

Homewood Faculty Responses to FACT Draft Report Nov. 18, 2019

Background

On Friday, November 1, 2019 the Steering Committee of HFA contacted all Homewood faculty requesting feedback on the FACT draft report dated September 2019. Feedback was solicited over a “google form” on which HFA members were invited to identify by tenure status and rank as well as by division, with the option of flagging specific topics.

61 responses were received. 55% of respondents were tenured Professors; 15% tenured Associate; and 23% tenure track (one of these latter responses was signed by 20 junior faculty). A small number of respondents were NTT or did not identify. Responses varied in length from a couple of lines (“I don't have any problems with the motivation and implementation for the FACT. In fact, I think it's a good idea.”) to over 2,000 words. More than one third were in the 400-600 word range with comments of three or more substantial paragraphs common. The need to distill faculty views for the present document requires that the arguments laid out by authors are represented only in truncated form. Members of HFA are referred to the raw data to consider the rationales in full.

Homewood faculty responses to the FACT report ranged from uneasiness to strong opposition. Of the 60 responses received, only three registered an acceptance of the report's proposal for a University-wide Tenure Advisory Committee. Responses were thoughtful and earnest and reflect a desire for maintaining the highest quality of faculty at the University. Nearly all responses had to do with the process at Homewood and the role of the Homewood Academic Council. Respondents did not claim familiarity with the procedural norms in other university divisions but showed a knowledge with the four-step tenure process at the Homewood (department, dean, ad hoc, HAC) that is absent from the draft report.

We note that on occasion, authors of comments use “FACT” in lieu of “TAC,” where FACT stands in for the recommendations and conclusions of the exploratory committee.

Respondents repeatedly reference potential impacts of the proposed TAC on four areas: junior faculty **quality of decision-making; retention and recruitment; diversity and inclusion;** and **shared governance.** In what follows we have collated comments on these interrelated topics.

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Some respondents had reservations about the composition and charge of FACT itself and the Homewood faculty's role in its deliberations:

“The Committee membership was not representative of the institution, with the chair and a majority of the members coming from Medicine and Public Health. A new committee needs to be formed.”

“The committee convened by the president included no representation at all from the humanities or social sciences at Homewood. This rendered their recommendations illegitimate--or at least sufficiently unrepresentative as to be problematic.”

“The commission was stacked by medical and professional schools and poorly represented Homewood. “

“The FACT document reflects consultation with peer institutions, but it would have benefited from asking those institutions what does not work well, or what problems have arisen from the use of a university-wide committee.”

“I am disappointed and upset that an effort was not made to consult with the junior faculty (or at least with their representatives/mentors in the departments, as many [including myself] may fear speaking our [*sic*] directly) who will be affected most by this process.”

Doubts were also voiced about the proposed composition of the Tenure Advisory Committee:

“[R]epresentation in the [TAC] is even less related to the candidate’s field than at the HAC level.”

“The representation of humanist disciplines on the committee is not only minimal (potentially one seat), it is uncertain. The humanities and social science ‘share’ one seat, and given the term for a committee member is three years potentially renewable, there could be six consecutive years with the absence of a humanist. The same is true for the social sciences. This would inevitably and undeniably make any tenure candidate in the humanities (and social sciences) keenly vulnerable.”

“all divisions of the university should have the same number of FACT committee members. I do not see why the numbers should be different. Size of the division should not matter here.”

The issue of representation is closely tied to the question of expertise and objectivity. A number of the respondents express doubts about the ability of a University-wide committee to make competent judgments about the disciplines represented in the Homewood Schools :

“In a committee of 12 people drawn from across the university, [...] the vast majority of members will have no disciplinary expertise at all in the field of the candidate in question. This, in turn, makes it overwhelmingly likely that proxies such as prestige of publication venues will take the place of meaningful consideration of the candidate’s research output. The reliance on external letters by no means solves this problem, since there is significant disciplinary expertise required to interpret such letters.”

“The current process with HAC, which includes faculty from HAC and AS, is working in my opinion relatively well, although issues related to expertise have contributed to several problems in the past. So, I expect these problems to become worse by including faculty from other divisions, such as Medicine.”

“A university-level tenure committee would add another layer of decision making onto the process of tenure review while calling for crucial decisions to be made by faculty further away from the relevant disciplines. The contention made in the draft report that ‘specific disciplinary expertise is not requisite for the type of review contemplated for a university-level body’ strikes me as unconvincing: in practice, how could this committee hope to adequately assess ‘a tenure review dossier relative to the school’s and department’s own standards and processes’ without an intimate familiarity with the scholarship in the discipline, with publication landscapes, with cutting-edge research, and with the multitude of ways in which disciplines reinvent themselves over time?”

“To the point of neutrality, the arguments made in the FACT report are again not relevant in the WSE/KSAS. [...] HAC spans across schools and I don’t know how much more ‘objective’ one can get than having a classics professor review cases of an electrical engineer.”

A concern often voiced is that the proposed university-wide TAC be dominated by larger professional schools (viz. SOM and Public Health) that have a different mission than the Homewood Schools, with the consequence of devaluing open-ended, speculative scholarship.

“Johns Hopkins is a diverse institution with faculty excelling in a broad spectrum of disciplines from applied areas (education; business; nursing; applied physics) to purely speculative ventures (pure mathematics; theoretical physics; comparative literature) that have no empirical component. The criteria for excellence also cannot be compared. It would be inappropriate for an epidemiologist to evaluate an ancient historian as vice versa. We are fortunate that the Homewood Academic Council has enough representation from different disciplines for members to learn what expectations and requirements are in various fields. We are fortunate that they can evaluate enough cases in those disciplines on a regular basis to be able to evaluate the dossier[s] and to assess recommendations made in letters of reference. A university-wide board with limited representation from various divisions would not have this expertise.”

“it is already difficult enough for humanists and social scientists to find fair representation even on HAC [...] a second judging body composed of an even smaller number of people across an even wider and less related range of fields - including fields which are utterly unlike the arts and sciences in terms of how knowledge and progress is construed - will only magnify the likelihood of uninformed judgment [...] This is a knife with only one edge, and what it will cut is talented young people this university ought to be protecting and cultivating. I would like to see the FACT initiative disbanded or, failing that, have [Arts & Sciences] excluded from its purview.”

“The trajectory of a tenure-track faculty in the School of Medicine will be very different than that of a tenure-track faculty in the Whiting School. The assessment from a faculty from the School of Medicine in this new committee will thus likely be skewed and not provide an accurate assessment of the candidate’s future potentials.”

“Some divisions, such as the medical school, place a large weight on funding when promotion and tenure are considered, and [...] this will seriously affect the promotion/tenure process and outcomes of other divisions. In addition, the inclusion in

the process of the executive/administrative branch of JHU will skew the process toward investigators who bring a lot of money (as expected by the administrators) against investigators that bring less money but produce high quality scientific work.”

A number of Homewood faculty emphasized the strengths of the Homewood Academic Council by comparison with the inadequacies of the proposed Tenure Advisory Committee. The Homewood Academic Council model is seen by most respondents as functioning well or very well and fulfilling a core academic mission within the university as a key element of shared governance.

“The [Homewood Academic Council] is relatively unique in higher education. This places JHU in an enviable position to attract strong faculty who want to associate with an institution that places trust in its faculty. The Council is about all that is left of our institution that honors the faculty.”

“The HAC already serves as an evaluative body with advisory powers in relation to the president, and so it’s unclear why we need yet another layer of administration, delay in the tenure process in order to advise the president more fully.”

“I doubt that the judgments of departmental committees, external referees, the respective deans’ offices, ad hoc committees and HAC should be second guessed by anyone outside or above those specially appointed to make this judgment.”

“The present process of tenure has been examined thoroughly by at least two committees that were set up by the Academic Council and included a member nominated by the President. Their finding[s] were that tenure decisions made at JHU Arts and Sciences and Engineering were very much within the statistical norms of peer institutions. [...] The President has failed to explain what part of the system needs fixing.”

“My biggest concern is that I do not understand what problem the TAC is proposing to solve. The view stated on page 7 of the report is ‘The FACT views the purpose of any university-level advisory committee as improving the president’s ability of make informed tenure recommendations and thereby complement the school-level components of the university’s tenure process.’ Why doesn’t the President trust the schools’ recommendations on tenure? If faculty input is important to him, as stated numerous times in the Report, why is the vast amount of input he already receives through the current process insufficient or untrustworthy?”

Respondents point to shortcomings in FACT’s account of tenure processes on Homewood:

“In describing promotion and tenure procedures, FACT has omitted several important features of Homewood’s arrangements, perhaps in the interest of brevity. [...]The FACT report does not indicate any particular shortcoming in this process. In fact, the evaluation of current tenure review processes has been explicitly excluded from the committee’s charge. (p.2) In the absence of any account of what’s wrong with the existing procedures, it is difficult to know whether the recommended remedies will make them right.”

“Throughout its report, no doubt owing to its own composition which favors professional schools with ‘contract to retirement’ rather than tenure per se, ‘FACT’ mischaracterizes the tenure process on Homewood. It exaggerates the role played by departments by stating that ‘Johns Hopkins [...] rests the power to grant tenure with departmental faculty.’ This statement contravenes University bylaws according to which only the Board of Trustees, upon recommendation of the President, can confer this status. On Homewood, review is located ‘in departments’ only insofar as the Chair first solicits one panel of outside referees before making a formal departmental recommendation to the Dean, followed (pending decanal approval) by a second ‘ad hoc’ committee review that solicits a second set of external international experts. [...] The accepted standards for tenure are predominantly those of the self-regulated profession at large, as embodied by a group of ten to twelve international experts with relevant field knowledge. [...] whatever the balance of its membership, would ‘improve’ the quality of decisions to tenure on academic grounds given the vast disparities of academic cultures across Johns Hopkins.”

“[The Tenure Advisory Committee] undermines the careful and exacting procedures for awarding promotion and tenure already in place, without any prior systematic independent review and evaluation of those procedures. [...] [W]e do not believe that a ‘one size fits all’ yardstick would be remotely appropriate to a complex and diverse division like KSAS which houses multiple disciplines, where the appropriate criteria for assessing the merits of a highly competitive faculty in highly varied fields of inquiry is a matter of close and detailed scrutiny and stewardship. I therefore join the call made by others that KSAS may be permitted to be exempted from the centralized monitoring of tenure and promotion by TAC.”

There is a concern that the Tenure Advisory Committee create an unnecessary redundancy:

“In justifying that a university-level committee is necessary, the FACT compared JHU with other peer institutions. What is missing in this assessment is the relative power of each level (department, college, etc.) has in the tenure process at these peer institutions and if there is already a HAC-equivalent prior to the university-level committee. For instance, at many institutions, the department or college generally have significant power to bring the tenure case to the final stages (e.g. the Chancellor or President) without extensive scrutiny. However, at JHU, the HAC conducts a thorough and critical assessment that is independent of the department/college's approval process. The power of HAC will be significantly diluted should there be another committee with even more power to direct the tenure process.”

“in light of the existence of the HAC and the information on ‘Ivy-Plus’ peer institutions, I cannot come to any other conclusion than the following. If, indeed, the TAC is commissioned, either it or the HAC would become a redundant entity. [...] [A]s the report notes, the HAC is already [a] multi-school oversight body in the vein of what is being proposed. [...] [A]dding the TAC would mean that our HAC would be an additional step in this process that, as far as I can tell, is not present at any of the peer institutions.”

A substantial portion of the postings note that the arrangements proposed by FACT would depart from the institution’s longstanding tradition of faculty governance and undermine decision-making.

“[T]he university that Gilman invented had no schools of medicine, public health, engineering, nursing, or international studies. It most closely resembled today’s School of Arts and Sciences, and that school’s Academic Council is the most direct institutional descendant of Gilman’s design for building a distinguished faculty. The Tenure Advisory Committee recommended by FACT represents a departure from its Gilman-era precedents. Homewood’s Academic Council is elected by the faculties of Engineering and Arts and Sciences. TAC would be appointed by the President on the recommendation of the deans (who are also appointed by the President). It represents a step away from the practice of faculty governance that made Gilman’s university distinctive.”

“[T]ransfer of final responsibility for tenure and promotion decisions from an elected body of faculty representatives to a body appointed by the President and Provost would effectively end faculty shared governance within the Homewood Schools.”

“TAC manifests a serious affront to the principle of shared governance; while it was surely not intended as an autocratic move, or as a strategy to downsize or weaken KSAS, it has the unfortunate appearance of being one, and so will be its effects.”

“I have been on the Academic Council. The president came. We were the faculty advisory committee on promotions. If the president today would go to the Academic Council, he would not need to set up a separate committee to advise [*sic*] him on promotions. He has one already.”

“Each school- or campus-level body, when it issues a negative or positive recommendation, makes that recommendation in the absolute. It recommends the candidate to the Trustees who embody the institution and who steward its future. [...] The proposed presidentially appointed Tenure Advisory Committee [...] is a structural anomaly which cannot [...] hope to attain any legitimacy in the eyes of the faculty. Its relationship to the Trustees is not specified (could the Trustees elect not to concur with the President’s decision to concur with the TAC’s advice not to concur?). Nor is the role of the Provost [specified] who is, quite unlike the members of TAC, present at all tenure deliberations across the University and thus familiar with each and every set of procedures. The ‘FACT’ report describes the Tenure Advisory Committee as merely advisory, yet allows that the TAC reopen in effect each and every dossier that is communicated to it to perform a quality-based evaluation. The prospect that the Tenure Advisory Committee issue few judgments of DO NOT CONCUR (1 – 2 %) does not lessen the impact it would exert structurally on the standing school-based tenure review processes such as they are.”

“The only meaningful role for [the TAC] would be to review the degree to which established procedure was followed by the recommending body, in other words to ensure procedural regularity.”

Some respondents suggested that the principle of faculty governance be extended to the Tenure Advisory Committee by requiring that its members be elected by the faculty of their respective schools.

“The fact that TAC will be constituted of selected, as opposed to elected, faculty members is an affront to divisional autonomy. How is accountability to be ensured if the very process of constituting the board is unrepresentative and unaccountable?”

“The TAC should be an elected body. [...] [E]lections will ensure that, down the road, the faculty would always have recourse to revise the body if it was consistently opposed to its decisions or felt harmed by a particular decision.”

“If this board is created, I have a strenuous objection to its members being appointed. Membership appointments by the president, provost, dean or other administrator lend the process to the pitfalls of political appointments and the suppression of contrasting points of view. Its members must be elected by the faculty. However, I would caution that elections should not be held across schools (e.g. [Whiting School of Engineering] faculty should not vote for [School of Medicine] seats). It is imperative that the elections be underpinned by relationships that an individual has built with his/her colleagues in the school. The elections become meaningless if we, as faculty, do not know the individuals we are voting for.”

Others were concerned about the impact that the proposed TAC would have on junior faculty.

“I’m an assistant professor in the humanities and, from what I’ve been told by my colleagues, doing everything I need to be doing to secure tenure. For the first time since coming to Hopkins several years ago, however, I’m now concerned that the process could go wrong for reasons beyond my control or understanding. I have even started looking seriously at recent job listings in my field, something I hadn’t been tempted to do before this new development.”

“[A] university-level committee would adversely impact junior faculty recruitment and retention. It certainly impacts my desire to build a career at Johns Hopkins University. When I was considering a faculty job offer from Johns Hopkins, I talked with numerous junior and senior faculty from the Whiting, Krieger, and Bloomberg schools [...] to better understand[d] the advantages and pitfalls of starting my faculty career at Johns Hopkins. Many of the faculty I talked to had encouraging words about starting a career at Johns Hopkins, but I received a warning from several of these faculty: Ronald Daniels felt that too many junior faculty were receiving tenure and that the tenure rate should be reduced. I perceive the university-level advisory committee on tenure as a means to achieve that end. The tenure process at Johns Hopkins already includes an extensive department-level review and a review by the 12-member Homewood Academic Council. It is unclear to me what purpose a university-level committee would serve other than to reduce the university’s overall tenure rate.”

“If a university-level committee comes to fruition, I plan to apply for faculty positions at other peer institutions. My department has a mixed track record of success in tenuring junior faculty. All of the top departments in my academic field of study have higher

tenure rates than my current department. Additional uncertainty in the tenure process at Johns Hopkins would push me to look for academic positions elsewhere.”

“The proposal for the tenure advisory committee as it stands does not appear to have any mechanism that would allow for consultation with the candidate’s department chair in case of questions – a distressing oversight, especially because it would make it even easier than it is now to overlook such crucial factors as the candidate’s service to the department, to underserved students, and to the community as a whole.”

“The ramifications of a 14-18 month tenure process, in terms of recruiting and retention, should not be dismissed as the report does quite flippantly when it says, ‘The FACT found this particular concern difficult to understand because the tenure process at the vast majority of our peers already includes a university-level faculty committee step.’ In this response, the committee seems to miss the point entirely. As a junior faculty member, I expect that I will be held to the highest standard by my peers across the institution when my tenure case is reviewed. [...] I expect that [the tenure process] will occur in a manner that is not cumbersome, overly drawn-out, and involving repetitive steps, which this would be.”

“We are able to hire outstanding scholars (and therefore attract outstanding graduate students) precisely because we do *not* rely on more easily legible proxies for quality, such as prestige of graduate institutions or publication with specific presses. This allows us to hire excellent junior scholars before they establish their reputations in the field and have multiple competing offers. Then, by nurturing vibrant intellectual communities on campus, we keep them here even when they rise to prominence in their fields and attract offers from wealthier institutions.[...] To the extent that we mold our tenure and promotion processes to replicate those of our peer institutions, it will hinder our ability to make up for this deficiency in other ways.”

A chief concern regards the impact of the proposed TAC on efforts to increase faculty diversity and to foster inclusion. To consider the breadth of cases presented to it, the TAC, respondents note, will be more likely to rely on conventional markers of success such as funding, broad appeal of topic, statements in letters, and frequency of publication and to ignore other relevant contributions.

“The leadership of Johns Hopkins University has made admirable steps toward promoting diversity through hiring initiatives, support for young families, and the simple recognition that the lack of diversity in professorial ranks is a serious impediment to the university’s excellence...it seems counterintuitive for Johns Hopkins to introduce another hurdle in an already complex and opaque process, especially for those of us who have supposedly been hired for the diversity of excellence that we represent.”

“Scholars with different training, different scholarly commitments, and different methodologies are rarely neutral with respect to what they consider to be valuable work. At best, they may lack familiarity to be able to adequately judge the scholarly contribution of a candidate for promotion and refrain from vocal support or opposition. But at worst, they may apply their own views on what counts as rigor or as important, shaping faculty appointments in line with their own prior perceptions of the type of

scholarship that merits recognition. Because the committee will be composed of senior faculty, this [...] could lead to a tendency to replicate existing strengths, rather than build from them - it could even lead to a devaluing of work that is particularly innovative or cutting-edge.”

“The senior faculty are less diverse and less representative of the school as a whole; they may thus be subject to problems of implicit bias or may simply fail to apply standards uniformly across candidates. A more diverse committee would be more representative and likely better able to avoid the kinds of discriminatory practices that have led the peer-institutions cited in the report as exemplars of the merits of a university-wide committee to fail to address ongoing problems of diversity.”

“[R]esearch on tenure processes at other institutions strongly suggests that any additional layer of review process will decrease the tenure rate of scholars who do not fit the typical profile of the professoriate, either due to their demographic profile or in terms of their subject matter. Instituting new layers of review that are further removed from the disciplinary expertise present in departments introduces a discriminatory multiplier effect. Insofar as discrimination on the basis of gender, race, and other categories is present in processes of graduate admissions, evaluation by external reviewers, and peer review (which it unquestionably is, at least for the single-blind review processes which are typical for book publication in most humanities fields), then any increased reliance on these proxies will intensify that discrimination, thus undermining university efforts to improve the diversity of our faculty.”

“The system will discourage risk taking, controversy, [and] long-term projects requiring substantial upfront investment.”

“[E]very study has demonstrated that arbitrary decision making is rife with confirmation bias, which has a profoundly detrimental effect on diversity and inclusion, since scholars of color and women are far more likely to be the victims of such abuses of power.”

Respondents point to the potential unintended consequences and negative impacts of the institution of a tenure advisory committee, in particular for junior faculty seeking academic tenure:

“It seems safe to say that the junior faculty are deeply alarmed by the establishment of FACT, that they will in significant numbers go on the job market at their year of tenure or before, that beginning efforts to expand diversity at the university will crumble, and that the university's reputation will decline.”

“The negative outcomes of the FACT's proposal are several folds [*sic*]: 1) Loss of successful young faculty due to the lengthy tenure process (e.g. outside offers) 2) Loss in recruitment power for potential faculty 3) increased burden on current faculty 4) Loss in recruitment of dedicated faculty for the HAC and 5) increased mistrust between faculty and the President.”

One of the three respondents to concur with the exploratory committee's recommendations calls attention to more pressing needs than that of reforming the tenure review system:

"I think that FACT is appropriate. None of the opposition to FACT, to my mind, has dealt adequately with 1) the committee report's treatment (answering) of faculty rationales of opposition to FACT and 2) the fact that the rationales of opposition voiced against FACT would be operable at any university that has a body comparable to FACT (which virtually all do) and yet do not actually have the problems that those in opposition to FACT claim FACT would bring. The president is pointing to a logical problem in his current role and is asking for professorial input in decisions he and the provost currently make by themselves. Can you imagine the faculty opposition if the situation was this opposite: that the President was dismantling a FACT-like body of faculty to advise him on tenure and promotion cases so that he and the provost could make those decisions themselves? There is a good chance that FACT would actually have the very opposite effects that its opposition suggests it would. In other words, opposition to fact may well exacerbate the very things faculty say concern them about FACT. My sense is that faculty concern with governance issues at Johns Hopkins would be much better focused on other, more pressing issues that affect our daily lives as teaching employees on this campus. [...] To my mind FACT is really not an area of concern, especially by comparison to any other university to which a faculty member on the tenure line or tenured would go--which all have such a body. So I don't see all the fuss as reasonable or logical. And this is meant as a friendly amendment to this discussion! Let's do some work on practical, everyday issues."

Respectfully submitted Nov. 18, 2019

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