours did you spend on the review, including reviewing the candidate's portfolio and writing the review?
Did you return the review by the deadline?

Did the institution send you a reminder of the deadline?
When you agreed to serve as an external reviewer, what level of importance did you place on completing the process?
If the institution provided no specific instructions, how long was your review?
Did the institution promise to redact your name and contact information?
Did the presence or absence of a redaction statement in the external review procedures influence the way you wrote your review?
How were you influenced by the presence or absence of a redaction statement?
Were you permitted by your institution to complete the review during work hours?
How many external reviews did you complete last year?
Does your participation in providing external reviews contribute towards your accomplishments for promotion and/or tenure at your institution?
What aspect of your accomplishments is fulfilled by writing an external review?
What is the status of librarians at your institution? (check all that apply)
Does your institution require external reviews for its promotion and tenure process?
How many external reviews does your institution require for its promotion and tenure process?
How many years have you been employed as a librarian at your institution?
Which category best describes your position?
What is your current FTE?
Do you have additional comments on any aspect of the external review process?
Would you like to be contacted with additional follow-up questions or to discuss your survey responses?
Please provide your contact information (e.g., name, email address, or phone number).

Response Rate

The authors sent 1885 survey invitations via email to librarians at 166 libraries. A total of 1849 survey invitations were delivered after 36 bounced back as undeliverable. The survey was open from March 28, 2012 to April 20, 2012. A reminder was sent to all 1849 original invitees on April 16, 2012. The authors received a total of 379 survey responses by the closing date for a total response rate of 20.5%. The authors used Survey Monkey to tabulate the results.

Results

Survey respondents based their answers on the last external review they had written. While the survey questions provided a great deal of easily tabulated information, the many additional comments to open-ended questions yielded valuable information.

The majority of respondents (78%) were employed at an institution where librarians had faculty status, with 52.4% of respondents at institutions granting tenure to librarians. [Table 2] Of the 14 respondents who checked the “Other” category, most added comments clarifying their status, e.g. “continuous appointment, which carries with it a quasi-tenure status, but not nearly as strong as faculty tenure,” “mix of academic and faculty status with tenure,” and “extended term appointment.” One respondent indicated that his/her institution was beginning to transition from faculty status, though there was no indication whether this was for librarians only, or all faculty. The majority of respondents (80.1%) indicated that external reviews were required by their institution for its promotion and tenure process.

Of those who were at institutions that required external reviews, 65% were at institutions where librarians have faculty status.

Table 2
Demographics

<i>A. What is the status of librarians at your institution? (Check all that apply)</i>		
(n=191)*	Response Percent	Response Count
Faculty status	78%	149
Tenure	52.4%	100
Continuous appointment, not tenure	14.7%	28
Academic status	14.1%	27
Other (please specify)	7.3%	14
*(n=number of respondents answering question)		
<i>B. Does your institution require external reviews for its promotion and tenure process?</i>		
(n=191)	Response Percent	
Yes	80.1%	
No	19.9%	

Table 3 shows the level of participation of respondents in the external review process. Of the 379 respondents, 52.5% (199 respondents) had written an external review, 77.9% of whom had written less than five reviews since employment at his/her current institution. The next largest group (16.6%) had written 6-10 reviews. A majority of respondents (81.4%) indicated that they had never declined to write an external review.

Table 3
Participation

<i>A. Have you ever written an external review for a librarian seeking promotion and/or tenure at another institution?</i>	
(n=379)	Response Percent
Yes	52.5%
No	47.5%
<i>B. Approximately how many external reviews have you written since you have been employed at your institution?</i>	
(n=199)	Response Percent
Less than 5	77.9%
6-10	16.6%

11-15	3.5%
16-20	1%
21-25	0%
26+	0%
I don't know	1%

<i>C. Have you ever declined to write an external review?</i>	
(n=199)	Response Percent
No	81.4%
Yes	18.6%

Of the 18.6% of respondents who indicated that they declined to write an external review, the largest percentage noted that they were “too busy.” [Table 4] Of the 11 respondents who chose “Other,” three responded that they were already committed to multiple reviews and could not commit to another, two indicated that they did not feel sufficiently familiar enough with the candidate’s work to do an informative review, and two others did not yet have tenure and felt that it would be inappropriate to make a recommendation for a candidate for tenure. Other reasons for declining were “referred file to another more qualified person in the organization,” “exercise in futility,” “candidate didn’t ask me in advance,” and “file was garbage.”

Table 4
Reasons for declining to write an external review

<i>What were your reasons for declining to write an external review? (Select all that apply)</i>		
n=37	Response percent	Response count
Too busy	35.1%	13
Other	29.7%	11
Did not meet institution’s qualifications	27%	10
Institutional deadline too short	24.3%	9
Did not want to write a negative review	21.6%	8
Concerns over confidentiality	5.4%	2

With responses based on the last written review, 55.1% of respondents reported that the requesting institution did not ask for a CV from the reviewer in order to establish if they were qualified. For those institutions that did ask, 91.4% of reviewers indicated that they had one that could be supplied readily. The majority of those who did not have a current CV that could be supplied readily noted that they updated an old one in order to comply with the request.

Concerning the selection process for external reviewers, 74.1% received letters asking if he/she was willing to write a review. [Table 5] For those who indicated “Other,” most responded that requests were received through email or phone calls. Six respondents who gave this answer indicated that the request came directly from the candidate. Respondents also indicated overwhelmingly that the institutions sent specific instructions for completing the reviews, with 90.2% answering yes to this question.

Table 5
Selection process for external reviewers

<i>How were you selected to perform the external review?</i>	
(n=197)	Response Percent
Received letter asking if willing and/or qualified	74.1%
Other (please specify)	12.7%
I don't know	8.1%
Received unsolicited candidate portfolio and asked to review and return	4.6%
Recommended by colleague who was unable to complete the review	0.5%

<i>Did the requesting institution send you specific instructions for completing the review?</i>	
(n=194)	Response Percent
Yes	90.2%
No	7.2%
Not sure	2.6%

The majority of respondents found the candidate's CV the most helpful piece of information for writing the external review. [Table 6] Of those respondents who indicated "Other," the majority noted that they considered the entire portfolio necessary, and one piece was not more important than another. One respondent indicated that all that was received was a letter from the candidate, who was personally known to the external reviewer through service in a professional organization. Respondents were evenly divided when asked whether they read publications written by the candidate, but not supplied by the institution, with 50% answering yes, and 50% answering no.

Table 6
Documentation supplied by institution that reviewer found most helpful

<i>What one piece of documentation sent by the institution did you find most helpful in writing your review?</i>	
(n=194)	Response Percent
Candidate's resume	56.2%
Other (please specify)	14.9%
Personal statement of the candidate	13.4%
Copies of the candidate's publication	9.3%
Personnel document of the institution	6.2%

Respondents were asked what they felt their role should be as an external reviewer—advocate, critic, or neutral party; over half felt that they should be neutral. [Table 7] Of those who took the role of advocate, they did so because they were familiar with the candidate, had been asked by the candidate,

and/or supported the proposed promotion and/or tenure. Those who saw their role as critic said that they were asked to examine the files and make a critical evaluation of the materials provided. The majority of those who indicated "Other" felt the term did not exactly define their role. It was better defined as "objective," "unbiased," or a "combination of all three terms."

Respondents were asked an open-ended question concerning the role that they adopted. While the majority of respondents felt their role was neutral, the reasons why fell into several categories. Most felt that the requesting institution expected an assessment of the candidate based on the portfolio and the institution's documentation and criteria. Respondents described their approach as "reasoned," "honest," "evidence-based," "objective," "unbiased," and "impartial." They noted that their feedback could be both positive and negative. Often their role was not determined until they had examined the file and made an assessment of the individual's work compared to the institution's criteria. Those respondents who saw themselves as advocates either had been asked by the candidate, were familiar with the candidate's work, would not have agreed if they could not have been supportive, or felt that was what the institution expected of them. One respondent noted, "I believe that the most constructive and enlightened position to take is that of an advocate. There are always more than enough other 'peers' or library administrators only too eager to tear someone down, almost always when a candidate does not deserve such treatment." Of the small percentage who indicated their role as "critic," responses were that this was the role that they assumed the institution wanted them to take. These respondents noted "Evaluation implies critic," "tenure review process should be rigorous," and "external reviewer is ... more akin to a critic than an advocate."

Table 7
Role as external reviewer

<i>What did you think your role was as an external reviewer?</i>	
(n=194)	Response Percent
Neutral	55.2%
Advocate	19.1%
Other (please specify)	16%
Critic	9.8%

Table 8 provides a picture of the respondent's writing process. The largest number of respondents (41.9%) indicated "Other" for the number of reviews written in the past year. "Other" for all but one of the respondents meant that no external reviews were written in the past year. The sole respondent, who did not indicate zero, had done "probably 3-4."

Based on the last external review written, the majority of respondents spent three to seven hours working on the review. Of the four respondents who indicated "Other," two spent right at eight hours, and one provided an average time of four to five hours. One respondent indicated that he/she had spent approximately 40 hours. In terms of time given by the institution for completing the review, 43% noted the institution gave one month, while 45.6% indicated the institution gave two to four months to complete the review. The majority (92.2%) felt that the institution gave the reviewer adequate time to complete the review and 95.9% had met the deadline set by the institution for return of the review.

Of the ten respondents who indicated “Other” for length of review, one respondent’s review was 10 pages. Two respondents did not recall the length of the last review, and the rest noted that specific instructions were provided by the institution.

Table 8
Writing Process

<i>A. How many external reviews did you complete last year?</i>	
(n=191)	Response Percent
Other (please specify)	41.9%
One	39.8%
Two	18.3%

<i>B. When you agreed to serve as an external reviewer, what level of importance did you place on completing the process?</i>	
(n=193)	Response Percent
Medium priority	63.2%
High priority	31.6%
Low priority	5.2%

<i>C. If the institution provided no specific instructions, how long was your review?</i>	
(n=193)	Response Percent
1-2 pages	74.6%
More than 2 pages	14.5%
1 page or less	5.7%
Other (please specify)	5.2%

<i>D. Did you return the review by the deadline?</i>	
(n=193)	Response Percent
Yes	95.9%
No	4.1%

Table 9 concerns the promise of an institution to redact the external reviewer’s name. The majority of respondents indicated that they did not know whether the institution promised to redact his/her name. Of the number of respondents who indicated “Other,” six respondents could not recall whether their name would be redacted. An almost equal number noted that the institution offered the reviewer the choice of having his/her name redacted. One commented that he/she always insisted that the candidate see his/her unredacted comments. Another respondent pointed out that should a grievance result from a promotion and/or tenure decision, all names in the file would eventually be disclosed anyway due to public information laws.

Respondents were asked an open-ended question about how they were influenced by the presence or absence of a redaction statement. For 72.4% of respondents, the promise of redacting the reviewer's name had no influence over the content of the review. The 6.8% of respondents who felt influenced noted that they would not have been as candid without the redaction statement, with one noting that they would not have written the review without the promise of the redaction statement.

Table 9
Redaction statements

<i>A. Did the institution promise to redact your name and contact information?</i>	
(n=192)	Response Percent
Don't know	37%
Yes	30.2%
No	19.8%
Other (please specify)	13%

<i>B. Did the presence or absence of a redaction statement in the external review procedures influence the way you wrote your review?</i>	
(n=192)	Response Percent
No	72.4%
Not sure	20.8%
Yes	6.8%

The overwhelming majority of respondents (99%) were permitted to work on external reviews during work hours. [Table 10] However, 60.2% of respondents noted that writing external reviews was not considered towards their own accomplishments for promotion and/or tenure. For the 39.8% of respondents for whom this work could be considered an accomplishment in promotion and/or tenure reviews, the majority (94.7%) responded that this work was considered service to the profession.

Table 10
Practices of the reviewer's institution

<i>A. Were you permitted by your institution to complete the review during work hours?</i>	
(n=191)	Response Percent
Yes	99%
No	1%

<i>B. Does your participation in providing external reviews contribute towards your accomplishments for promotion and/or tenure at your institution?</i>	
(n=191)	Response Percent
No	60.2%
Yes	39.8%

C. *What aspect of your accomplishments is fulfilled by writing an external review?*

(n=76)	Response Percent
Service to the profession	94.7%
Other (please specify)	2.6%
Part of your regular job duties	1.3%
Research	1.3%

Respondents were asked if they had any additional comments on any aspect of the external review process. Of the 78 respondents who answered the question with a comment other than “no” (i.e. they had no additional comments), their comments could be easily grouped into four categories: practices for external review specific to the respondents’ institution; the importance of the external review process; the doubtful value of the external review process; and challenges reviewers have seen with the process. Fourteen respondents commented on practices at their institutions, including differences they saw when responding to requests of other institutions, e.g. items that would be considered as research at the institution making the request would not be considered research at the external reviewer’s institution. An almost equal number of respondents used this section to comment on the importance of the external review to the academic process, using phrases such as, “professional obligation,” “an essential part of the tenure/promotion process,” and “ensur[ing] equity and fairness in the promotion and tenure process.” They commented on how seriously they regarded their role, particularly as it affected someone’s career. Conversely, seven respondents commented on the doubtful value of the external review process. Reasons cited included “added nothing to the process,” “subjective,” “concept of faculty librarians is a waste of time,” and “easily manipulated by upper management.” One respondent noted, “I’m happy to help another librarian jump through the hoops in their path, but I’m dubious of the value of what we put ourselves through.” Eight respondents talked about challenges they have seen with the external review process, such as difficulty in finding external reviewers, both for higher ranks and to fulfill the number of reviews required by their institution. Another issue mentioned by several respondents was institutions not sending adequate documentation and/or instructions. As one noted, “I often find the portfolios I receive tell me more about the university/library’s required documentation than the candidate him/her-self.” Another noted, “I’ve seen external reviews in my colleagues’ packets that were not very thoughtful, didn’t take into consideration our definitions, and didn’t help us evaluate the candidate’s reputation as seen by those outside our immediate region.”

Discussion of Findings

The survey responses provided a great deal of information, and much of it supported findings in the other studies on external review, particularly with regards to identifying external reviewers, the role of the external reviewer, the reviewer’s process, and the generally positive tone of external reviews.

Of those who responded, almost 48% had never written an external review. While some undoubtedly did not meet institutional requirements, the assumption could be made that there are willing and qualified librarians who are never asked. While it is difficult to prove, it does support the supposition by Bicknell-Holmes and Logan-Peters that the burden of writing external reviews is spread unevenly in the profession. Some respondents commented about the difficulty of finding external reviewers, so one does wonder how to go about connecting qualified external reviewers with the candidates and promotion and tenure committees who need to find them. Bicknell-Holmes and Logan-Peters noted

that there may be some validity to the point that writing external reviews is unevenly shared in the profession, noting that, "... at eleven of the responding institutions reviewers complete fewer than five evaluations a year while at three they complete more than ten."²³ It may be easier for promotion and tenure committees to ask for external reviewers at institutions that have assisted with the process before, and/or to ask individuals who have a record of completing reviews. At their institutions, the authors have also noted that repeatedly the same people are asked to write reviews, while others are equally qualified.

The percentage of those respondents in the authors' survey who declined to write a review because they were too busy (35.1%) closely matches the results found by Schlozman (39%).²⁴ However, it is important to note that 81.4% of respondents in the authors' survey had never declined the invitation to write an external review.

Like other institutions, the University of Louisville sends a packet of information to an external reviewer. Obviously it is important for external reviewers to follow the institution's instructions. It is equally important for institutions to send instructions and documentation that are appropriate and useful. Reviewers should be mindful that each institution will have its own criteria, which can be very different from the reviewer's institution. It would certainly be interesting to see how the same items within the criteria of research and service are considered at different institutions; however, there would probably be as many variations as there are institutions. It is important for the candidate to carefully prepare his/her materials, particularly his/her CV, given its importance to the external reviewer.

Some of the survey's longest and most detailed responses concerned the perceived role of the external reviewer as advocate, critic, or neutral party. An overwhelming number of respondents considered themselves neutral, which is certainly the premise of the University of Louisville's external review process, which mandates that each unit solicit external reviewers in a process that is "designed to certify the professional expertise and objectivity of the evaluators."²⁵ That the majority of respondents considered themselves neutral would lend credence to the supposition of Schwartz and Schroeder that, "one perceived advantage of external reviewers is an objective evaluation of performance by unbiased observers."²⁶ Schlozman also noted that the responsibility of those soliciting external review letters is "to choose referees with appropriate professional competence and no known biases, either personal or professional, with respect to the candidate being evaluated."²⁷ When responding to the open-ended question related to their perceived role, some of the respondents to this survey pointed out that their approach would be neutral at the start, and the resulting review would be positive or negative only after examining the portfolio. Many respondents also pointed out that their assumption was that this was what was expected of them based on their understanding of the external review process and/or specific instructions received from the requesting institution.

One of the common findings of previous studies was that external reviews tended to be positive. Schwartz and Schroeder wrote, "... it is highly likely that only positive reviews will be received from the reviewers."²⁸ As readers of many external reviews as part of the promotion and tenure process at the University of Louisville Libraries, this finding is consonant with the authors' experience. While a smaller percentage of respondents to the authors' survey took the role of advocate, they tended to know the candidate, and/or had been asked by the candidate. Schlozman also noted the same tendency of reviews to be positive. Some of the respondents to Schlozman's survey commented that unless they could write a positive review, they would decline. While the respondents did not elaborate, certainly one assumption is that the reviewer might be aware of the potential damage of a negative review. As Schlozman noted, "another concern is the extent to which external referees seem reluctant to make

negative judgments—a phenomenon that may reflect a recognition of how high the stakes are for the candidate or a tendency for those who are negatively predisposed to decline to serve as reviewers when asked.”²⁹ The authors speculate that other reasons include concerns over confidentiality and inadequate documentation provided by the requesting institution.

Bicknell-Holmes and Logan-Peters also noted that “three of the institutions ask reviewers to make a recommendation on whether the candidate should be awarded promotion or continuing appointment, while an equal number specifically tell reviewers not to make a recommendation on whether the candidate should be awarded promotion or continuing appointment.”³⁰ One sample letter to a potential reviewer in their book asks the reviewer for “your assessment of (names)’s accomplishments relative to others in comparable positions in the profession nationally and internationally, as well as your judgment of whether (his/her) work meets the requirement for someone being considered for promotion at your institution.”³¹ One respondent to the authors’ survey thought it “strange” to be asked to consider a candidate’s file under the reviewer’s institutional procedures, while another respondent noted that “we always ask if the person would qualify for tenure at the reviewer’s institution.” Schlozman discussed issues raised by a reviewer being asked to make a recommendation based on his/her institution’s criteria, and noted that several respondents to her survey felt that the reviewer should not make such a recommendation.³² Rhoades-Catanach and Stout noted the importance of benchmarks for an external reviewer. Asking the reviewer whether the candidate would be promoted and/or tenured at the reviewer’s institution would not be an appropriate benchmark, noting that “This benchmark is particularly inappropriate in cases where the candidate’s and reviewer’s institutions are not comparable in terms of mission, goals, support, and expectations.”³³ The University of Louisville Libraries request that the reviewers not make a recommendation, so it is important for external reviewers to carefully read the instructions since they often vary.

Most reviewers spent between three and seven hours preparing a review which generally did not exceed two pages in length. Bicknell-Holmes and Logan-Peters calculated the cost estimate for one review to the institution, and the “mean” that was used matches closely the time that most reviewers spent in the authors’ study.³⁴ Of course, added to this time is the time needed by the promotion and tenure committee to review the letters, share them with the candidate (if part of the process), and then incorporate them into reviews (if part of the process). It is part of the requirements at the University of Louisville that these letters be incorporated into the recommendation sent to the Dean of the Libraries by the Libraries’ Personnel Committee. The University Administration has written guidelines to advise all academic units about the incorporation of these letters into the final recommendation for the candidate to the University Administration.

The authors assumed that reviewers would find important the presence of a statement promising redaction of his/her name, but this was not the case. The majority of respondents did not seem to be concerned about the presence of a redaction statement. One reason for this is the likelihood that confidentiality could not be guaranteed should legal action be taken at some point in the process, probably following a denied promotion and/or tenure. Another reason for a lack of concern about redaction of the reviewer’s name might be that most reviews tend to be positive. If, as one respondent noted, he/she would not agree to be an external reviewer if he/she couldn’t write a positive review, then the issue of redaction is not a factor.

Clearly, most respondents felt that completing the process was important. The vast majority of respondents accepted the responsibility when asked, considered the assignment either a high or medium priority, and met the institution’s deadline for completing the review. Open-ended comments

also reiterated the importance of the process. However, there were a handful of respondents who clearly felt that the external review process was not valuable to librarians, either due to opinions about librarians as faculty or concern about the value of the process in general. If institutions are discussing revisions to the external review process, this study, as well as the others the authors noted might be helpful in starting a dialogue.

Conclusion

External reviewers undertake an important and time-consuming task to adhere to the many aspects of the external review process. The results presented here are an attempt to examine the process from the point of view of the external reviewer. While it is helpful to know the external review policies and procedures of the institution requesting the review, the results from this survey provide additional information from those writing external reviews, and point to similarities in the views and concerns of external reviewers with those in other academic disciplines.

This survey and surveys in other disciplines point out variations in processes and criteria amongst institutions. The differences in criteria and processes amongst libraries could provide an area of further study. There are librarians willing and qualified to write external reviews who are not being asked, so there is an opportunity for more participation in the process, if a means can be found to more readily identify a larger pool from which to solicit external reviewers.

As academic institutions examine and revise long-standing practices like external reviews, information gleaned from surveys in various disciplines may inform future policies and procedures. At the very least, it might provide information to begin a dialogue within departments and, perhaps, with academic administrators since the outcome of this process is so critical to the candidate and the institution.

Angel Clemons (angel.clemons@louisville.edu) is the Government Publications Librarian at the University of Louisville. **Tyler Goldberg** (tyler.goldberg@louisville.edu) is Head of Technical Services at the University of Louisville.

Published: August 2013

References

¹ Lyn Reilly et al., "External Review for Promotion and Tenure in Schools of Nursing," *Nurse Education Today* 16, no. 5 (1996): 368-72.

² Kay Lehman Schlozman, "External Reviews in Tenure and Promotions Decisions: How Does the Process Work? How Should It?" *PS: Political Science and Politics* 31, no. 3 (1998): 623-630.

³ "Redbook Chapter Four," last modified October 13, 2011, <http://louisville.edu/provost/redbook/chap4.html>.

⁴ Tracy Bicknell-Holmes and Kay Logan Peters, *External Review for Promotion and Tenure* (Washington DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2006).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Lyn Reilly et al., "External Review for Promotion and Tenure in Schools of Nursing," *Nurse Education Today* 16, no. 5 (1996): 368-72.

⁹ Bill N. Schwartz and Richard G. Schroeder, "External Reviews: What is Being Done?" *Journal of Accounting Education* 15, no. 4 (1997): 531-547.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Shelley Rhoades-Catanach and David E. Stout, "Current Practices in the External Peer Review Process for Promotion and Tenure Decisions." *Journal of Accounting Education* 18 (2000): 171-188.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Kay Lehman Schlozman, "External Reviews in Tenure and Promotions Decisions: How Does the Process Work? How Should It?" *PS: Political Science and Politics* 31, no. 3 (1998): 623-630.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "A Guide to the Professional Status of Academic Librarians in the United States (and Other Places)," last modified August 9, 2012, <http://academic-librarian-status.wikispaces.com/>.

-
- ²¹ "Mississippi State University Libraries Academic Promotion and Tenure Policies and Procedures," last modified June 12, 2009, <http://library.msstate.edu/library/policies/pt2009.pdf>.
- ²² "Survey Monkey," last modified 2012, <http://surveymonkey.com>.
- ²³ Tracy Bicknell-Holmes and Kay Logan Peters, External Review for Promotion and Tenure (Washington DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2006).
- ²⁴ Kay Lehman Schlozman, "External Reviews in Tenure and Promotions Decisions: How Does the Process Work? How Should It?" *PS: Political Science and Politics* 31, no. 3 (1998): 623-630.
- ²⁵ "Redbook Chapter Four," last modified October 13, 2011, <http://louisville.edu/provost/redbook/chap4.html>.
- ²⁶ Bill N. Schwartz and Richard G. Schroeder, "External Reviews: What is Being Done?" *Journal of Accounting Education* 15, no. 4 (1997): 531-547.
- ²⁷ Kay Lehman Schlozman, "External Reviews in Tenure and Promotions Decisions: How Does the Process Work? How Should It?" *PS: Political Science and Politics* 31, no. 3 (1998): 623-630.
- ²⁸ Bill N. Schwartz and Richard G. Schroeder, "External Reviews: What is Being Done?" *Journal of Accounting Education* 15, no. 4 (1997): 531-547.
- ²⁹ Tracy Bicknell-Holmes and Kay Logan Peters, External Review for Promotion and Tenure (Washington DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2006).
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Kay Lehman Schlozman, "External Reviews in Tenure and Promotions Decisions: How Does the Process Work? How Should It?" *PS: Political Science and Politics* 31, no. 3 (1998): 623-630.
- ³³ Shelley Rhoades-Catanach and David E. Stout, "Current Practices in the External Peer Review Process for Promotion and Tenure Decisions." *Journal of Accounting Education* 18 (2000): 171-188.
- ³⁴ Tracy Bicknell-Holmes and Kay Logan Peters, External Review for Promotion and Tenure (Washington DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2006).