

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT RESEARCH OPTION (PERO) GUIDE

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I. Overview

The mission of the University of Illinois is to enhance the lives of the diverse people of Illinois, the nation, and the world through our leadership in discovery, learning, and economic development. Faculty public engagement is critical to the success of the University's mission. When such engagement takes the form of research conducted with public partners (e.g., local, state, national, or international communities or organizations), evaluation of impact may require alternative approaches. To address this issue in the promotion and tenure process, faculty members at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) can select the Public Engagement Research Option (PERO; see II.C.8 of [Provost Communication 9](#)).

It is expected that publicly engaged research conducted by faculty members will generate scholarly and/or creative products (e.g., peer reviewed journal articles, books, and/or grants) whose impact can be captured by traditional metrics. Publicly engaged research may also generate products (e.g., policy reports, museum exhibits, and/or websites) whose impact may not be adequately captured by traditional metrics. PERO is suitable when a substantial proportion of a faculty's record is comprised of such products. PERO allows traditional metrics to be supplemented by alternative metrics that provide insight into societal impact.

Alternative metrics are likely to evolve over time and may need to be identified by candidates and their Executive Officers (EOs). Thus, the conversation about PERO between faculty and their EO should begin as early as possible and continue over time so they can collaboratively develop and execute a plan for evaluation that will capture the intended impact of the research. The decision of whether to take PERO is up to each faculty member but should be made in collaboration with their EO. If additional input or guidance is needed (e.g., the EO is unsure and/or the candidate and EO disagree), the Dean's office should be consulted; the Provost's office is available for additional input or guidance if needed.

Regardless of rank, the decision to select PERO must be made at least two calendar years prior to the candidate's submission of their materials for promotion. Candidates selecting PERO may later decide, in collaboration with their EO, that the option is not appropriate for them (e.g., because the large majority of their research can be evaluated with traditional metrics). Such a decision must be made ***prior*** to the deadline for the candidate's submission of their list of external evaluators to their committee. ***All decisions about PERO must be documented in a Memorandum of Understanding*** (see the *PERO Memorandum of Understanding* template in the attachments in [Provost Communication 9](#)) which must be forwarded to the Dean's office for their approval.

II. About PERO

As highlighted in [Provost Communication 9](#) (see section II.A.1), publicly engaged research draws on a faculty member's expertise to define and address societal problems, concerns, issues, or interests to contribute to the public good. Such research occurs in collaboration with communities or organizations at the local, state, national, or international level. In its model form, publicly engaged research exists through a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity. Central in the evaluation of publicly engaged research is gauging its societal impact.

For faculty members opting into PERO, two of the five required letters from external evaluators must be from experts outside academia who can objectively evaluate the societal impact of the candidate's publicly engaged research (see section II.C.10 of [Provost Communication 9](#)). The other three letters must be from external evaluators at academic institutions; it is advised that at least one of these evaluations be from a scholar with expertise in publicly engaged research in the candidate's field at an academic institution. The wording in the *PERO: Sample Letter for External Evaluators in Academia* and *PERO: Sample Letters for External Evaluators Outside of Academia* (see attachments to [Provost Communication 9](#)) should be used in requesting the evaluations.

Candidates and their EOs should discuss what types of experts outside of academia have the relevant knowledge to evaluate the societal impact of the candidate's research. They may also find it useful to consult with others with more expertise, or the Dean's or Provost's office. External evaluators outside of academia may include, but are not limited to, an expert in industry or government, a leading public figure, and someone in another community who holds a parallel position to a community partner. Regardless of the letter writer's position, letters from external evaluators outside academia must be appropriate along two key dimensions:

- Be from **highly qualified individuals** with the expertise and/or perspective (e.g., as a consequence of their experience working in a relevant organization and/or as demonstrated by awards) to evaluate the societal impact of the candidate's contributions; and
- Be from **objective evaluators**. Evaluators cannot have a conflict of interest in that they may *directly* benefit from the candidate's promotion. For example, letters should not be solicited from a candidate's collaborator in the community. *Indirect* benefits (e.g., if a faculty member's innovative school discipline program is successful in one school district, it will be available to a neighboring school district) are not considered a conflict of interest.

In submitting their list of external evaluators, PERO candidates should include not only evaluators at academic institutions, but also evaluators outside of academia, with enough names to guarantee some degree of privacy to each type of evaluator. As is the case for all candidates, the majority of the five letters from external evaluators, regardless of whether they are from within or outside academia, must come from the unit's list. In sum, for PERO candidates, there must be at least three external evaluators at academic institutions along with two evaluators from outside of academia. Whether evaluators in these two categories come from the candidate's or unit's list, is up to the unit.

Invitations to external evaluators outside of academia should be made using the template letter created for this purpose (see *PERO: Sample Letter for External Evaluators Outside of Academia* in the attachments to [Provost Communication 9](#)). The template letter should be modified to reflect the type of publicly engaged research conducted by the candidate with a brief but concrete description of the type of dossier being shared with the evaluator. The procedures outlined in section II.C.10 of [Provost Communication 9](#) for solicitation of external evaluators at academic institutions must be followed in that invitations must be neutral and indicate that the confidentiality of the evaluator's remarks will be protected to the extent possible within the law. ***As illustrated in the template letter, the invitation letter must include guidance on the provision of concrete feedback so that the letter is informative to promotion and tenure committees.***

As is the case for external evaluators at academic institutions, the unit must include the qualifications, including titles and current affiliation, of all external evaluators from outside academia in the promotion papers. The unit should also explain why each external evaluator from outside academia was chosen—that is, what qualifies them to evaluate the candidate—and report any direct relationship (e.g., collaborator) between the evaluator and candidate. When the contacted individual declines to serve as an evaluator, their name must be included with the list of external evaluators (see *Outline of Promotion Dossier* Section VII.B in [Provost Communication 9](#)), and the reason for declining the request should be provided, if one is given. A copy of the letter or letters of solicitation must be in the promotion dossier. (If the same letter was sent to several different individuals, only one of the letters of solicitation need be submitted.)

III. Guidance for Faculty Members Deciding Whether to Take PERO

The decision about whether to select PERO involves consideration of a variety of issues, often making it complex. The questions below are provided to help faculty take these issues into account in making the decision. In answering each question, faculty should consider their research program as a whole—if only a small portion of their research is publicly engaged and/or it is their teaching and/or service that is largely publicly engaged, PERO is not appropriate. In addition, if the impact of the large majority of the scholarly and/or creative

products can be evaluated with traditional metrics, PERO is likely unnecessary. PERO may be a good fit for candidates answering in the affirmative to the majority of the questions below.

1. Does the research generate significant new transferable knowledge—that is, knowledge that can be used outside the specific setting in which it was produced?
2. Does the research significantly draw on your scholarly expertise?
3. Does the research meaningfully address a community or societal problem, need, concern, issue, or interest?
4. Are the discipline's traditional review mechanisms insufficient to evaluate the impact of the work?
5. Does the work have a significant measurable direct impact on the public at the local, state, national, or international level? For example, did the work contribute to a new policy or legal decision, improve access to needed services or other resources, enhance how an organization works, or improve the mental health of those the work is designed to help?
6. Is review of the work's impact by stakeholders outside academia critical to the evaluation of its success?
7. Is the research a collaboration with community or other public partners—for example, the partner identified the need for the research or is involved in the development of the methods?
8. Did the work take significant relationship-building with external partners to maximize its quality and impact?
9. Does the success of the research depend on community buy-in?
10. Can the work be sustained in the community? Is the work done in a way that the community can continue the program and/or policy developed by the work?

IV. Checklist for PERO

Because PERO has three unique elements that are required for the promotion and tenure process, we provide a checklist for these elements so candidates and EOs can ensure they have followed all the instructions:

- ☐ PERO Memorandum of Understanding—must be signed by the candidate, the EO, and the Dean at least two calendar years prior to the candidate's submission of their materials for promotion. Use the sample *PERO MOU* found in the attachments to [Provost Communication 9](#).

- ☐ Two letters from external evaluators outside of academia—use one of the *PERO: Sample Letters for External Evaluators Outside of Academia* (see attachments to [Provost Communication 9](#)) to request these evaluations.
- ☐ Three letters from external evaluators in academia—use the *PERO: Sample Letter for External Evaluators in Academia* (see attachments to [Provost Communication 9](#)) to request these evaluations.

Candidates and EOs should also ensure they discuss the following three issues, beginning with the creation of the PERO MOU or earlier:

- ☐ The types of non-traditional scholarly and/or creative products the candidate's work will generate.
- ☐ The types of metrics appropriate to evaluate the societal impact of these non-traditional products.
- ☐ The types of experts outside of academia appropriate to evaluate the societal impact of the candidate's work; this discussion should not focus on specific individuals but rather the type of expertise and experience that is appropriate.

V. Frequently Asked Questions about PERO

A. If a candidate takes PERO, do they need to have scholarly publications and/or grants? Or can all their work be non-traditional with non-traditional metrics to evaluate it?

All promotion and tenure candidates need to generate scholarly and/or creative products considered traditional in their discipline. However, candidates conducting publicly engaged research may also have products considered nontraditional if such products are the conduits through which their work has societal impact. Thus, PERO candidates may have fewer products considered traditional in their discipline, but their work as a whole is expected to demonstrate societal impact.

B. Is research in the context of entrepreneurship or work with private companies appropriate for PERO?

Only to the extent that research in these contexts meets the definition of public engagement as described in the *PERO Guide* (see also section II.A.1 of [Provost Communication 9](#)), would it be considered publicly engaged research.

C. How can candidates who do a substantial amount of publicly engaged service, but not publicly engaged research, be recognized for their work?

Publicly engaged service should be discussed in the optional service statement, which can be up to three pages, of the dossier. It should also be listed in the service section of the dossier under “public engagement, outreach, and/or extension” (see section II.C.6.a and Candidate Activity Outline Form sections IV.A.1 and V.C of [Provost Communication 9](#)).

D. Is it appropriate for the EO or their designee to have additional conversations to explain or educate external evaluators outside academia about the promotion and tenure process?

Similar to communication with external evaluators at academic institutions, communication with external evaluators outside academia should largely be restricted to the formal letter requesting the review to ensure the process remains unbiased. Of course, there may be correspondence around technical issues such as deadlines, format, conflicts of interest, or confidentiality. If an external evaluator has questions about the review process that go beyond these kinds of technical issues, the evaluator should be referred to the next level of leadership (e.g., the College Dean’s office).

E. Can the letter to external evaluators at academic institutions explain PERO and the different metrics being used to evaluate the candidate’s work?

Section II.C.10 of [Provost Communication 9](#) details the additional language that can be used in letters to external evaluators at academic institutions. A sample letter including this language is also available (see *PERO: Sample Letter for External Evaluators in Academia* in the attachments to [Provost Communication 9](#)).