

## Thrivecast Episode 34: Letters of Evaluation for Faculty Promotions

**Trish Kritek:** [00:00:00] Welcome to another episode of the University of Washington's Thrivecast, the podcast designed to help School of Medicine faculty thrive. I'm Trish Kritek, and today we're joined by Dr. Rudy Rodriguez. Dr. Rodriguez is a professor in the Department of Medicine division of Nephrology, and he is the Director of Hospital and Specialty Medicine at VA Puget Sound Healthcare System and our vice chair in the Department of Medicine for the VA Puget Healthcare System as well.

He is here today though, to talk about something that a lot of folks who are professors and often folks who are associate professors get asked to do, and that is write a letter of evaluation and sometimes support around promotion requests for faculty, usually outside of our institution. So kind of a rite of passage as you get more senior, as you keep start getting more and more of these letters to evaluate people for promotion.

So Rudy, I [00:01:00] feel like this is one of those things that you start having to do without anyone ever telling you how to do it. So I thought it would be great to have a conversation about that today. So thanks for joining to talk more about it.

**Rudy Rodriguez:** Yeah, my pleasure.

**Trish Kritek:** So, I'm confident that you have done many, many, many of these in the past. And so I think, at least for me, the first thing that happened was I got an email that said, "Hey, would you be willing to be an external referee for X person at the University of Michigan?" Or something like that. And I wasn't even really sure where to start. So my first question for you is like, what do you think about when you get these requests?

First of all, in terms of saying yes or no, and then kind of how do you start to approach it?

**Rudy Rodriguez:** Yeah, they are different I think than when they come from within, you know, for say UW promotion. Cause I think like when we are asked for UW faculty, it's really like a peer reference.

So, do you support the promotion? You know, you go through the paragraph of talking about degrees and [00:02:00] honors and then you describe your relationship and comment on achievements and then a kind of summary. So you're right. These are very different because they really want you to be objective and you know, basically like an arm's length appraisal of the candidate.

And there are contributions to whatever teaching, research, clinical activity and national standing, things like that. So they are very different.

**Trish Kritek:** You know, I appreciate that distinction because I think what we get used to talking about is like letters of recommendation for medical students who are applying for residency or residents applying for fellowship and we've done a podcast about that before.

And I feel like lots of times what you're doing is championing those folks and, and that's kind of true for the internal promotions as well. But in this case, they're actually asking you to kind of be a peer and say, how do you see this person's career, accomplishments, and who they are in the field at this point in time?

So I'm going to ask a bunch of [00:03:00] details about that. But my first question is, when you get those requests, do you usually say yes?

**Rudy Rodriguez:** Yes. I usually say yes and then regret it because they're a fair amount of work. But yes, I usually say yes. And the reason I say yes is that, you know, I think it's just kind of being part of the academic community.

It's kind of like for research folks and why they actually go on study sections. You know, if you're getting money from the NIH, this is like what you do, and so I think it's part of being part of the academic community. It's also, you know, I think almost everyone, you only get promoted a few times, so everyone remembers who wrote these letters are grateful to the people who wrote them.

So it's good not to be remembered as the person who said no.

**Trish Kritek:** I appreciate that. Yeah, I agree.

**Rudy Rodriguez:** That said, I would say no. Like, if it's a basic scientist, then it just wouldn't be appropriate for me to provide that. Or if I can't really write a positive letter because I know the [00:04:00] person and for whatever reason I can't really be, couldn't be objective.

If I can't make the deadline or if I have too close of a relationship, maybe I probably, I may say no, just cause that defeats the purpose of the letter.

**Trish Kritek:** That's all great. I mean, I think that part about paying it forward, that's usually what I hear in my back voice, in my head saying, this is where I kind of pay it forward.

And I generally say yes, and then I think the distinctions about when you might say no are really helpful, and those all make sense to me. I do think that if you really can't comment on the work they do or where they stand in the community of people in that specialty, it's hard to write that letter.

And I think, as you said, if you can't get it done, don't say yes. Because the worst thing is they're waiting for your letter and they can't move forward with the promotion package. But otherwise, I also try to carve out the time it takes to write these in the spirit of supporting the careers of other folks in the way that somebody did that for me.

[00:05:00] So you get this request comes in different kind of styles of things. You might get the CV, you might get supporting documents. You often get papers that come with it.

Sometimes there's like a self-evaluation that's shared. It kind of depends on the institution. So where do you start when you are going to go ahead and write one of these letters?

**Rudy Rodriguez:** You know, one thing is I do stand back a little bit and ask why am I being asked? You know? Cause there's usually a reason, right? So I may be someone with similar interests, you know, like having written similar papers, you know, have kind of similar publications, administrative roles. I get them also because I'm on the VA field advisory board for nephrology.

So I'm on this, I have this national role, so a lot of people look to me to say, oh yeah, you know, I can probably comment on their national prominence of this VA physician within the VA, or I've gotten them because I'm also on the ABIM nephrology board. I've gotten them for people from that are, you know, know me from there.

And then, you know, [00:06:00] again, I figure they want me to comment on these kind of national roles I take. So I think about that, you know, I think about this, you know, are they part of a small community that maybe I'm part of. So those are some of the things I think about. But then also it's, you know, it's rare that it's a candidate that's just completely unknown. So I look at the CV, those are the hard ones where all they provide is the CV. They're really helpful when they provide the division head summary. A letter or the candidate provides a summary to kind of describe their achievements.

I think otherwise it's very hard to, it takes a lot of work to go through someone's CV and try to figure things out. So I really appreciate when those are there. But otherwise it could be hard to figure things out just from looking at the CV. I do spend, they usually will share the promotion criteria for the other institutions.

So I do spend time kind of reviewing that, comparing it to what UW's is. So I can comment on it. So [00:07:00] I will even include parts of that in the letter that say, you know, their promotion criteria exists. So I can really comment on whether they're meeting their promotion criteria and then really try to get the data points and may even look up some PubMed, you know, some of their papers.

**Trish Kritek:** So a bunch of stuff there. So, number one, I really like that. I think about why they asked me and for me, it's funny you say that because I get a lot of these and I was a clinician educator professor early in the kind of world of people in our field becoming clinician educator professors. And I felt like everybody who was a clinician educator was on their list of letters writers, but it was always about that being a clinician educator.

So that really resonates with me. I think that part about looking at their promotion criteria is a really important thing, and I just want to really emphasize that, that it's totally different at different institutions. So it is really important to understand what does it take to be promoted at that institution for this person on their specific track or [00:08:00] whatever.

And I think often it's like a little bit surprising that it's so different from what we have here at UW. And then I think the part where you start to kind of gather data is interesting. So, maybe you could talk a little bit more about that. Like what are the data that you think are important to include in the letter?

**Rudy Rodriguez:** So then, yeah, so I think the important thing to remember is that this isn't going to be a very long letter, right? So what I try to do is find kind of the key elements of kind of their work. So from a, let's say it's in that same track, clinician scholar track.

So I'll try to figure out what they have done in that area, especially if they have a national prominence in that area. So I think that's where I try to kind of, that's why I said it's helpful when there's a division head letter. Or the candidate has a letter cause they describe what they feel is most important.

[00:09:00] Or they also will sometimes provide a paper that they're really proud of or their CV will asterisk their most important paper. So I try to do that. You know, for example, I remember one person I wrote one a letter for, and the only time I'd ever met him was we were at a professional meeting and we were kind of, we were speaking and he was the speaker after me basically.

So on you know a session, so a common session. So I, you know, that's what I then expanded on for a paragraph on kind of the role and the fact there was a national meeting and stuff that they've done with policy, for example. So that became a whole paragraph. And so that's what I try to do from that standpoint is try to write one or two paragraphs depending on the what I think their most important work is, you know. Teaching is a little harder since we don't know, and it's usually not in the CV.

So I'll comment a little bit about the amount of teaching they're doing, especially helpful when they have teaching awards. And then quickly I'll comment also on what I know [00:10:00] about their role in the VA or on professional societies, things like that. So that's usually what I try to include, I don't necessarily include things, you know, like in the UW letters, they want us to put in the education and degrees and I don't bother with that in these letters or really try to comment and judge, kind of comment on what their achievements are.

**Trish Kritek:** I really appreciate that because I feel like we think we have to recapitulate some of the stuff that's in the CV and I think liberating people that they don't have to restate where they went to college and residency and medical school is helpful.

So, sorry, I interrupted you.

**Rudy Rodriguez:** No, no, no. That makes it a little bit more helpful and useful, hopefully these letters. And one thing to comment on though is I think it's very important the language I think we use. So I think sometimes, you know, I think people who are already professors probably know this already, but if you know, the first time writing, I think

sometimes you're trying to use kind of more vocabulary to describe people and start using [00:11:00] “good” and “solid.”

And so I think it's important to remember that these are kind of code words and you know, no one ever writes a letter that says that someone's a terrible candidate, but someone may write a letter with a lot of code words, you know, like if people started saying, I'm a “solid” clinician, I would kind of worry, right?

Because I think that being not, you know, probably the lowest adjective you can, you know, on what's acceptable. So if you think someone's fantastic, do you always say they're exceptional or excellent and not necessarily think, because you want to mix up your words and adjectives that use “solid,” “good,” “very good.”

Those kind of things. So I think that's important. Cause otherwise you may hurt someone just by, you know, using words that you probably shouldn't.

**Trish Kritek:** Yeah. It's a little bit the hidden curriculum of an external referee letter that we're going to be superlative in our language in support of someone. If you think that they're doing a stellar job, use those words.

It's important to [00:12:00] do so, because you're right. I think you can damn someone with faint praise if you don't attend to that. When you do these letters, do you usually specifically comment on the number of publications people have and the quality of publications? Is that a part of what you include in all the letters that you do?

**Rudy Rodriguez:** I do, but mostly kind of in the topic. So, you know, again, I will probably focus on the topic of their work and then we'll comment on the number of papers and whether they're, you know, first author and they were, whether they were leading something in the topic. So I will comment on that.

Not necessarily looking at their host CV and counting how many firsts, but although that's probably helpful, I think for some people. I think at some point in the letter I almost always, unless they ask not to, will comment on whether the person would be promoted at UW. That's something, only one time did I see one letter request come through that [00:13:00] said, don't comment on that.

But the majority of time they want to know that that's almost part of why they're asking, you know, how would this person do? And as you know, our website has some good, data points and things. So I have included that saying, you know, this person has a similar, you know, similar to the mean on promotion at our institution, those kind of things.

So I will compare and, and say whether someone may or may not be kind of a good candidate at UW. It's sometimes hard because they're, you know, even the tracks may not exist at other institutions, but I usually will comment unless they specifically ask me not to comment on whether someone would be promoted at UW.

**Trish Kritek:** I think that's a great thing to highlight. So I think if you get one of these requests, attending to what they're asking you to write, and I would agree, the vast majority do ask if the person would be promoted at your institution. And if so, give them your opinion about that. And maybe with the caveats that there's differences in tracks and whatnot.

And then they ask you to say whether or not you think they cross the [00:14:00] threshold for promotion at their institution. So do you usually just say, "I think this person meets the criteria, or they exceed the criteria"? What's, what's the language you use when you talk about them being promoted at that institution?

**Rudy Rodriguez:** Yeah, I usually would just say that they, you know, if it's someone who meets ours, I would just say it sounds like they meet their criteria. It's just very hard, you know, because in general, I'm not that familiar with the, you know, even after reading kind of the criteria, it's, it's obvious you don't know who's actually being promoted there, so I do comment, but you know, it's hard to be definite, you know, so it's using a language and it seems like they meet the criteria at the institution.

**Trish Kritek:** Okay. Anything else that you think is really important to include in the letter that, beyond the kind of reflections on their, you know, area of expertise and scholarly work and their accomplishments in that space, including publications and other spaces and like talks like you talked about, and then these [00:15:00] comments about meeting promotional criteria, is there anything else that you share on a regular basis?

**Rudy Rodriguez:** You know, I think what people have trouble with is this, you know, having a national reputation or they're kind of, how do you judge that? And I do try to comment on that. And again, you know, that's why it's helpful to ask yourself, why are you being asked?

Because it's usually going to be someone you don't know very well, but you probably have heard of them and it's good to comment on how you've heard of them and, and to comment whether they do have a national reputation or not. Cause that's always very important. So it's good. It's, I think it's good to kind of look at that and to be generous about their, to look at what they've accomplished and some of the things they've done on a national basis.

**Trish Kritek:** Yeah, I think that that's a really important part because I think for most people going to professor says you need to have a national or international reputation. And I liked your words, you said be generous in that. So if you know them in national societies or you've been at meetings where they've spoken like, I think you want to reflect on those things to say this [00:16:00] person has been on a national stage, or in a national organization, has a voice and things like that.

I like that. I don't do that. Like think about it at the very beginning when I start, but I like that idea and I think it's a great one that I might try the next time I write one of these letters. Have you ever written a letter that didn't support the promotion of somebody?

**Rudy Rodriguez:** No. I mean, luckily I've never been asked to write one I guess where I would've said no, where I would say I don't support it. I probably would've said no to begin with, you know?

**Trish Kritek:** I think that that's generally maybe the etiquette is that if you don't think you're going to write a strong letter, then maybe you decline writing the letter. I mean, I'm not saying you shouldn't be honest, because I think people shouldn't be honest in their letters, but it is an interesting space.

I also have never written such a letter. I might have noted that like they're up and coming in certain spaces, but I don't think I've ever said anything that would have said this person shouldn't be promoted. So it's an interesting thing, and the culture around that is interesting to me as well.

**Rudy Rodriguez:** Yeah, if you think [00:17:00] about it, I mean, if the candidate has gotten to that stage where they're asking for these letters, everyone in the institution probably does support it, right? So I think they're getting pretty close. So I remember one recent letter where I was amazed at how much the person had done because they're like so clinically active and had very little time for scholarship, but they had a ton of scholarship, you know, and they didn't really have tracks.

So I tried to put that into context that, you know, even though they didn't have a clinician scholar track that this person obviously has done a tremendous amount despite not having any protect, almost no protected time. So I think that's something that, you know, especially here, we can provide that insight because we've had a clinician scholar track now for so long.

**Trish Kritek:** Yeah, I appreciate that. And I think that's a really nice part of it is like to acknowledge what they've accomplished with what bandwidth they may have or what you can [00:18:00] appreciate that they have to do those accomplishments. Alright. Any last pearls for people as they start to try to do this for the first time?

Anything else that you learned as you've done many of these over the years?

**Rudy Rodriguez:** I think it's always good to not leave it to the last minute, you know, I think that's like most things we tend to say, when's the deadline? And then, you know, as you're approaching the deadline, then you're kind of rushing it.

It's probably good to put a little draft together early on and then, just kind of keep revisiting it so it becomes much more painful if you forget, if you wait until the last minute.

**Trish Kritek:** I would strongly reinforce that and say, I often like have new insights into what I might add to the letter if I let it simmer for a little bit and come back to it, and if I don't give myself a little bit of time to let it simmer, it's hard to make that happen.

So I really appreciate that. And maybe I'll go back to this beginning part that you said, which is, this is part of us being a part of a community and really supporting [00:19:00] each other and someone has or will do this for you. So that's, it's a request of your time and energy for sure. But it's a nice way to support your colleagues as they kind of continue to advance in their career.

**Rudy Rodriguez:** Yeah, definitely.

**Trish Kritek:** Alright, well, I am confident that people who are listening have some new ideas about this. Honestly, I remember the first time I got asked, I walked down the hall to someone who was senior to me and said, what am I supposed to do with this?

So, I think there are lots of people who are like, I'm not really sure what to do. So I really appreciate you kind of making that less opaque for folks, and I know that people will learn a lot. The time has been valuable for me. Thank you so much. And for all of you out there, if you want to listen to more episodes of Thrivecast, you can find them at Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your podcast.

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