

A Tenure Review Glitch Stirs Anxiety



Dear Labby,

I am up for tenure this year, and although my Chair and the members of the department's Personnel Action Committee (PAC) all told me my case looked promising, a serious wrinkle has developed: Of 14 investigators from whom letters were requested, 10 have declined! And two of the four who accepted are my graduate and postdoc advisors. I was devastated by this news. The 10 who declined included eight scientists I suggested and two others suggested by one or more PAC members. My Chair is now seeking additional letters (eight invitations) and is committed to getting my case moved forward. Meanwhile I am really depressed. You are always so helpful. Any advice?

—Knocked Back

Dear Knocked Back,

This is indeed a very low acceptance. At Labby's institution the acceptance rate for tenure review letter invitations is approximately 65% (usually invitees are mostly investigators suggested by the candidate, with two to three suggested by the PAC, the same mix as yours). Whatever the average is for your institution, in entertaining (or accepting) the notion that this reflects reservations that would-be writers may have about your case, you are jumping to a conclusion. It is likely that all those who declined sent reasons such as too busy, one of my R01s is up for renewal, I have study section coming up, I am on sabbatical and swore off doing such things, etc. These are the usual reasons for declining invitations and are likely honestly given. A more nuanced situation is when the invitee feels that he or she might prepare a positive letter, but senses the need for a fair amount of work to do so. Labby always recommends that individuals suggested (by the candidate or the PAC) be scientists so knowledgeable about the candidate's work that their decision to write letters would not be influenced by that consideration.

A new factor may have crept in during the past year (when it sounds like your letters were requested). The recent ending of National Institutes of Health (NIH) American Recovery and Reinvestment Act supplemental awards, together with the current nadir in NIH and National Science Foundation grant application success rates, has placed many U.S. investigators in positions of declining almost everything; many are focusing only on their teaching and institutional service responsibilities. They are saving every other minute and calorie of energy for their research.

One idea would be to ask your Chair to immediately send, in addition to the second set of invitations that just went out, a few requests to admired senior figures who might be semi-retired. Such individuals sometimes have a bit less crashing anxiety about their labs and, in addition, bring broad perspective to the task from years of experience. Even one letter from such a person close to your research field could be particularly influential at the institutional tenure committee level. If your package ends up with four or five letters from the second set of requests (approximately a 33% response), and one or two from the "senior statesperson" type, your package would not be seen as deficient in letters. Tenure packages have abundant other information on candidates' scientific impact and stature, as well as teaching and service. A key point in your inquiry is worth keeping in mind: You said that both your Chair and PAC think you have a strong case. The initial letter invitation responses may well be a statistical anomaly and/or have causes totally unrelated to the merit of your tenure case.

Hang in there. You may have been knocked back for a few weeks. But you certainly were not, and are not, knocked out. ■

—Labby

Direct your questions to labby@ascb.org. Authors of questions chosen for publication may indicate whether or not they wish to be identified. Submissions may be edited for space and style.

