

Reflections of FEC

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Reflections on the 2011 Science FEC Experience

By JC Cahill (Biological Sciences) and Doug Gingrich (Physics)

This year FEC adjudicated 302 increment cases, 13 tenure cases, 5 promotion cases, 3 continuing FSO appointment cases, and three contested cases. As is the tradition in the Faculty of Science, we have been asked to reflect on our experiences as the two newly elected members to FEC. Here are our reflections – not statements of fact.

FEC is fair. FEC is filled by people genuinely trying to reach reasonable outcomes. Yes, there is a game aspect to the process, but driving decisions are the merits of the case. Overall, there is a bias in favour of assistant professors, as they had an average increment of 1.3 (not 1.2). This bias could be that they are just better, but also that when in doubt, FEC errs on the side of generosity towards the younger members of the academy.

FEC is efficient. We were impressed with the thoughtfulness given to tenure and promotion cases. In many cases, the outcome was obvious – given the file, and so discussion was minimal. In other cases it wasn't – with one file discussed in excess of three hours. In no cases was discussion shut down without individuals having a chance to raise questions or make comments. Files are closely read, but they aren't discussed unless there are questions. Most increment decisions were made in seconds – though they certainly took each departmental chair substantially longer in writing their chair's report.

Incrementation boundaries exist, but are blurry. Files that were recommended for 0.0-0.5 and those of 2.0-2.5 are very clearly different from those of 1.0-1.5. Most discussions tended to focus on those ends of the distribution – either bring people to those categories or moving them from them. In contrast, the distinctions in the middle seem to us vaguer. Our feelings are that many 1.0 cases would have received full support if the chair initially recommended 1.5, and many 1.5s would have been 1.0 if that was the initial recommendation.

FEC is conservative. Out of 302 merit cases, only 24 chair recommendations were changed (18 down, 6 up). However, substantially more cases were 'opened', such that discussion occurred (perhaps 25% though this is just a guess). The implications of this are obvious – FEC is reluctant to go against the chair's recommendation, and only does so in light of very clear evidence. What this means to the individual is if you care about your incrementation, it is critical you discuss your file with your chair before their recommendation is made – it is highly unlikely FEC will bump you up later. Our opinion is this conservatism plus efficiency is warranted – as long as each chair is equally effective in assessing their department relative to the entire faculty. We would have concerns if FEC was not made up primarily of seasoned chairs.

FEC 'targets' (= quotas). There is no doubt the issuance of targets to each chair has downloaded much of the difficult discussions from FEC to the chairs. This is good in the sense that chairs know their faculty best, and thus recommendations are realistic. Though one of us (JC) remains uncomfortable with the quota system, we both recognize it allows FEC to focus primarily on truly unique/confusing/problematic cases.

Elected members are the minority of FEC. It is important to remember that the seven chairs represent the largest demographic on FEC, and not all departments have an elected FEC rep. Nonetheless, we were convinced that FEC is fair.

There is no equation to solve. Though one could develop an *a posteriori* model of the probability of different incrementation as a function of different metrics (total papers, top-ranked journals, IDQ, etc) – we do not feel this would be a useful predictive model for future years. Every case is unique – and chairs explained the nuances. FEC recognizes individuality.

We had no idea how little service we do, until we saw all the files. Many members of our faculty do truly amazing amounts of service - perhaps a handful of people within each department. Those files clearly stood out. If you *think* you might be among them, we would suggest you likely are not – those in that group *know* they are in that group, and are told so by people around them.

For full professors, it is expected that you do a meaningful amount of service – and chairs were regularly asked to explain service contributions. Service received at least as much discussion as research or teaching, and low service contributions hurt files. However, it is written in our faculty agreement that research and teaching are to count more – and they do. We found service difficult to handle, as participation does not equal effective contribution. Chairs would indicate particularly valuable service contributions. However, service would rarely give extra incrementation, but may prevent it being reduced.

Teaching matters. A lot. For everyone. There were many cases where weak teaching (as measured by IDQ and comments from the chairs) resulted in lost increments. Exceptional teaching was rewarded. So too was evidence of improving teaching such that 'mainstream' teaching was viewed quite positive if one's history was very low, while generally ignored if one's history was 'mainstream'. FEC showed evidence of caring about and rewarding teaching development. Do not believe otherwise.

There is nuance in research assessment. This faculty is productive and diverse. As expected, average publication rates vary among and within departments. The quality of the publication venue was typically assessed through ISI rankings or their equivalents. Chairs would frequently give more information about why ISI categories didn't fit for an individual and justify the appropriateness of 'low-ranked' venues. In other words, rankings are one tool – not the final answer on quality. It is important to explain to your chair why you chose the venue you did. Our observations are that low publication rates and/or low quality venues reduce incrementation, regardless of teaching and service. Very strong publications will get more incrementation, unless teaching and service are low.

Grants do not factor into incrementation. It is not how much money you bring in, but what you do with it that counts. Questions were raised in several cases where labs had substantial funds, but very few/low quality publications.

The current view of most FEC members is that NSERC Discovery grants have a bit of randomness, and thus declines at renewal are down weighted relative to years past. However, a significant subpopulation is skeptical of this view, and asked chairs for evidence to support the contention that a decline is 'meaningless'. If you find yourself with a reduced Discovery grant next year, we encourage you to provide your reviews/comments (at least in summary) to your chair. Personally, we found it odd that chairs would regularly comment positively on Discovery increases, and downplay decreases. Our hunch is that as the Discovery system matures there will be greater expectation to explain negative outcomes.

Awards are funny. FEC has a tradition of giving 0.5 extra incrementation for a 'meaningful' award. We were surprised at this, as 1) awards are not randomly distributed amongst disciplines, so this necessarily means some disciplines are open to more increments than others, and 2) what awards 'count' isn't clear. For example, Discovery Accelerator's are viewed as 'grants', rather than awards. So too are McCalla and others that give teaching release and/or some salary. We understand this policy for truly major awards such as Royal Society, National Academy, etc. but are skeptical with respect to discipline-specific awards. Given how much nuance is given to other aspects of incrementation, a one-size-fits-all approach here seems unusual. Perhaps like grants, it is not the award itself, but what you do with it that should be recognized by FEC.

Those with teaching relief are expected to do more research. This was made explicit in the pre-FEC meetings, and was apparent in discussions. Chairs were regularly asked to explain what aspects of an annual report compensated for the time afforded by reduced teaching.

Departments are highly variable in teaching 'loads'. In one department classes over 300 students count as 'two' teaching credits, in others they don't. In some departments classes of four students are considered as full courses, while in another department mentoring undergraduate research projects are essentially ignored as teaching contributions. It was left to department chairs to decide what constituted a 'full load'.

Research, teaching, and service appear positively correlated. We have heard over and over how these are negatively correlated such that increased service crushes research productivity. After looking through 300 files, we either saw no apparent, or a (weakly) positive correlation. The most productive researchers tend to also have unusually high service loads, and are average to strong teachers. Low research productivity does not imply strong teaching, nor does it imply great contributions to the department, community, or scientific organisations.

Concluding remarks. Above all else, FEC appears fair, and we are very reassured in the process. There are some things we all can do to help – the least of which is pay attention to your annual report. Do not write five pages of additional data, nor should you leave it blank. Use that space to highlight things unique to your case, not to describe every paper. Explain why your contribution to service was unusually strong, why your NSERC changed, or let FEC know you chose to publish one large paper instead of three small one (that will be recognised as a positive). Talk to your chair about their recommendation, and understand why they recommend what they did. FEC will only catch big mistakes by chairs, not small judgment calls. If you care about incrementation, you need to play an active role in the process. And publish well. And teach well. And provide meaningful service.



Reflections on the 2011 Science FEC Experience

By Gregory Taylor, Dean

In writing my last reflections on FEC I thought I would reflect back on 12 years of change, rather than focusing on the events of this year's process. If I were to stick to the usual approach, I would probably be telling you things you have heard before. Furthermore, an approaching end of term has me in a reflective mood.

The Faculty Agreement establishes a clear and detailed framework for the FEC process; nonetheless it is a process that evolves over time. This evolution is also driven by the Faculty Agreement, which imagines a process that responds to FEC's own views of how performance should be recognized, periodic review by Faculty Council, input and review from the Provost, and input from the President's Review Committee. When I look back over the past 12 years, there is unmistakable evidence of change.

As I read over Doug Gingrich and JC Cahill's reflections on FEC, I was reminded that the presence of elected Full Professors is one of those changes. Where previously there was provision for only three elected staff (all Associate Professors), FEC now includes five elected staff (adding two Full Professors). This change arose from a suggestion from one of our faculty, and I must say it is a good change. Elected representatives bring richness to the discussion that helps keep FEC young. They don't rely on history and have lots of questions to ask. In the end that's good. Some people worry that five elected representatives coming from seven departments might create opportunity for bias. That might be true, but one thing I have observed over the years is that elected reps from a given department are anything but pushovers when it comes to decision making in their own discipline. It is also my sense that this change brings an enhanced dialogue on discipline dynamics and helps bring FEC's decision making closer to our community of scholars.

A new change we have been experimenting with is what I might describe as a soft target system. For the past two years, Chairs have been asked to bring their merit increments in line with a 3 year rolling average for their department (with modest room for growth). I personally like this change. The concept is built upon an expectation that Chairs will do most of the heavy lifting in terms of decision making. They know their discipline best, so this seems appropriate. There is another nuance. By virtue of being closer to the mark, FEC is also able to devote more time to the cases that sit on the real margins, and the margins are more likely to include discussion about cases that might be undervalued than has ever been the case before (this year FEC voted to increase 6 half increments above what their Chair had recommended). It also frees up time for discussion on tenure and promotion cases and contributes to more positive dialogue within FEC that promotes collaboration as opposed to confrontation. Finally, it means that fewer of our staff receive that dreaded letter just before Christmas; "unfortunately FEC did not agree with the recommendation of your Chair..." In previous years as many as one in six of us received such letters, sometimes detracting from an otherwise wonderful year in teaching, research and service.

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In the past I have commented about the increasing richness of information that is brought forward to FEC. In many respects this is one of the biggest changes that I have witnessed over the past decade, one that FEC itself helped orchestrate. But over time, it has been the individual faculty member who has played the biggest role. In my opinion, our staff believe that FEC can and will recognize different kinds of merit. They have responded to the requests of their Chairs to bring substantive and reflective information forward to FEC. This in turn has had a number of consequences. For starters, the decision making process is more evidence-based. A faculty member's annual report and the Chairs summary not only speak of impact in teaching, research, and service, they work to provide direct evidence of that impact. In doing so, the process has also become more attune to important differences between disciplines. While publication is a common currency, there is no longer any debate that conference proceedings play a different role in different disciplines, that journals come in many different shapes and forms, and that seminal contributions look different in Mathematics than say in Psychology, Chemistry or other disciplines. Similarly there is no longer any debate that different contributions may target different kinds of audiences, and effective communication requires sensitivity to those audiences.

The increase in flow of information into FEC has also changed the role of the Chair. Chairs have always had to defend cases. They also play a unique role in establishing their expectations for achievement and impact within their department, and interpreting annual reports within that context. In doing so, they help their department build its impact and reputation. Of course consistency is an ally in terms of setting standards for performance. Increasingly we see Chairs reflecting back on their week in terms of the harmony between their initial recommendations and the decisions that FEC makes. As Chairs look to reward performance and impact, a change that was implemented more than a decade ago is also a substantive ally. Many of us will have forgotten that the annual increment pool provided to an FEC for distribution used to be equal to 1.1 times the number of staff being considered (as opposed to 1.2 today). Truthfully, it would be hard to imagine allocating such a limited number of increments given the outstanding performance we see today.

To illustrate my point about outstanding performance, perhaps I can reflect on a few quantitative trends. The first thing that jumps to mind is the extent to which our scientists publish their work in top tier venues. I began my tenure as Dean in July 2002 and we have been watching these things closely since then. In 2001 and 2002 (data are only available by calendar year), our faculty complement published an average of two papers per year in the big three journals (Science, Nature, PNAS), although 5 might be a more realistic estimate of an annual baseline. By 2010, the number had grown to 18. Indeed we reached or exceeded that benchmark in each of 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010 (with 25 publications in the 2009 peak year). Not all would agree that Science, Nature and PNAS are where the best work is published.

If you are one of the skeptics, you might be more compelled to learn that 65% of our papers appearing in 2010/11 appeared in journals ranked within the top 30% of their disciplines. Over the same time (since 2001/02), our research funding has grown from \$50 M to \$84 M, with per capita funding growing from \$178,000 per year to \$285,000 per year. On the teaching side, our per capita training of graduate students has increased from 3.3 to 4.4. At the undergraduate level, we now have six years of detailed IDQ data available and quantified. Student ratings of the quality of their instructors (“overall this instructor was excellent”) has increased every year - year by year – from 4.28 to 4.44, even though our undergraduate/faculty ratio has increased. With this kind of activity, even handing out a pool of merit increments based upon the 1.2 rule still seems a bit scrooge-like at this time of year.

Service is another area where change is part of the recent past. Chairs have been active in promoting a culture of citizenship within and beyond their departments. This past year, more than 50% of our Associate and Full Professors served on editorial boards of one kind or another. Another 7% served on Tri-Council GSCs. Their collective service to university, profession and community is simply amazing (I love Doug and JC’s comment that “we had no idea how little service we do, until we saw all the files”). Interestingly, recent changes to the Faculty Agreement provide a means by which exceptional service can be used to justify promotion to full professor. The wording appears in Section 13.05.d. “The staff member must demonstrate a strong record of achievement in teaching, research, and service, including excellence in teaching and/or research, or, in rare circumstances, a record of exceptional service”. To date, the nature of “rare” and “exceptional” service has not been tested in the Faculty of Science FEC, perhaps someday it will. Another process that has not been tested is the role of the President’s Review Committee in handling “contentious cases” that arise because an FEC decision is viewed to be “unfair or procedurally flawed”. Science FEC is very careful about process and fairness.

Another line from the Faculty Agreement that catches my attention appears in section 13.06, which states that “The standards for evaluation of teaching performance shall be broadly based”. This has been part of the mantra about teaching for as long as I remember. The reason I cite it today is that both FEC and GAC have been clear that it is the responsibility of the staff member to bring information to FEC. In the absence of information, FEC presumes that there is nothing to report. In a world of evidence-based decision, making, this is not a good place to be.

Of course I do have to report on that statistics for this year. This year, 27 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, 13 cases (48%) were brought forward for consideration. With deliberations complete, 12 were granted tenure and 1 decision was for "no further appointment". A total of 66 Associate Professors were eligible to apply for promotion to full Professor. Four applications for promotion were submitted (6% of eligible candidates) and all were granted promotion. At the time of our deliberations, 5 of the 66 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 8 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 21 FSOs eligible for promotion, three submitted applications that were granted.

With regards to the allocation of increments, Chairs once again came in closer to the 1.2 target as a result of the new soft target system that we implemented last year. This year, we sought to recover 14 half increments. How were the merit increments distributed among the 312 academic staff within our FEC mandate? The answer is that decisions were made on 19 increments at the 0.0 level, 29 at the 0.5 level, 114 at 1.0, 100 at 1.5, 40 at 2.0 and 5 at 2.5. Another 5 staff members received a partial increment that brought them to the maximum salary at rank.

As this is my last year on FEC, I do want to say thank you to the dozens of people who have given their time so freely over the years to make this process work the way it does. I really believe the process helps define our Faculty. The effort and commitment of our tenure and promotion representatives, elected representatives, Chairs, support staff, and of course our Vice Deans deserve recognition. In my final reflections on FEC, I also want to say thanks to all our staff who contribute day by day to our teaching, research, and service, and in doing so distinguish our Faculty of Science. As we hang our stocking by the chimney with care, may I humbly exclaim; thanks to all --- and to all a good night.

Gregory Taylor, Dean of Science