TO:       Primary Unit Evaluation Committee Members, and Candidates for Tenure and Promotion

FROM:    Todd T. Gleeson

SUBJECT: Guidelines for External Letters of Evaluation

DATE:    11 March 2002

The University of Colorado requires a minimum of six letters of evaluation from disciplinary experts external to the University as part of every promotion and tenure review. These letters are solicited by the primary unit from lists contributed by both the candidate and by the primary unit evaluation committee (PUEC). These letters play an important role in establishing the national stature and the quality of the research or the creative work accomplishments of the faculty member under review. They also represent an attempt to calibrate the campus’ personnel action relative to norms for research intensive institutions of our caliber.

Recently, the Arts and Sciences Personnel Committee and I have become concerned about the effect that these letters can have on a candidate’s career when the authors of the letters are poorly selected. We have seen cases where a candidate’s excellence in research and creative work was obscured by the selection of external reviewers who were poorly qualified to offer an unbiased assessment of the candidate’s merits, or who were writing from institutions with promotion and tenure standards quite different from our own. As a result, the committee and I have decided to offer a set of guidelines that PUEC members and candidates could consult in the course of nominating external evaluators.

We have found that persuasive external letters are often those that are

1. authored by distinguished senior members of the discipline,
2. and whose perspectives of promotion and tenure standards are drawn from experience at AAU and other research intensive institutions.

Our observations suggest that a candidate’s promotion or tenure review is often compromised by letters of the following types:

1. letters written by graduate or postgraduate mentors,
2. letters authored by frequent collaborators,
3. letters authored by colleagues whose context for promotion and tenure standards is drawn largely from institutions which would be judged by most to have lower expectations for the quantity or quality of research or creative accomplishment,
4. a predominance of letters authored by colleagues of junior academic rank, or by individuals who were graduate school colleagues of the candidate,
5. superficial letters which do not offer analysis or professional opinion of the scholarly accomplishments of the candidate.

The A&S Personnel Committee and I do not wish to discourage the selection of letters from this second list when they are appropriate. Letters of this sort can sometimes be useful and provide supplemental perspectives to those offered by individuals in the first list. There are also occasions where referees of this second list are the most appropriate choices. In these occasions, it is incumbent upon the PUEC to explain why certain letters were solicited so as not to compromise or damage the candidate’s prospects for a favorable review.

We offer these guidelines because it appears that some units and candidates do not appreciate that letters solicited from under-qualified or potentially biased individuals may sometimes trigger a degree of scrutiny or uncertainty that would otherwise be absent. Weak letter selection not only harms the candidate, it can sometimes also be interpreted to reflect poorly on a primary unit’s rigor or standards. Committee members and I would like to encourage PUEC members and the candidates to consider these guidelines as they construct their lists of potential referees from which letters will be solicited. The associate deans are available for consultation to both candidates and PUECs who might like help in choosing a good list of potential referees.