

May 8, 2025

TO: Washington State University (WSU) Faculty Senate
Dr. Elizabeth Cantwell, President
Dr. T. Chris Riley- Tillman, System Provost and Executive Vice President

FROM: Dr. Aaron Oforlea, Co-chair, WSU Faculty Status Committee
Dr. Bidisha Mandal, Co-chair, WSU Faculty Status Committee

Report of the Faculty Status Committee: Academic Year 2024-2025

Charge and Purpose

Pursuant to I.B.4 of the Washington State University (WSU) Faculty Manual, we are reporting the activities of the WSU Faculty Status Committee (FSC) for the 2024-2025 academic year. The FSC is an independent investigative committee elected by the WSU faculty at large. The committee reports and makes recommendations directly to the WSU President. Under provisions of the WSU Faculty Manual, the FSC:

1. Reviews, mediates, and/or adjudicates disputes between individual faculty members and between individual faculty members and the administration.
2. Makes recommendations to the Faculty Affairs Committee and the WSU President concerning policies about faculty affairs, which arise out of its conciliatory and Judicial functions.
3. Calls special meetings of the faculty or any component thereof, giving reasonable notice, at which time the chair of the committee shall preside.
4. Reviews any problem within its jurisdiction brought to it by any member of the faculty
5. Makes periodic reports (at least annually) to the Faculty Senate and the faculty concerning its operations

Historically, tenure denials have been the most common type of appeals to the FSC. The FSC can also be asked to investigate the non-renewal of a faculty member's contract following the comprehensive third-year review, or a tenured faculty member's termination of employment following elimination of a program due to financial exigency or discontinuance of a program or department. FSC also nominates members of the Faculty Hearing Panel and arranges for investigations and hearings prior to disciplinary action. Finally, other types of decisions that a faculty member believes may violate the Faculty Manual may be appealed to the FSC. FSC members serve non-renewable three-year terms that end on August 15th.

FSC's investigations are thorough and confidential. Reports of the findings of an FSC investigation are provided to the members of the committee, the appellant, and the President in addition to the Senate Executive Committee. Under provisions of the Faculty Manual, the FSC can make its own rules of procedure but must meet certain timelines for handling a case. The specific provisions in the Faculty Manual have been approved by the Faculty Senate, the university administration, and the WSU Board of Regents; they should be regarded as

authoritative. Further information on FSC's composition, charge, functions, and operations is available in the Faculty Manual, Section I.B.4.

Membership:

Current membership consists of 12 faculty members, 9 tenure track (tenured) and 3 career track. The members and their affiliations can be found at: <https://facsen.wsu.edu/faculty-status-committee/>. Current members elected Associate Professor Praveen Sekhar to serve as a co-chair the 2025-2026 academic year to serve with Dr. Bidisha Mandal.

On April 17, 2025, the Provost's Office disseminated a ballot for the purpose of replacing members whose terms are concluding. On May 1, 2025, the co-chairs of the Faculty Senate Committee (FSC) communicated the results to both the newly elected members and those who were not elected. The newly appointed members are Kimberly McBride (Career-Track), Anne Cox (Tenured), Allan Felsot (Tenured), and Kimberly McKeirnan (Tenured).

Faculty Appeal:

The FSC received two appeals regarding tenure and promotion decisions, which were reviewed by a preliminary evaluation conducted by at least three committee members.

1. Dr. Per McCord, Department of Horticulture, appealed to the FSC to review the decision of denial of tenure. A subcommittee of the FSC initiated an investigation on April 1, 2025, which concluded on April 30, 2025, with the presentation of the findings to the FSC. In the case of Dr. Per McCord, the FSC committee found that a substantial "body of evidence and key findings" recommends that the decision to deny tenure be set aside. This decision was taken and accepted by the vote of the full present FSC committee on April 30, 2025. Co-chair Bidisha Mandal email the final case report to WSU President Elizabeth Cantwell on May 8, 2025.
2. Dr. Praveen Sekhar, School of Engineering and Computer Science, appealed to the FSC to review the decision to deny promotion. All necessary material were formally received on April 17, 2025. Given that it would have been impossible to conduct a thorough investigation before the end of the Spring semester, with almost all tenure-track members already occupied investigating Dr. McCord's case or involved in the process to elect new FSC members, it was decided to start the investigation process in Fall 2025. Dr. Sekhar approved of this. Note that Dr. Sekhar will be one of the co-chairs next academic year. To understand if this might result in any conflicts of interest during the investigation process, the current co-chairs, Dr. Oforlea and Dr. Mandal, met with Adam Malcolm (Senior Assistant Attorney General, Division Chief) on April 22, 2025. During the investigation into Dr. Sekhar's case in Fall 2025, Adam Malcolm will be assisting the FSC in generating the necessary memo(s) and formal procedures to protect the integrity of the process and safeguard Dr. Sekhar's interests.

Faculty Complaint:

The FSC received one complaint regarding an annual review, which received a preliminary evaluation by three committee members. A subcommittee of the FSC was formed on September 5, 2024, and it initiated an investigation on September 12, 2024, which concluded on October 30, 2024, with the presentation of the findings to the FSC. In the complaint, Dr. Mays received satisfactory ratings in Research and Teaching. He received an unsatisfactory rating in Service based on his performance as the Program Lead. The FSC found no evidence to support Dr. Mays' request for a new Annual Review. Co-chair Aaron Oforlea emailed the findings to WSU President Kirk Schulz on December 9, 2024.

On November 20, 2024, co-chairs Dr. Oforlea and Dr. Mandal received an email communication from Dr. Brian Collins, Department of Physics and Astronomy. It involved an urgent matter involving one of his colleagues, who was banned from the campus and was prohibited from communicating with students due to conducts within the Department of Chemistry. Dr. Collins wanted to discuss the situation on behalf of the colleague who was banned from the campus. He had first approached the Faculty Senate and the Faculty Affairs Committee, who directed him to contact the FSC. In our meeting with Dr. Collins and Dr. Brian Saam (Department Chair, Physics), we sought to ascertain whether the FSC is the appropriate body to investigate the situation. We were informed that the concerned faculty member had retained legal counsel. Consequently, we concluded that, given the involvement of legal representatives, it would be prudent for the FSC to not investigate the case since we do not have expertise in legal matters. We recommended that Professor Collins contact the Faculty Senate representative within his department or college, to which he consented. Additionally, we made him aware that *he* has the option to file a complaint regarding what he perceives as unfair treatment and violations of department, college, or university policies. We assured him that, if he files a complaint, we (the FSC) would deliberate and determine whether to initiate an investigation. For clarity, the Attorney General's Office (AAG) has not contacted the FSC and is prepared to conduct an investigation as long as the FSC does not inadvertently contravene university policies or compromise the concerned faculty member's due process rights. We did not receive any further appeals from Dr. Collins. We notified Dr. Tracy Klein (Faculty Senate Chair) of this discussion and our decision on December 18, 2024.

Other Activities:

The FSC met on September 5 and November 26 of 2024, and February 21 and April 30 of 2025. Minutes are maintained on the FSC Teams site and are accessible to all current members. Completed activities include relocating the online complaint form: <https://facsen.wsu.edu/faculty-status-committee/> and at <https://provost.wsu.edu/complaints/> in addition to those noted in the prior section. Co-Chairs also met with the WSU legal officer, Adam Malcolm, on April 22 to discuss the sensitive responsibility of investigating a member's denial of tenure promotion by the FSC, who is currently serving on the FSC. The Co-Chairs expressed significant concern regarding the complexities associated with maintaining confidentiality.

Recommendations:

Numerous concerns pertaining to the structure and operations of the Faculty Steering Committee (FSC) that were presented this year continue to persist from previous years and necessitate attention from the Provost and/or the Faculty Senate. Consequently, we have re-included them in this annual review and have also incorporated a few additional concerns that have arisen this academic year.

1. We continue to emphasize that the annual review process has been confusing to faculty and administrators, particularly considering multiple potential COVID extensions. In addition to the intensive annual review in the third year, a career progress report is to be provided to the faculty member in their third year (required by the faculty manual, section III.C.4), and an explicit meeting between the Chair/Director and the faculty member should take place where the Career Progress Report is discussed. The faculty member, in their third year, should receive a copy of their annual intensive evaluation and a copy of their Career Progress Report.
2. We continue to recommend that a mentoring committee (or at minimum a mentor) is necessary for a given faculty member (career and tenure track), whether seeking tenure and promotion (i.e., assistant professor) or promotion (i.e., associate professor) in addition to the support and guidance of relevant departmental guidelines. We continue to encourage each unit/department to carefully review the roles and responsibilities of a mentoring committee in developing a given faculty member, updating, and clarifying as needed. Mentoring responsibilities should be clearly delineated in writing, preferably in the unit/department manual or its equivalent. The role of the mentor in providing the Chair/Director's input in the annual evaluation process should also be explicitly stated. There have also been gaps reported from individual colleges regarding guidance on progression from associate to full professor in all tracks.
3. The FSC's functional scope continues to cover career track promotion. We advise periodic review of the bylaws to address inclusion in promotion guidance.
4. We advise that the focus of the 2025-2026 FSC include a re-evaluation of the terms and member designations currently specified in FSC's governing bylaws and the Faculty Manual.
5. The FSC is concerned about our committee's visibility, so we suggest adding information about the committee and its charge to decisions on tenure and promotion. This would complement other sources of post-decision assistance for guidance and further evaluation at the department, unit, or Faculty Affairs levels.
6. The Faculty Standards Committee (FSC) articulates apprehension concerning the restricted responsibilities allocated to career-track faculty members.
7. The FSC expresses concern regarding the insufficient guidance pertaining to the policies for notifying complainants about the outcomes of complaints.