Tenure Decisions at Wharton and Elsewhere:
Some Factors Reviewers May Consider

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Each candidate for tenure presents a unique set of accomplishments. At most top-quality schools, and certainly at Wharton, there is no formula for determining whether a candidate will receive tenure; there are no hard and fast numerical criteria. In evaluating the merits of each candidate’s case for tenure, reviewers undertake a careful, detailed, analytic, and qualitative assessment of the candidate’s record. While the assessment may cover teaching and service in addition to research, this document focuses on how reviewers tend to evaluate candidates’ research records.

In evaluating candidates’ research records, internal and external reviewers often consider, implicitly or explicitly, the questions and factors that we outline below, though different reviewers may give different weights to these questions and factors. Our description of these questions and factors captures the shared observations and reflections of a subset of Wharton’s faculty and does not constitute official or unofficial Wharton policy.¹

Wharton contacts experts in the candidate’s field, asking for their commentary on and recommendation regarding the candidate’s case for tenure. Accordingly, prospective candidates should consider, early in their Wharton appointments, what they would like leading scholars in their fields to say about their work when they are evaluated for tenure. Given publication lags, work that is submitted late in the candidate’s appointment may be forthcoming or in working paper form and thus may not have its full impact.

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Is the candidate’s work important and novel?

To answer this question, internal and external reviewers are likely to assess the extent to which:

- The candidate’s publications and working papers are perceived to be substantive, thought-provoking, innovative, and persuasive, rather than obvious, derivative, repetitive, technically competent but little more, or unconvincing.
- The candidate’s work has defined or substantially contributed to new and important research areas, or substantively extended existing areas of research in new and useful directions.
- The candidate’s work makes a strong contribution, providing important new ideas, insights, findings, or approaches.

¹ Note: This document was prepared by former members of the Wharton Personnel Committee (Stan Baiman, Larry Brown, Gerard Cachon, Tom Donaldson, Scott Harrington, Bob Holthausen, Katherine Klein and Susan Wachter). Other senior faculty members, with experience as department chairs and/or heads of Wharton’s Personnel Committee, provided comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this document. The views and comments expressed in this memo are meant to be helpful to those interested in the tenure review process, but in no way should this be construed as a legally binding document nor should anyone assume that this document reflects all of the questions and thoughts that a reviewer might consider in evaluating a particular tenure case.
Has the candidate had a clear impact on his/her field? Is the candidate considered an established or emerging intellectual leader with regard to a given subject area, methodology, or set of topics?

To answer this question, internal and external reviewers are likely to assess the extent to which:

- The candidate’s work is focused, thematic, and programmatic.
- The candidate has published his/her research in top-tier journals (or other top-tier, prestigious outlets).
- The candidate’s work has influenced others’ scholarship, both in the US and internationally.
- The candidate’s contributions are clearly his/her own vs. attributable to co-authors (especially senior co-authors, former advisers, etc.).

Is the candidate respected and known in the field?

To answer this question, internal and external reviewers are likely to assess the extent to which:

- The candidate would be hired and granted tenure at other top-tier schools. (Do external letter writers say so explicitly?)
- The candidate’s publications place him or her among the top individuals in the cohort of other academics who received their doctorates at approximately the same time.
- The candidate has presented work (or served as a discussant) and made valuable contributions at prestigious invited and/or refereed conferences.
- The candidate has presented work at leading institutions in the field.
- The candidate serves as a reviewer for top journals or other important outlets in his/her field and has been appointed to editorial boards of the top journals.
- The candidate has won research awards.
- Citation counts suggest that the candidate’s work is having an impact.²

Is this person likely to continue to have an impact in the field?

To answer this question, internal and external reviewers are likely to assess the extent to which:

- The record indicates that the candidate’s work has moved beyond mining his/her dissertation research.
- The quality, quantity, and pacing of his/her publications give confidence that the candidate will continue to conduct research and publish impressive work at an reasonable rate in the future.
- The candidate’s pipeline of research (e.g., working papers, data sets, current research projects, and research agenda) gives confidence regarding the quality and quantity of the candidate’s future scholarly productivity and intellectual impact.

² Some reviewers include citation counts and make comparisons to the citation counts of other scholars; others do not. Citation counts can be an imprecise measure of an individual’s research impact for a variety of reasons.