

Evaluation processes for research staff at STScI

Context

AURA and STScI policies and STScI practices for evaluation of members of the research staff (defined as those having a fraction of their salaried time available for independent research) have been introduced at various times over the history of STScI. These processes currently include or have included:

1. Annual functional performance evaluation
2. Annual science performance evaluation
3. Science Personnel Committee (SPC) reviews
4. Mid-term meeting with the Director
5. Post-tenure reviews

While each of these processes has an important objective, in the aggregate they represent a significant effort on the part of those being reviewed and those doing the reviews or consulted as part of the review processes. The current multiplicity of reviews has led to some confusion as to their purpose, which at times has led to dissatisfaction with the process and/or the nature of the outcome. Items (2) and (5) were both introduced within the past half decade or so, and item (4) applied only to tenure track staff and was discontinued about a decade ago. We now plan to resume the mid-term meetings with the Director and to expand them to include the Scientist track. This document provides a statement of the desired purpose and nature of each of the above processes, with the hope that this comprehensive overview will lead to more cost-effective evaluation activities while providing staff a better understanding of the purpose of each process and how it fits into their career progression at STScI. It should be noted that in addition to the above processes, STScI maintains active mentoring programs. Mentors can be an invaluable source of feedback and career guidance in both functional and scientific work. Staff are strongly encouraged to establish an active relationship with an experienced mentor.

1. Annual functional performance evaluation

The purpose of the annual functional performance evaluation is to determine how well the staff member has met annual functional goals and objectives, to provide feedback on areas for improvement in functional performance, and to provide guidance on how to further career objectives.

This process is organized by the Human Resources department. For research scientists, an important element is planning of how to schedule research time compatibly with functional responsibilities in each year. The review is conducted by the functional supervisor. The result (a score and rank within the organization) is used to set the salary adjustment (or that part based on functional work) for the next year. The input materials (but not the results) are also reviewed by the Science Personnel Committee when considering re-appointment, promotion, or tenure, and by the post-tenure review committee for those who are tenured or are Senior Scientists.

2. Annual Science performance evaluation

The purpose of the annual science performance evaluation is to confirm that the ongoing research activities and accomplishments of individual research staff meet the expectations for their positions; to identify research staff who exceed or fall short of these expectations by a significant margin; to provide aggregate information about the ongoing research activities and accomplishments of the STScI research staff as a whole; and to encourage periodic self-assessment by research staff on the progress of their research programs. This process is organized by the Science Mission Office. **THIS PROCESS IS NOT INTENDED TO BE AN IN-DEPTH ASSESSMENT OF THE QUALITY OR IMPACT OF THE RESEARCH OF INDIVIDUAL STAFF MEMBERS.** The Science Personnel Committee processes described below are designed to provide in-depth reviews of the research of individual staff members. This distinction should be clearly understood by all research staff. The evaluation is conducted by a committee of peers selected each year by the Head of the Science Mission Office. The outcome of the evaluation, in broad adjectival bins, is used by management to determine a component of the annual salary adjustment for each individual. This process visibly reinforces the STScI concept that functional managers are accountable for planning research time for their research staff members, and shows the government and STScI governance bodies that we are serious about research. An important element of this process is annual collection of the 'scientific' activities of each research staff member per a template distributed by the Science Mission Office. These data provide an essential data base for use in responding to queries from NASA, AURA governance bodies and the Institute Visiting Committee.

3. Science Personnel Committee reviews

The primary process for career evaluation of STScI research staff is review by the Science Personnel Committee (SPC). This process is organized by the Science Mission Office.

The SPC conducts in-depth evaluations of scientific, functional and service accomplishments for tenure-track staff for purposes of recommending re-appointment and promotion prior to tenure, for recommendations of tenure, and for promotion to ranks above Associate Astronomer with tenure thereafter. External assessment letters of functional and scientific accomplishment are a required part of the process for considering tenure and subsequent promotions to Astronomer and Senior Astronomer. Appointments on the tenure track are for 3-year terms until tenure is granted. The Science Personnel Committee conducts in-depth evaluations of scientific, functional and service accomplishments for Scientist-track staff for purposes of recommending re-appointment and promotion every three years until rank of Observatory Scientist is reached. Re-appointment beyond 10 years on this track requires attainment of Scientist or higher rank by that time. External assessment letters of functional and scientific accomplishment are a required part of the process for considering promotion to Scientist, Observatory Scientist and Senior Scientist. As part of most reviews, the SPC provides feedback and short-term guidance on how to further career objectives. The Senior Science Staff reviews recommendations from the SPC for major promotions and tenure and makes recommendations to the Director. Recommendations of tenure and Senior Scientist by the Director require review by the Space

Telescope Institute Council (STIC) for the merit of the recommendation, and by the AURA Board for review of process and approval.

In the early Fall of each year, the Science Mission Office (SMO) reviews the status of all AURA staff with research appointments. The SPC is requested to review all whose terms are ending or who must be considered for tenure (tenure track staff) or Scientist (scientist track staff) because they are approaching the limits of allowed service below those ranks. In addition, ad hoc nominations for consideration for promotion to any rank can be made by SMO or by any staff member, including self nominations, and such nominations will be considered by the SPC.

4. Mid-term meeting with the Director

The purpose of the mid-term meeting with the Director is to provide advice to staff as to how well they are progressing toward promotion to tenure or promotion to Scientist rank well before they are considered for these career-critical promotions. This meeting is best viewed as an important part of our mentoring processes. No formal record is maintained in personnel files. In the past, such meetings were held only for tenure track staff, and they were discontinued about ten years ago. We will now resume these meetings for tenure track staff and establish a similar process for Scientist track staff. The nominal time for such a meeting is after about 3.5 years of employment on the tenure track, and about 4.5 years on the Scientist track. The review on either track is conducted in a meeting of the staff member with the STScI Director, the STScI Deputy Director, the mentor of the staff member and the Head of the Science Missions Office. The meeting provides the staff member the opportunity to describe their research accomplishments since coming to STScI and plans for the future, and to discuss this with the attendees. Feedback to the staff member consists of discussion and advice during the meeting and a letter to the staff member summarizing the review and advice provided. The aim of the meeting is to help assure that the staff member is successful on the path that they are on. In the event that a staff member is perceived to have little chance of being granted tenure or promotion to Scientist on his/her current direction or a reasonable modification thereto, this meeting provides an opportunity to consider alternative options in a more timely and less traumatic fashion than waiting for the formal tenure or Scientist promotion review. The opportunity for personal interaction with the Director and Deputy Director regarding one's science research is a major benefit of the process both for the staff member and STScI leadership.

5. Post-tenure reviews

The purpose of post-tenure review is to encourage individual scientists to maintain their scientific, service and functional productivity following their last promotion, to identify individuals whose scientific, service or functional productivity has dropped, and help those individuals to improve; and to identify individuals who have maintained consistent excellence in their scientific, service or functional contributions since their last promotion. The review is conducted by the Post-tenure Review Committee (PRC), constituted by the Science Missions Office (SMO) and staffed by tenured astronomers and senior scientists. STScI staff members eligible for review are tenured Astronomers and Senior

Scientists who have not received a promotion or post-tenure review within the preceding five years. Improvement plans are recommended for those found to be consistently performing below expectations, and consideration for promotion or other rewards is recommended for those found to be consistently performing at outstanding levels.