

Dean's FEC Reflections 2016

The entire faculty evaluation process involves an enormous investment of time, primarily from the seven department chairs. The chairs' work consists of two major components: promotion/tenure and increments. Each has its own set of challenges.

Promotion/tenure:

This process typically starts in May with the vetting of promotion/tenure applications. Some of the cases must go forward to the Faculty Evaluation Committee (FEC) for consideration (e.g., when an assistant professor reaches the end of his/her second probationary period), and some are discretionary (associate professors, in consultation with their chair, decide when).

For all cases that are to be considered, the chair has to find six referees. Typically, three of the referees are suggested by the candidate and three by the department. Oftentimes, finding enough referees for a case can be challenging (referees may be too busy, or out in the field, or believe they are not qualified, or feel uncomfortable writing a positive recommendation, etc.), and many people end up being asked. Once the letters have been received (usually in September), the chair will then ask for department feedback on the case.

The candidate's CV, the referees' letters, and the department feedback form the core around which the chair will make a yea or nay decision on promotion. Whichever way the chair decides, a strong letter needs to be written to support the position. These letters can be demanding and time consuming to write, especially if the decision is borderline or negative. All it takes is one poor referee letter (unfavorable comments or faint praise) to force the chair into damage control mode. Even "obvious" promotion cases can get weak letters – referees are sometimes not as objective as they should be. If the chair has to recommend against promotion, this can be an extremely difficult and emotionally charged situation for both the candidate and the chair. Obviously, the Faculty of Science prefers all promotion cases to be a foregone positive conclusion. The reality is that most of them actually are.

Increments:

Annual reports start trickling in to a chair in July; all must be in by the end of September. Some chairs make increment decisions as they read each annual report; others prefer to wait until they have read a critical mass of reports before starting to decide on incrementation.

When I was chair, I found that it took me roughly 30 minutes to process an "obvious" annual report: read the report, do some fact checking on the data, look at teaching evaluations, compare against other evaluations, decide on a preliminary increment level, and then write up the recommendation. Then I would meet with the professor/FSO for at least 30 minutes. Some cases required much more work depending on the circumstances. An hour just to evaluate a case is not uncommon, and one or more meetings with the person in question might be needed. Based on additional input from the meeting(s), the initial increment decision might change.

Contrary to popular belief, there is no quota system in the Faculty of Science for increments. Chairs have a history of the department's performance at FEC and use this as a guide to suggest how many increments will likely be achieved, all things being equal. Of course, all things are not equal. Some departments have, on average, an unusually good or bad performance year: it is up to the chair to make the case in the former and argue that the latter was an aberration. Some departments have an upward trend of receiving increments, often the result of growth in the number of faculty members and/or young careers that are beginning to blossom. Downward trends for a department need to be carefully analyzed to understand if there is a problem and how it might be remedied.

Increment recommendations by the chair are, of course, subjective. The final decision is arrived at by a complex process that involves a mix of research, teaching, and service components. Poor performance in one of these areas can significantly hurt; strong performance can help. Many people believe that FEC is guided by research output and that little else matters. More papers equate to higher incrementation, or so the popular theory goes. This does not match reality. As an example, Professor A had five papers, good teaching, and good service this past year. The chair's recommendation, upheld by FEC, was for 2.0 increments. In contrast Professor B had 15 refereed publications, good teaching, and good service: 1.0 increments. Obviously these simple numbers do not tell the whole story, but it does illustrate that publication quantity can help, but only if it is matched with quality. As a second example, Professor C had one paper, superb teaching, and strong service. Professor D had five papers, poor teaching, and weak service. Professor C received more increments than Professor D. Doing well at FEC requires research, teaching, and service contributions. The above descriptions are approximate so as to hide the identities of the people.

In a high-performing faculty such as Science, it is always challenging to come up with a fair distribution of increments. Every year there are a few people who feel that the chair's recommendation was too low. This is always an awkward situation, since the chair has access to information (all of the department's annual reports) that cannot be shared. If a chair makes a mistake in a recommendation, it is FEC's job to fix it.

Department chairs have to put in a lot of time making increment decisions, recommend career-changing promotion decisions, wrestle with hard borderline cases, and are subject to emotional angst over their decisions. All of the Faculty of Science department chairs do an excellent job making increment/promotion decisions, writing their recommendation reports, and defending cases at FEC.

There were three important changes over last year. First, the recently concluded settlement with the AASUA resulted in some changes to the size of the increment pool. This year there were 1.2 merit increments available per professor and faculty service officer (FSO), up from last year's 1.175. However, this increase was largely offset by the removal of capped associate professors from the increment pool. There is an upper bound on the number of increments one can receive as an associate professor. Once that limit is reached, the salary is "capped" from the merit point of view (across-the-board salary increases still apply). Since these people cannot receive increments (unless they are promoted to full professor), the AASUA settlement has them excluded from the calculation of available increments. This is also true for all levels of FSO. As a result of the above two changes, there were 334.8 increments available for faculty members and 19.2 increments for FSOs (16x1.2, with 10 being capped).

Second, for the first time, all members of FEC had access to the written comments provided by students as part of their course evaluation, the result of a recent change to general faculty council (GFC) policy. In previous years, only the department chair and the faculty member being evaluated could see this information. The course comments were most often used by FEC to better understand the reasons for poor USRI (universal student ratings of instruction) scores.

Third, FEC votes were done using clickers. All votes were anonymous, giving the members of FEC the ability to vote their conscience without any real or perceived implications. The difference was immediately obvious. The number of abstain votes was reduced by 89 per cent, often resulting in cases being decided more quickly.

The annual FEC process is now a two-stage event. On November 1, FEC met to discuss and decide on all cases involving tenure decisions or (for FSOs) continuing appointment decisions. December 5-8, FEC reconvened to discuss all merit increment decisions, promotions to full professor, and FSO promotion cases. The split makes it much easier to do scheduling and gives us greater flexibility in the event that one of the promotion/tenure cases takes longer than expected to reach a decision.

As usual, all members of FEC (the vice dean, seven chairs, five elected members, and one external professor; the dean is *ex officio* and does not vote) did a superb job of discussing the 292 cases (professoriate and FSOs) in a balanced and congenial manner. This year’s interesting numbers include:

- 1: Promotion from associate to full Professor. Congratulations for this wonderful recognition of research, teaching, and service excellence.
- 6: Promotion from assistant to associate professor (with tenure): The caliber of the young researchers joining the ranks of associate professor reassure us that the future success of the Faculty of Science is secure.
- 266: Number of professoriate cases considered by FEC. This does not include the Dean, Vice Dean, and Department Chairs. Those who have announced that they will be retiring before July 1, 2017 do not go to FEC.
- 1.197: Average number of increments for a full professor.
- 1.112: Average number of increments for an uncapped associate professor. Note that this number has been lowered by the “almost-capped” professors. Some professors were eligible for less than 1.2 increments before reaching the cap. Even though they had a meritorious year, they could only receive enough increments to reach the cap.
- 1.284: Average number of increments for an assistant professor. That this number is as high as it is is delightful, as it reaffirms the excellent hiring decisions made by all departments in the last few years.
- 8: Number of increment recommendations that were raised by FEC.
- 23: Number of increment recommendations that were lowered by FEC.

- 4: FSO promotions. Congratulations, and thank you for your superb support of the Faculty of Science research and teaching mission.
- 26: Number of FSO cases considered.
- 1.108: Average increments received by non-capped FSOs.

One comment that has not been made by me in the past is the number of increments that are awarded by FEC to the faculty. FEC always awards every quarter increment available; nothing is left on the table. This is in contrast to some faculties which award less than the maximum available. The members of Science are, in general, performing at a high level, which means we never have enough increments! Unfortunately, this also means that some faculty members may get a quarter increment less than they think they deserve.

The following table helps justify the claim that the members of Science are performing at a high level. The table shows the publication output of the faculty by type. There is no double counting: one paper counts as one, even if it is coauthored and appears on the annual report of more than one Science faculty member.

Category	2010 2011	2011 2012	2012 2013	2013 2014	2014 2015	2015 2016
Journals	986	1054	1079	991	1130	1103
Conferences	193	205	177	186	198	155
Book Chapters	51	78	61	57	41	36
Other Refereed	119	57	110	141	106	96
Total Refereed	1349	1394	1427	1375	1475	1390
# Faculty	285	283	285	280	285	280
Average/Faculty	4.73	4.93	5.01	4.91	5.18	4.96
Non-refereed	N/A	411	440	440	345	273
Books	N/A	9	15	11	7	5
Patents	N/A	9	12	10	15	11

There is a small dip in the above totals, but this is likely just statistical variability. The average number of refereed publications per professor should not be taken as a performance standard because, of course, there are huge variances in the number of papers produced per discipline (and even sub-discipline).

What about quality? The following table shows the ISI impact factor of the journals that we publish in. A journal is placed in a bucket based on its percentile ranking compared to other journals in the same field. As always, this data must be viewed with extreme caution. However, the data can be used as a sanity check to see if anything major has changed from year to year. Obviously, there is a lot of noise in this data, but one positive observation is that 72.6 per cent of the publications coming from the Faculty of Science are in venues that are considered in the top 30 per cent of their field (up from 69.9; a record high).

Ranking	2010 2011	2011 2012	2012 2013	2013 2014	2014 2015	2015 2016
1-10%	27.6	27.1	25.8	27.6	25.9	27.1
10-30%	37.3	40.7	43.5	43.2	44.0	45.5
30-50%	13.4	14.6	12.0	12.1	11.2	11.3
50-100%	12.0	10.3	10.3	8.7	10.4	8.6
Unranked	9.7	7.2	8.5	8.4	8.6	7.4

On the teaching side, Science continues to excel. On the USRI question “The instructor was excellent,” the average score received was 4.5 on a scale of 1 to 5. At this high level of performance, it is hard to imagine this number moving much upward. Thank you to everyone involved in teaching – professors, FSOs, instructors, support staff, and teaching assistants – for ensuring that we deliver a superb education to our students.

To repeat myself from previous years... As always, it was a pleasure serving on FEC. It is inspirational to read about the impressive accomplishments of our academic community – in research, teaching, and service. Thank you for making our Faculty strong and making a significant impact locally, nationally, and internationally.

Jonathan Schaeffer, Dean, Faculty of Science, and Professor, Department of Computing Science

Committee members FEC Reflections 2016

Those of us who serve on FEC always report that the experience is an interesting one. Aside from the long hours spent reading through thick binders containing all the files over the span of two or three weeks before and also during the week when FEC convenes (which is a very heavy load), there are benefits to serving on this committee: one of them is to get a general picture of the sheer magnitude of the scientific research conducted in the Faculty. Each FEC member arrived well prepared, and the points and questions raised in discussion were almost always relevant. Chairs demonstrated, through their great familiarity with each case, how much they valued their colleagues. Most professors had spent a great amount of care in writing their reports and many of them had a lot to say in the section on additional data.

The way faculty members are evaluated by FEC is neither entirely efficient nor accurate. One reason is that it is nearly impossible to read in every little detail all the reports from everyone. Another reason is that it is our peers in our discipline who are in the best position to judge our research, but this is not how FEC operates and we have to find a way to gauge the contributions of colleagues who work in fields very different from our own. This is true both between disparate departments, but also surprisingly true within departments: theoretical vs. applied physics, ecology vs. biomedical biology, industrial vs. fundamental chemistry all gauge and value their colleague's contributions in different ways. Metrics like impact factors and citation counts have some usefulness in evaluating the significance of the publications under consideration, but FEC does not rely solely on these, and it was apparent that all those serving on FEC understand their limitations. Consequently, committee members tend to rely a lot on the assessments and recommendations of the chairs. Even though no one has a perfectly accurate sense of judgment (especially when it comes to judging a piece of work in an area outside of our own field of expertise), it is nevertheless possible to gain an appreciation of the contribution of each faculty member after reading a good number of reports. Indeed the chair recommendations typically aligned very well with our own assessments with an error of at most a quarter of an increment. This explains in good part why, in the majority of cases, there was either a consensus or a clear vote in favor of the chair's recommendation.

On the other hand, some of the reports did generate quite a bit of collegial discussion leading sometimes to very close votes, which could then lead to even more discussions before a second round of voting could take place. In most every case, chairs were sufficiently persuasive to swing the opinion of FEC in their favor. It was extremely rare that FEC altered a chair's recommendation more than 0.25 increments. From these observations, one can see that chairs are the primary determinants of merit assignment in most every case; FEC serves to legitimize the process and as a subsidiary secondary check. One aspect of annual reports that tended to raise discussion was the appearance of discrepancies between the chair's recommended increment compared to past year's awarded increments. For instance, someone may have substantially fewer publications this year and yet his/her chair recommended the same increment or perhaps even a higher one. Annual reports from previous years were not available to us (although increment history and number of publications were made available), so this type of question was not always easy to resolve. Such problems were especially challenging if the chair on the previous FEC was someone else (there were many new chairs this year), but it was nevertheless viewed as a valid way to raise concerns or objections.

A question that is usually discussed in "Reflections on FEC" is whether the whole process was fair. This is a valid concern, in part considering the difficulty of our job. That is not a very precise question because it depends on what is meant by "fair", but fairness cannot be given a definition that doesn't contain gray areas. FEC is mostly a fair process. Mistakes may have been made and, unfortunately, these can be impactful to the individual. One way in which FEC may be unfair is that, sometimes, serving members may be inclined to vote for slightly different increments for performances that appear rather equivalent because of the obligation to reach the average of 1.2 (This is mostly speculation on our parts since we don't know what other FEC members were thinking exactly except when they spoke up). Chairs certainly faced such dilemmas when writing their evaluations. One can imagine all the reports being ranked on the continuous interval from 0 to 3: with almost 300 reports, some of them will inevitably fall on the boundary between two increments and this can result in different increments being awarded for quite similar performances. There is no doubt that FEC would have been more

generous if we had not been bound by the mandatory requirement of reaching an average of 1.2.

It is stipulated in the Faculty Agreement that "Performance expectations shall increase as a staff member moves through the ranks" (section 13.05). This is taken into account by FEC, in particular with respect to the service component. A full professor is expected to have a good research and teaching performance but is also expected to be doing a larger portion of service, not only for the scientific community but also for the department and the university, compared to the junior faculty (who are mostly building their research program and establishing themselves). Annual reports of senior professors which were thin on service but whose recommended increment was quite high often raised red flags. This would then lead to discussions wherein the chair might attempt to explain the reasons underlying lower than expected service. Moreover, being a good citizen of the university helped one's case. Going beyond the usual expectations regarding the service tasks assigned to a faculty member was usually noted and appreciated by FEC, though not all types of service were equally valued by all chairs.

One of the elected members on FEC noted that the lack of women on this year's FEC is both dismayed and disappointing. We all agree that it is unfortunate that women are under-represented among scientific researchers and efforts must be made to nominate and elect more female FEC members. Because almost half of the FEC members are elected, one must consider the lack of diversity in FEC membership as a function of this process (of course representing minorities is never a strength of the democratic process!). Indeed last year there were no women nominated for the elected positions. We note that participating on FEC was a collegial experience and all opinions were respected and valued. We wish to see a diversity of faculty members putting themselves forward. The opinion amongst all at FEC was that this should be addressed seriously; encouragingly, this opinion really appeared to be entirely sincere and unanimous.

Discussion was also held amongst FEC members about ways to streamline completion of the Annual Reports, ensure integrity of this data, and facilitate its review by FEC. This extended into some consideration of what additional types of data may be desirable for inclusion on annual reports. Several FEC members volunteered to take up these challenges and we hope the input of all Faculty members will be sought on these issues.

Ted Allison, Associate Professor, Biological Sciences
Nicolas Guay, Assistant Professor, Mathematical and Statistical Sciences
Mohammad Salavatipour, Associate Professor, Computing Science