

Science Matters

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Reflections of FEC - Dr Gregory Taylor

It seems that December is always a time for reflection. We look back on the year at the same time that we begin to imagine where a new year might take us. This year I found myself in a more reflective mood than usual and my reflections took me back over a longer period of time. There was clearly more than the holiday spirit at work. As I pause to think about it, I can see that I was reflecting back over my term as Dean. Six years of observing the Faculty Evaluation Committee (FEC) operate is something that few get to experience. Doing so as a Dean gives me a unique vantage point. I will try and share some of my thoughts with you before I move on to the details of the outcomes of this year's deliberations.

Let me begin by saying that the FEC process is an enormous task for those who are intimately involved. It is also a process which distinguishes our institution. As such, we must shepherd it in a way that encourages the development of our faculty as leaders in learning and discovery. In doing so, we help our Faculty of Science grow in influence and stature. While our FEC evolves over time as new players come and go, one thing that has not changed is the committee's willingness to take this role seriously.

There can be no doubt that our Science Chairs play a crucial role in the FEC process. If you recall, last year I commented on the duality of their role in FEC. On one hand, Chairs are asked to manage the performance of their staff. On the other hand, the FEC process is a competitive one in which achievements are recognized relative to one's peers. Reflecting back over six years, I see that the duality remains but the importance of the "competition" has been declining. My sense is that several factors might be driving this shift. Interdisciplinary collaboration is certainly part of the story. We are seeing a growing number of scientific contributions that would not have been possible without interdisciplinary collaboration and a growing awareness of the importance of facilitating such collaboration. To some extent, this softens the edge on competition.

Another important driver has been a dramatic increase in the availability of information to FEC. The flow of

information through the staff member to the Chair and on to FEC has certainly improved over the past six years. On top of this, the Faculty provides information directly to FEC, and FEC members themselves are constantly asking and answering questions with information available on the web. This may not come out the way I want it to, but the availability of information has increased so much that there is little value for a Chair in trying to make a case that is not fully justified. It's hard to play poker when the person across the table can see your hand. As a result, I see a growing understanding among Chairs that the best value they can bring to their Department is by getting their recommendations right - rewarding those whose merit most effectively build the overall influence and stature of their Department, Faculty and University. In working to build their Department, they know that they will have to win some difficult cases. They also know that their credibility is their most valuable asset, one that can only be gained by honest and thorough reporting and one that can easily be lost if they get caught with erroneous information or an unwillingness to differentiate. It is a fascinating process to watch.

So, in a very real sense, the Chair's focus seems to be shifting from defending the individual case at hand to growing the Department as a whole through appropriate feedback and reward. When involved in discussions about the FEC process, I have often said "be careful of what you ask for, because that is exactly what you will get". Our Chairs clearly understand this. Through the recommendations that they bring to FEC and through their defense of these recommendations, they are communicating their sense of what defines excellence within their department and discipline. This has played out with a movement towards a more balanced evaluation of contributions to teaching, research and service. It has also played out with a greater emphasis on comparisons to scholarly leaders within the same discipline.

In the past I have often reflected on the kinds of things that FEC values or what it takes to move from one merit increment to the next. I am going to steer away from that this year, since past issues of *Science Matters* are available for those who care to hear the message again.

Furthermore, the more I think about it, the more I am inclined to say that there is no magic formula. Each case is considered on its own merits, albeit in context of other cases at a similar stage of career development.

Furthermore, each member of FEC sees and hears all the information that is provided, and then casts their vote on the basis of their sense of overall merit. While I cannot see what is in each of their minds when a vote is called, I can see the outcomes of their votes. This allows me to say with confidence that just as surely as a Chair can win a case on the basis of contributions to research, so too can they win a case on the basis of contributions to teaching and service. Furthermore, the more that merit spans the trio of teaching, research and service, the more likely it is that multiple increments will follow.

I mentioned last year that FEC is increasingly inclined to place the onus on the staff member to bring information to the table. This information is augmented by information that the Chair and the Faculty brings to the table. FEC expects the Chair to interpret this information within the context of their department and discipline. Several thoughts emerge from this comment. The first is that FEC expects to see full and accurate information. In the absence of information that communicates merit, it may conclude that merit is lacking. Second, an informative annual report does not need to be a long report. You should carefully select information that illustrates the impact of your contributions in teaching, research and service. Just as surely as incomplete information can be a problem, so too can information overload that mixes substantive information with “fluff”. Finally, you should not be tricked into thinking that the information itself makes FEC’s decision. Publication counts, impact factors, citations, teaching innovations, teaching evaluations, contributions to professional bodies, service to your institution, awards, accolades and many other types of information are all useful. But FEC is not just about numbers. It is important to help your Chair accurately understand the importance of the information that will be brought forward to FEC. You must do so in a way that protects their credibility.

Another trend I have watched over the past six years is what might be described as a decreasing gestation period for new academic staff. FEC has always tried to understand the unique challenges of young staff as they work to establish their teaching and research. Assistant Professors are given the time they need to develop before FEC gets too excited about specific indicators of productivity and impact. But the bar for merit increases with rank and experience. Many of us might be surprised at how fast the height of the bar increases, particularly at the rank of

Professor. Newly elected representatives to FEC often seem amazed at this. In many respects this is a compliment to the impact and productivity of our professors. I suspect it is also a reflection of the improved support we provide to our young professors. While there is still much room for improvement, it is becoming increasingly common for young professors to be at full stride when they reach the rank of full professor.

Now, on to some of the details. This year, 24 professors in the Faculty of Science were eligible to be considered for tenure, either through an early tenure consideration or at the end of first or second probation. Of these, 14 cases (58%) were brought forward for consideration. With deliberations complete, all were granted. A total of 52 Associate Professors were eligible to apply for promotion to full Professor. Fourteen applications for promotion were submitted (27% of eligible candidates) and all were granted promotion. At the time of our deliberations, 7 of the 52 Associate Professors who were eligible to apply for promotion were at the salary maximum for that rank. Given the decisions we made this year, a total of 9 Associate Professors will be at the maximum salary for that rank in the year to come. Applications for promotions within the ranks of our FSO were also considered. Of the 10 FSOs eligible for promotion, 1 submitted an application and that promotion was granted.

In considering allocation of increments, FEC clearly sees its role as one of rewarding merit arising from effort and not simply effort itself. This is true even for an award of 0.5 increments since a “0B” is awarded for satisfactory performance. This year, Chairs came in closer to the 1.2 target than they have in the past. In several recent years we were faced with the daunting task of clawing back more than 50 half increments. This year, the target was only 17. While at times this seemed to keep the process moving faster, the tough cases at the margins still required a great deal of discussion and debate. How were the merit increments distributed among the 314 academic staff within our FEC mandate? The answer is that decisions were made on 17 increments at the 0.0 level, 22 at the 0.5 level, 132 at 1.0, 89 at 1.5, 40 at 2.0 and 7 at 2.5. Another 7 staff received partial increments that brought them to the maximum salary at rank.

As you have come to expect from me, I always close my FEC message with a sense of optimism and awe. Let me start with a vote of confidence for our Chairs. It is hard to overstate the effort that they put into this process, the depth of thought and analysis that they bring to the table and the horsepower they bring to decision making. I know they will

pass on a vote of confidence for the support staff at the Department and Faculty levels that help prepare the documentation and ready the process. To all members of FEC, I must pass on my appreciation for your efforts to reward staff whose contributions change thinking within their disciplines, classrooms and meeting rooms. Year after year, however, one thought always remains at the end. I am inspired by the collective contributions of our staff to teaching, research and service. Your contributions establish our reputation and stature as a Faculty. It is hard not to feel humble. On behalf of the Faculty of Science and the University of Alberta, I must say thank you.

Gregory Taylor
Dean of Science

Thoughts on the 2007 Science FEC Experience

By
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“Nothing shocks me. I'm a scientist.”
- Harrison Ford as Indiana Jones

In December of 2007, we joined the Faculty Evaluation Committee as elected representatives from the ranks of the Full Professors. Following an intense couple of weeks of preparations and meetings, Dean Taylor asked us to summarize our impressions of the process, with the idea of including these comments in the next issue of *Science Matters*. This has traditionally been the case each January for the new FEC members and perusal of previous issues reveals a number of eloquent accounts written by others who have now rotated off the committee. This begs the question: what insights can we add that would not be utterly redundant?

One possible answer to this question is the unique background each of us brought to the table. Mazi has spent most of his career at the University of Alberta and served previously on FEC as both elected Assistant and Associate

Professor. Fred came here in 2002, after spending 14 years at another institution (University of Utah) with drastically different evaluation procedures. Each of us came in with certain preconceptions about a process that remains fundamentally mysterious despite the annual commentary from the Dean and the elected members. Some of these expectations were emphatically confirmed while others were turned on their head. Below, we include some of our reactions to FEC, sprinkled with occasional suggestions for how each of us can build the strongest possible case for merit, both through our activities throughout the year and as we compose our Annual Reports.

The Annual Report

During the 8-10 days leading up to the week-long FEC meeting, each of us poured through two thick binders containing Annual Reports, the Chairs' merit recommendations, Tenure and Promotion files, any appeals of the merit recommendations and sabbatical requests. Of these, by far the largest single component was the annual reports. Each of these was read in detail by all 13 members of the FEC and questions regarding the significance of various items were jotted down. For every file, each member of the FEC formed an opinion regarding the validity of the Chair's recommendation and inconsistencies were considered during the discussion of that case. In some cases, a Chair could persuade the Committee that his or her recommendation was appropriate, while in others it was overruled...and not always in a downward direction! (See below for more on the deliberation process.)

The important point here is that all FEC members develop a well-formed impression of each merit case well before it is discussed, based upon the contents of the Annual Report and the Chair's narrative. With this in mind, it seems obvious that a clear and thorough Annual Report is absolutely necessary if a staff member hopes to make a compelling case for increments. In fact, a majority of Annual Reports provided eloquent support for the Chair's recommendations. Reading through example after example of high achievement was a humbling experience and left a strong impression of the overall excellence of our Faculty. However, some Reports undercut their cases with confusing, unclear or incomplete presentation of data. In an increment-poor environment, these cases sometimes paid a price.

“We judge ourselves by what we feel capable of doing, while others judge us by what we have already done.”

- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Evaluation Criteria

After an initial inspection of the binders, it became clear that our Faculty is filled with a large number of excellent colleagues at all levels of seniority. Given the large disparity between newly hired, freshly tenured and well established senior faculty, cases were most often compared to those in similar situations. As expected, research productivity is considered critical at all levels, as is teaching. Evidence for research excellence includes high-profile publications, awards and training of highly qualified personnel. Teaching is evaluated through student evaluation scores, awards and other evidence (unusual levels of development of curriculum or course materials), along with the Chair's commentary. It is important to emphasize that indications of weak teaching performance can be a deal-breaker. FEC showed little tolerance for signs that someone was not taking his or her teaching responsibilities seriously. On many occasions, the FEC went to great lengths to understand the teaching record over a number of years in order to assess the teaching performance in the year under review in its proper context. There are periodic accusations that large research universities such as ours do not value teaching; to the contrary, Science takes it very seriously indeed.

“Be silent as to services you have rendered, but speak of favours you have received.”

- Seneca

Another cliché regarding large research universities is that service is not appreciated. This is a very bad assumption for anyone to make. In fact, this committee was very conscious of the level of service displayed by all but the most junior faculty. It may be that serving on a time-intensive operation such as FEC leaves one especially sensitive to the notion that a department, faculty or university cannot run properly without the many contributions made by individual faculty members. In any case, evidence of extensive service can have a beneficial effect on the increment that a faculty member receives and a lack thereof can have a serious negative impact. From this, one can infer that thorough documentation of one's contributions in this area is imperative. Seneca's call for modesty is admirable but would probably be a losing strategy in FEC.

The Deliberations

Many cases were approved without a single question being asked or concerns being raised as a consequence of a good, solid record, a well-presented annual report and a good assessment by the department Chair. In many other cases, questions of clarification would be asked even by

committee members who supported the Chair's recommendation, in order to understand, as fully as possible, the staff member's contributions in the reporting year. Lengthy discussions ensued in those cases where the Chairs were asked to justify their merit recommendations. Some of the most difficult cases to decide turned out to be those that were in some sense vague enough that several committee members would initially abstain from voting either for or against the recommendation before them. In some instances, the hesitation arose out of a genuine sense that the committee was looking at a case which was “more than 1.0 but not quite 1.5.” The FEC is, of course, prohibited by the Faculty Agreement from awarding intermediate values of merit increments (a relic of the pencil-and-paper days of the distant past that ought to be looked at by the University and the AASUA). In other instances, the members simply needed time to reflect further on the information presented to them. Many decisions were far from unanimous but they were all discussed as fairly and as thoroughly as the information before the committee allowed.

Tenure and Promotion Cases

Many truly impressive cases were before the FEC and all were considered very carefully. The unpredictable factor in tenure and promotion is the letters from the external referees and what they do or do not say. The FEC sees every letter received by the department (whether supportive or not) and tries to understand everything it sees in the context of the Faculty of Science criteria for tenure and promotion. In many cases, the FEC felt no need to ask questions and simply approved the tenure and/or promotion recommendation. In other cases, a great deal of discussion took place, on matters such as the international stature of the staff member (for promotion to full professor) and the impact of their work or the nature and extent of their service to the university.

“College football would be more interesting if the faculty played instead of the students – there would be a great increase in broken arms, legs and necks.”

- H. L. Mencken

Sabbatical Requests

The FEC saw many excellent and meritorious sabbatical proposals and a few which were more questionable. The committee formed a rather poor impression of requests that took the tone of, “It's been six years so I deserve another year of sabbatical leave.” Nor was the FEC overly impressed by sabbatical plans that read like a travel

itinerary with no indication of what the staff member intended to do once they had reached this or that place. This was in part a reflection of the fact that paid leaves of this sort are a major perquisite from the University and should be treated as a privilege rather than an entitlement. Sabbaticals have to be well-planned and well-used, given the financial cost to the University and the fact that those who remain have to shoulder the burden of the work of their absent colleagues. The role of the FEC in sabbatical matters is to advise the Dean, and it left the Dean in no doubt as to how it saw the merit of the applications.

Overall Summary

Most members of our faculty recognize the importance of the FEC process and the workload that it imposes on its participants. An additional burden is the realization that our allotted pool of increments is insufficient for a faculty that manifests excellence across the board. During the many painful decisions that had to be made, difficult issues were discussed with thoughtfulness and complete integrity. *To summarize: Do any of us agree with every decision the FEC made? Absolutely not. Do we believe that each of those decisions was arrived at through a fair and careful process? Categorically yes.*

A guide to update your listing in the U of A's Guide to Experts

The University of Alberta Office of Public Affairs has worked with U of A Creative Services to redesign and update the U of A Guide to Experts (GTE) website. You can find the new site at www.experts.ualberta.ca. We would like to encourage as many experts as possible to be included in the site.

The GTE allows people around the world to see the depth and breadth of research conducted at the U of A. This enhances opportunities for research collaboration, and it provides members of the media with quick and easy access to find expert commentators. Maintaining a positive media profile enhances the reputation of the U of A and serves as a form of accountability to the general public, who fund the U of A through provincial tax dollars. Maintaining this site and accommodating media members whenever possible helps the U of A fulfill its community service mandate.

The GTE allows you to input and update information about your faculty, department, research discipline, area and specialization. All you need is your one card ID. This will allow you to the Guide to Experts, or edit your information at any time.

Some tips for entering information - try to think of searchable key words (buzz words) the public, or media, would likely use. In other words, layman terms. If you have something to do with nanotechnology, include the word. Also, it is important to think outside of Science as your only research discipline, and consider what other areas your research might apply to. For example:

Laura Frost
Faculty of Science > Biological Sciences

Research Specializations:

- [Medicine / Health](#)
[Biochemistry](#)
 - genetic engineering
 - molecular biology
 - RNA
- [Medicine / Health](#)
[Genetics](#)
 - gene transfer
 - genetic engineering
 - molecular biology
- [Science](#)
[Biological Sciences](#)
 - Bacteria
 - gene transfer
 - genetic engineering
 - molecular biology
 - RNA

Jillian Buriak
Faculty of Science > Chemistry
Faculty of Science > National Institute of Nanotechnology

Research Specializations:

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[Chemistry](#)
 - semiconductor surface
 - silicon and germanium wet surface
- [Science](#)
[Nanotechnology](#)
 - materials and interfacial chemistry
 - nanolithography

Michael Bowling
Faculty of Science > Computing Science

Research Specializations:

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