

**COUNCIL ON ACADEMIC PERSONNEL (CAP)
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQS)**

Revised November 1, 2008

37. What constitutes a good internal letter of evaluation and how can departments avoid potential “conflict of interest” in internal letters of evaluation?

The same attributes that make an external “department-nominated” letter useful also apply to the internal evaluation of the candidate’s research. Specifically, internal letter writers should strive for letters that are analytical and evaluative. Letters that simply enumerate numerical contributions are less helpful, as are letters that quote extensively from those written by external letter writers. When published work in joint authorship (or other product of joint effort) is presented as evidence of academic achievement, it the responsibility of the department chair to establish as clearly as possible the role of the candidate in the joint effort (APM 210-1d(2))

It is helpful for the *department* letter to comment on the candidate’s formal teaching and service contributions, relative to those of others at similar rank/step (without identifying them by name), and to explain apparent discrepancies (e.g., a lack of formal undergraduate teaching during the review period) wherever possible.

Units should avoid the appearance of conflict of interest in internal letters of evaluation, including letters from the departmental committee, the department chair, and the dean. The department should apply the same guidelines articulated above (see FAQ 35) to determine whether internal colleagues are in potential COI situations and, if so, should exclude such colleagues from file preparation whenever possible. If this is unavoidable (e.g., a candidate in a small department collaborates with most line faculty), then the potential conflict of interest should be clearly noted in the internal document. Whenever a department recommendation is developed by a committee; it is most important that the chair of the committee be free of the appearance of conflict of interest. CAP recognizes that departments might favor inclusion of collaborators in file preparation for reasons of expertise and expediency; however, collaborators sometimes stand to benefit indirectly from a positive outcome of a proposed action and/or their judgment may be unduly influenced by their recent interactions with the candidate. For these reasons, CAP may give less weight to letters of evaluation that have been authored by collaborators of the candidate. CAP may return the file to the department for additional information or a new letter due to the appearance of possible conflict of interest.