

## **“Thoughts on the Importance of Retention Reviews During a Global Pandemic”**

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Chapter 3 of the [UTK-UTIA Faculty Handbook](#) addresses the appointment, evaluation, promotion, tenure, and review for all tenure-track and tenured Faculty. For tenure-track faculty, the annual retention reviews are when they prepare materials documenting their teaching, scholarship and service for review by their tenured colleagues as described in [section 3.11.4.5](#). While department heads also conduct annual reviews of tenure-track faculty, and mentors advise them with their professional development, I consider the annual retention reviews conducted by the tenured faculty to be the keystone in this process. Below I have outlined six observations on this process, and its value to our university.

1. Conducting faculty searches are major undertakings requiring countless hours of recruiting and reviewing applications, sometimes numbering in the hundreds. These searches have many aspects which resemble an executive-level search for a dean or provost. New faculty members reflect the aspirational goals for our degree programs and will be responsible for future students for decades to come. These new faculty members also offer opportunities to advance the knowledge-base and institutional connections of their home departments.
2. Given this investment in our new colleagues, we owe it to ourselves, and to them to have a process that is transparent, iterative, and constructive, not only during the mid-cycle ETTR review, but every year.
3. Transparency is important because tenure track faculty need to have a clear process with a procedural structure, with clearly articulated criteria for rank that provide benchmarks to help them succeed. This is why the UTK-UTIA Faculty Handbook requires each academic unit to articulate their criteria for rank.
4. The retention reviews are an iterative process, one that involves an annual meeting and dialogue among the tenured faculty. This meeting ensures that the faculty mentor is engaged, and the discussion provides the basis for an evaluative narrative that is separate from the evaluation conducted by the department head. In addition to voting for or against retention, the most important outcome of this process are the written comments on the ballots that can help reinforce progress made since the last review, point to areas that need improvement, and connect the probationary faculty member to resources and colleagues who can advance their development. Consider this as a form of collective mentoring that supports the work of their chosen mentor.
5. Involving all tenured faculty in this process is constructive, not only for the faculty member under review, but also for those of who are already tenured. Longer term faculty have much to learn from their new colleagues, their methods of teaching, their research aspirations, and their paths through the profession.
6. Finally, if a new faculty member does not fulfill the promise we saw in them when they were hired, because we had a process that was transparent, iterative, and constructive, we can feel confident in our decision not to recommend the granting of tenure.

The importance of the retention review process is no less diminished as we strive to do our work during a global pandemic. The pressures are especially acute for assistant professors working to fulfill criteria for tenure while navigating the additional public health challenges of COVID-19. In this context, while the form of the faculty member’s dossier may need to take the form of a PDF, and the deliberations of the tenured faculty most certainly conducted over Zoom, our tenure-track colleagues should get the same level of constructive, collective mentoring as they have receive previously.