

THE REFLECTIVE ESSAY:
PERSPECTIVES AND GUIDELINES

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Introduction

The Reflective Essay is an integral part of the reappointment, tenure and promotion process at virtually all universities. The reason for its universal importance is that "a capacity for reflection and self-evaluation ... is a critical ingredient in a professor's life" (McGovern, p. 96).

As such, the Reflective Essay holds a unique position in the candidate's dossier of supporting evidence. The CV (curriculum vitae) and Form D--no matter what the length--will be read and discussed by reviewers. Consequently, the Reflective Essay should *not* be a summary of evidence presented in those documents. Instead, the Reflective Essay is "an opportunity to weave a tapestry of understanding of [your] scholarly pursuits" (Smith, p. ii).

Intent and Use

The Reflective Essay serves as the "key orienting and organizing element of the [dossier]" (Froh, et. al. p. 108) with the purpose of "providing a frame of reference 01' context for the items submitted to the committee" (Diamond, p. 24). Consequently, the Reflective Essay is the primary opportunity the candidate will have to convey the nature and meaning of her/his scholarly work and philosophy to those reviewers from his/her and other disciplines (Millis, p. 69).

Above all, the Reflective Essay should (a) convey the candidate's vision of herself/himself as a maturing or mature scholar (including describing one's scholarly niche); (b) communicate the contributions made during the reporting period in advancing toward that vision; (c) provide an indication (evidence) of the impact of the candidate's scholarly efforts; and (d) show development-evolution of the candidate's scholarship.

The objective of the Reflective Essay "is to convey as much depth and richness as possible by [employing] selective evidence of [scholarly] accomplishments" (Froh, et. al., p. 106). Above all, candidates should remember that the Reflective Essay is "a reflection of the care [the candidate] take(s) in communicating scholarship" (Smith, p. ii).

Preparation Guidelines

The preparation of the Reflective Essay should begin early in one's MSU--CANR career, and should be updated on a periodic basis throughout the reporting period (c. g., during the annual evaluation process). Approaching it this manner will enable the candidate to prepare a document that represents a more accurate and convincing expression of the evolution of one's scholarly development. With all of this in mind, here are 8 guidelines for the development of a Reflective Essay:

1. Because the Reflective Essay is just that--a personal reflection written in essay format--*it is important that it be crafted as an intellectual piece, an academic contribution in its own right, rather than as a document that reports academic accomplishments.* Most of all, the essay should “demonstrate a capacity to be reflective and self-critical; hence, capable of continued growth and change” as a scholar (Diamond, p. 24).
2. The Reflective Essay *should convey the candidate's vision of himself/herself as a maturing or mature scholar.* It is an opportunity to convey one's scholarly philosophy and vision; to describe how Scholarly priorities were established; to share the logic of one's program of scholarship (and its development); to make explicit the strategy (choice making) used over the years; and to be clear about one's future trajectory.
3. The Reflective Essay should be *expressed in manner that is consistent with CANR's interpretation* of scholarly activities and scholarship. Scholarly activities cut across the mission of teaching, research, and outreach / Extension / engagement. Activities are “things scholars do” (e.g., designing and offering an undergraduate class). While scholarship also applies to all mission dimensions, it is an outcome, not an activity. Scholarship involves creating something new; and it is designed to advance understanding by contributing something new to a body of knowledge. “Newness” is peer reviewed or validated; and products of scholarship are made available in publicly accessible forms and in publicly available locations. The worth of both scholarly activities and scholarship is evaluated in multiple ways: in terms of intellectual quality (substance-content); quality of expression (how the work is constructed and presented, particularly in terms of its relevance to intended audiences); and its impact on and/or use by intended audiences.
4. Because each candidate's mix of assigned duties is unique, *the essay should address all aspects of the candidate's assigned duties---activities and scholarship--in a manner roughly proportionate to those duties--teaching, research, outreach / Extension/ engagement, and service to MSU and profession* (Froh, et. al., p. 107). It is understood that scholarly activities and scholarship influence a wide range of audiences (e.g., disciplinary peers, scholars in other disciplines, students, public officials, industry members, members of nongovernmental organizations). Consequently, just as each candidate's assigned duties is unique, the impact of each candidate's activities and scholarship is also likely to be unique (at the very least distinctive in nature and contribution).

5. Because the hallmark of the scholarly life is integration and connections across the mission, the Reflective Essay should demonstrate the candidate's integration of work across her/his assigned duties (e.g., how research influences teaching; how Extension influences research).
6. The Reflective Essay "*provides a vehicle for discussion of special circumstances that have affected your work to-date*" (Diamond, p, 24), There are always critical times or points in an academic's life, when an academic decides to move in one way or another. Sometimes these times or points are products of one's own doing--an outcome of intent. At other times, they are either a result of opportunity ("being in the right place at the right time") or unexpected circumstance (e.g., departure of a senior collaborator from MSU).
7. The Reflective Essay also provides an opportunity for the candidate to explain "*any contradictory or unclean materials in the [dossier]*" (Seldin, p. 10). However, explanations should be reserved for unique events; and, when included in the essay, the description should not consume an undue portion of the essay.
8. A useful means of developing a Reflective Essay may be to periodically consider a series of "*reflective prompts*" that will induce reflection about "*why we teach; why we work as we do; why we choose certain priorities in... scholarship; why we publish in this or that field or particular topic; ...* [thereby leading to] meaningful inquiry into *what we do and how we do it*" (Zubizarreta, p. 208, italics in original; for additional useful prompts, see McGovern, pp. 103-08).

Final Comments

Remember..., the Reflective Essay is the candidate's opportunity to communicate the quality of thinking, vision and logic of the program, strategy and implementation--incorporating what has been achieved to date; the trajectory of the program; and the targets and milestones anticipated in the next 10 years. The Essay must emphasize the intellectual foundation of the work and plans for the future. The Essay must *not* be a reporting or listing of what has been done in the past; this is well covered in Form D and the CV.

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