EVALUATING LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION FOR FACULTY CANDIDATES

Letters of recommendation often show more about the skill of the letter writer than the skill of the candidate. The search committee may specifically ask references to include the items listed below, or may suggest that candidates ask their references to include this information.

A letter of recommendation should:
- Clearly state the writer’s relationship to the applicant
- State the skills and abilities of the applicant, and the writer’s value judgment of those skills and abilities
- State the applicant’s research record and the writer’s value judgment of that research
- State the teaching record of the applicant and the writer’s assessment of it
- Reference the applicant’s publication record and the writer’s value judgment
- Include additional items pertaining to this search as indicated by the search criteria

Letters of recommendation can be systematically different depending upon the gender of the candidate, as seen in a study by Trix and Psenka.* The following kinds of phrases, which may be the result of poor attention to writing rather than deliberate red flags, can unintentionally influence the reader.
- **Doubt raisers or negative language**: “although his/her publications are not numerous” or “while not the best student I have had, he/she”
- **Potentially negative language**: “s/he requires only minimal supervision” or “s/he is totally intolerant of shoddy research”
- **Faint praise**: “s/he worked hard on projects that s/he accepted” or “s/he is void of mood swings and temper tantrums” or “she has been lucky in her collaborations”
- **Hedges**: “her health and personal life are stable” or “s/he responds well to feedback”
- **Irrelevancy**: information that is not negative in itself, but lacking in academic characteristics such as “He is very active in church” or “She is quite close to my wife”
- **Using gender terms for women and titles for men**: “A lovely woman, she was an asset to our department.” vs. “Dr. Smith was an asset to our department.”
- **Gendered adjectives**: “Dr. Sarah Gray is a caring, compassionate physician” – vs. – Dr. Joel Gray has been very successful with his patients
- **Grindstone adjectives**: showing that women succeed through effort, and men succeed through abilities or talent such as “She is hardworking” vs. “He is highly motivated”, “She is dedicated” vs. “He is highly intelligent”, She is conscientious, dependable, meticulous, thorough, diligent, dedicated, careful” (all synonymous effort adjectives) vs. “He is brilliant, inspired, talented, a rising star, gifted” (all synonymous talent adjectives), or “She contributed” vs. “He wrote”
- **Gendered skill focus**: writing more about “her teaching” (often perceived as a more female skill) and “his research” (often perceived as a more male skill); focusing on “her training” vs. “his skills and abilities”