Operator’s Manual for a Departmental Awards Committee
October 23, 2012

There are two components that are critical to successful operation of a Departmental Awards Committee:

a) A list of relevant awards arranged chronologically by nomination deadline
b) A dedicated Chair for the Awards Committee

These components are discussed in detail below. Departments that lack an Awards Committee should create one and appointment of the Chair should be the first order of business. If a dedicated awards chair cannot be found, a prepared awards list will facilitate nominations to proceed on an *ad hoc* basis.

**Creation of a list of awards that is appropriate for a particular department or academic discipline.**

There are four parallel techniques that can be used for creating a list of awards:

1) Making a list of academic societies whose awards could be relevant to the department and then searching the web pages of these societies for details of each society’s relevant awards. Once informed of these societies, a work-study student or an administrative assistant could examine these web pages and develop a list of awards, that while likely in need of some professional editing, could serve as a first draft of a department’s awards list.

2) Monitoring the “trade press”. A typical scholarly society has a periodic publication that describes the society’s activities and upcoming meetings. These publications also describe upcoming award nomination deadlines and sometimes mention awards that are relevant to the society’s membership, but are offered by other parties. Often these publications will have news items about society members who have received awards from other awarding organizations. Monitoring a particular society’s publications over a year will complete the list of annual awards related to that society. Two year’s worth of monitoring will add the corresponding biennial awards.

3) Asking colleagues about their memberships in, or knowledge of, specialized societies (e.g., cross-discipline societies or societies for sub, sub specialty areas) and the awards from these societies. In addition, major scientific societies may have divisions that have their own awards, that are administered by the division’s executive. This executive can annually rotate and there may be no web page for the division’s activities. However, once these divisional awards are included in a departmental list of awards, the Awards Chair can track down the nominating procedure whenever needed.
4) Examining the web pages of a discipline’s most prominent scholars and the faculty members at the most prestigious universities will probably lead to discovery of lesser known awards that should be included in the awards list of a department.

In addition, there are major external awards, such as Fellowship in the Royal Society of Canada, that are not discipline-specific, and as appropriate, some of these awards should be added to the departmental awards list. At UBC, some of these major external awards are listed under “Major External Awards” and “Other External Awards” on the UBC Web page, http://research.ubc.ca/vpri/faculty-awards-honours.

The list of awards should be prepared as a database with the following five fields:

1. The nomination deadline. The order of presentation for awards should be chronological by nomination deadline. e.g. this field controls the order.
2. The criteria for the award, e.g. description of the to-be-recognized achievement, research sub-discipline, restrictions (age, gender, residency, citizenship), other relevant factors, say monetary aspects or implied obligations for receipt, of the award
3. The name of the award
4. The awarding society and its website
5. The website that describes the award

Other database fields, say for the names of prior winners, can be added, if desired.

The awards list should be annually updated to discover changes in nomination criteria, especially changes (usually advancing) in nomination deadlines as well as no-longer-extant awards, new awards, and awards that may have been omitted from earlier versions of the awards list. This step involves exercising activities 1) to 4) above under creation of a list of awards.

An award website often has a list of prior award winners or a weblink to that list. The name list of prior winners is an excellent aid in deciding whether to proceed with an award nomination. One criterion that can be employed is comparing the achievements of a potential nominee with the achievements of prior winners. If the prospective nominee’s achievements are competitive with those of the least deserving winner of the past five years, the nomination should go forward. Otherwise, not. The list of prior winners also gives guidance about *de facto*, but unstated, criteria for nomination success. e. g., if all prior winners are senior-in-age, implying the award is a lifetime-achievement award, nomination of a younger person is probably fruitless, regardless of how closely the prospective nominee’s achievements match the stated award criteria.

The Faculty Awards Coordinator in the Office of the V. P. Research & International (VPRI) routinely distributes a list of upcoming deadlines of major award opportunities. This list should be scanned to ensure that those major awards that are relevant to a particular department are included in the departmental awards list.
Appointment of the Awards Committee Chair and operation of the Awards Committee

The Awards Committee should consist of a chair and other members as appropriate. It is to be expected that almost all the work will be done by the Chair or will be delegated by the Chair. The work of the Awards Chair is a heavy administrative duty. In a large department, say one with forty faculty, the load is about 10-12 hours per week, averaged over the three trimesters of the academic year. This workload is comparable to that for teaching a three-contact-hour-per-week course in each trimester. Departments should recognize the magnitude of this workload and for regular faculty reduce the other administrative and/or teaching duties of the Awards Chair. An emeritus professor can be an excellent choice for appointment as Awards Chair and should be financially rewarded.

The typical awards cycle does not overlap with the academic year. E. g., a nomination deadline in May can lead to an award announcement in December with a re-nomination or updating of the file needed by next May. Accordingly, to maintain continuity, and to gain experience, the Awards Chair should be appointed for a minimum period of five years. The importance of continuity is recognized for administrative appointments in the university and similar considerations apply to the work of an Awards Chair.

Political reality: Many individuals will be resentful when others get awards. Some individuals will be resentful when others get nominated for awards. The Awards Chair must believe that award nominations of colleagues are important and must persevere in spite of the resentment of others. A thick skin helps. It is important that the Department Head be supportive and not be one of the “resenters”.

Notifications of upcoming nomination deadlines – Once every two or three months, the Awards Chair should solicit from the departmental faculty suggestions, including self-suggestions, of nominees for awards, whose nomination deadline is ten to twelve weeks hence. Self-suggestions should be considered as legitimate as suggestions from third parties. The web site of the award should be included in the solicitation along with a short description of the award’s criteria. Ten weeks' lead time gives one week for faculty to respond with suggestions and another week for a suggested nominee to prepare a draft of a one-page “statement of accomplishment”, an up-to-date CV, and a list of possible referees. The referee list should include full contact information for each referee. The referee list can follow a bit later as it will be needed only if the nomination goes forth. With the accomplishment statement and CV in hand, the Awards Committee can decide whether to proceed with a nomination. If only one nomination can go forth, but more than one nominee dossier is in hand, other faculty can be consulted for their advice.

A follow-up solicitation of nomination suggestions should follow the original solicitation to ensure that all worthy candidates are considered for nomination.
The Awards Chair should feel free to ask other faculty to prepare award nominations whenever a particular faculty member is particularly well qualified to do so.

Receiving a suggestion that someone should be nominated for an award should be taken by the Awards Committee to be an obligation to consider that the suggestee be nominated. The suggestion should not be taken to be an obligation to nominate.

The Awards Committee has the obligation to nominate deserving faculty for awards but should not have veto power over nominations by others. In general, others, who on their own wish to nominate third parties, should be encouraged to do so, but should inform the Awards Chair of their desire. In cases where only one nomination should leave the department and there is a conflict between the Awards Committee and others about who should be nominated, a final selection should be made in consultation with the Department Head.
Referees

Once a decision has been made to proceed with a nomination, supporting statements can be solicited from referees. The number of solicited letters should exceed the minimum number of required letters, with the best of the received letters being used in the submitted nomination dossier. A prototype solicitation letter is attached.

The nominee should be the first source for the names of suitable referees. Selection of referees for award nominations should also consider referees, who are supportive of the nominee, but whose possible support is unknown to the nominee. This situation can arise when referees, not suggested by the candidate, are consulted about promotion and tenure. This situation will most likely arise with junior faculty, although it could arise when nominating a recent senior appointee.

Selection of referees for an A. P. Sloan nomination probably precedes the promotion and tenure process and selecting referees can be problematic. In this case, the nominee’s prior research supervisors can be contacted for suggestions of possible referees, in addition to those suggested by the nominee.

The solicitation letter to referees should include information about the award and information about the candidate, including a statement of accomplishment, that the referee can use to prepare the supporting letter. Often the current, e.g., early, draft of the accomplishment statement for the nomination dossier will be suitable. It can also be helpful to the referee to have a point-form description of the nominee’s achievements. While this information essentially duplicates the information in the accomplishment statement, some referees find it easier to organize their thoughts starting with a point-form list of achievements. This alternate description of the nominee’s achievements can be particularly helpful to a referee who is preparing his/her first-ever supporting letter for the nominee. Also, some statements of accomplishment are required to be quite short per the nomination’s criteria and a point-form achievement list gives the referee more working material. An easy way to prepare a point-form achievement list is to have the nominee prepare a list, ordered by decreasing order of significance, of the nominee’s ten most significant papers with a one- or two-sentence description of the significance of each paper.

In cases where the nomination procedure demands a short statement of accomplishment, it could be helpful to a referee to provide the referee with a longer, say up to one page long, accomplishment statement. This could be in addition to the point-form list of key papers and the short accomplishment statement.

For cases where the referee has supplied a recent, say within the past few years, supporting letter, but the nominee has significant achievements that are more recent, it’s advisable for the nominee to prepare a short supplementary “Recent Accomplishments” statement that the referee can use to revise their prior supporting letter.
Remember, referees are doing you a favor by supporting your nominations. Make their task as easy as possible.

Receiving a referee’s letter should generate an immediate emailed acknowledgement of receipt to the referee.

When a referee promptly refuses to be supportive, perhaps because they are supporting someone else, it wouldn't hurt to thank the referee for the promptness of their refusal.

The possibility of losing referees to some other nominee is the best reason for early work on the nomination, with contact with prospective referees occurring as soon as a draft accomplishment state and CV are available.

The response to solicitation of supporting letters should be monitored and follow-up queries should be sent to referees who have not responded. Most referees are busy and even when well intentioned, can be forgetful.

When a nomination succeeds, a thank-you letter/email should be sent to all referees who supplied supporting letters.

It wouldn't hurt to send a congratulatory note to a referee, who has been helpful in the past, when that referee gets an award.

The Awards Chair or designate should maintain a list of prior and current referees with their contact information. Since prior referees will likely be contacted again, this existing contact list is a great time saver.

All referee letters should be kept on file. Referees occasionally lose their copies and when this happens it is a time saver for the nominator to be able to provide the referee with a copy of an earlier supporting letter.
Preparation the accomplishment statement and nominating letters.

In some nominations the nominating letter implicitly contains a statement of the nominee’s accomplishments and in other cases, the statement of the nominee’s accomplishments is a separate document in the nomination dossier.

The accomplishment statement is a critical part of a nomination dossier as it tells the reader why the candidate deserves the award. When preparing the accomplishment statement, note the exact wording of the award criteria and the permitted maximum length of the accomplishment statement. The statement should address the specific items in the list of award criteria if there are such specific items besides general statements about excellence. The statement has to be prepared by the nominee but should be vetted by others. Many individuals have trouble writing a statement that says in effect, “I am great because …”. Nevertheless, at least a first draft must be prepared by the nominee. It may be necessary for the nominator to help the nominee in preparing the first draft. To this end, the following questions and their answers will focus the nominee’s attention on pertinent matters: “What do you do in your research? Why is this important? What are your specific achievements? What are your most significant achievements? What have you done that is the first of its type? What have you done that is the best of its type? Are others imitating your work? Imitation in the broad sense; not only repeating your techniques on their systems, but using your work to improve what they were already doing. Have others dropped what they were doing to follow you? Is your work mentioned in undergraduate texts? And in its own section? Is it taught to graduate students? Is it discussed in monographs? Are monographs written on the topic pioneered by the nominee? What awards have you already received?”

Use the third person writing style for the accomplishment statement. e.g., “Professor Nominee is an expert in YYY and has …”. Watch for needed changes of “person style” when revising a first draft coming from the nominee.

Many of the sentences in the statement will have the same subject. “Professor Nominee has …”. To break the monotony of arising from using identical subject wording in many sentences, the following alternate subject wording can be used: Professor Firstname Nominee, Professor Nominee, Nominee, First name, Dr. Nominee, The Nominee Group, (Professor) Nominee’s students, Nominee and his/her students, e.g., graduate student/postdoc Name and Nominee.

Use superlatives whenever appropriate. “Professor Nominee’s discovery/synthesis/creation/analysis/development/destruction of XXX is the driest/slowest/greenest example of ….”

Priority is noteworthy and is the most important superlative. “Professor Nominee’s discovery/synthesis/creation/analysis/development/destruction of XXX is the first example of this type of discovery/synthesis/creation/analysis/development/destruction.”

Don’t forget to mention imitation, as broadly defined above, whenever appropriate.
Write the accomplishment statement keeping in mind the nature of the award. For example, if the award is for achievement in some subdiscipline, one can be certain that the award selection committee will be experts in the subdiscipline. Mention of classic experiments and people will be legitimate, as will be undefined technical language. On the other hand, a nomination for an award for general societal achievement, like say the Order of Canada, should contain sparing use of technical terms and should contain carefully worded definitions of those technical terms that are critical for correct meaning.

Contact the awarding society’s awards office if any aspect of the nomination criteria are unclear. There often are unstated or ambiguous factors that can be identified in a short phone call or email. For example, Order of Canada reference letters should be about two pages long with no citations, but these characteristics are not in any written instructions to referees.

Once a first draft of the accomplishment statement has been prepared, the statement must be edited for clarity. A good accomplishment statement tells a story, and the importance of readability cannot be overstated. It follows that the merits of the nomination must be clear from a single reading of the accomplishment statement. Studying, e.g., repeated reading, of the accomplishment statement should not be needed to see these merits. Starting early and reviewing the statement every few days will likely improve the readability of the statement as will asking other parties to vet it.

Editing is a somewhat different skill from composing. Some individuals, who have trouble writing their own accomplishment statements, can be worthwhile editors when revising someone else’s statement.

Remember, people on award selection committees are usually busy and may not be experts in the sub-discipline of the nominee. Proofread carefully for undefined or unnecessary jargon as well as poorly worded phrases that prompt repeated reading.

Many awarding societies have recently switched to on-line submission of award nominations. This is a convenience to nominators but also increases the number of nominations. The greater number of nominations enhances the importance of need-only-single-pass readability of the accomplishment statement.

Referees’ letters should be examined before preparation of the final version of the accomplishment statement. Sometimes the emphasis in a referee’s letter uses language that is especially articulate and which can be incorporated into the accomplishment statement. Other times quoting the referee’s exact wording can be appropriate. e.g., Professor Referee says, “Nominee’s achievements …”.

Prepared statements of accomplishment should be filed by the Awards Committee for future use.
Some nominations require that the formal nominator be a senior university official. Other nominations require an endorsement letter from a senior university official. In these cases the Departmental Awards Committee should prepare a draft nomination/endorsement letter to be edited and signed by the senior official. Also, the senior official’s office should be informed far in advance of the necessity for the nomination/endorsement letter so that a designate is arranged should the senior official be unavailable for signing the nomination/endorsement letter.

Tracking UBC's participation in major external award competitions is an institutional priority. Once a department has confirmed it will be submitting a nomination for a major external award, the VPRI Faculty Awards Coordinator must be advised, so that the “nomination activity” can be effectively and confidentially reported. This information is often requested by the President and by the V. P. Research & International. The VPRI website includes an overview of major external awards. The VPRI Faculty Awards Coordinator is also available to provide guidance with respect to written endorsements from the President and the V.P. Research & International.
Re-nominations

A nomination issue that routinely arises for awards nomators is possible updating of still valid, but not yet successful nominations, and/or re-submission of unsuccessful expired nominations. There are two cases where follow-up action should be automatic. The first case occurs when a not-yet-successful, but still valid, nomination can be updated and the nominee has noteworthy achievements of the past year. The second case occurs when the Award Selection Committee suggests that the nominator re-submit the nomination in the next award cycle. It’s probably safe to assume that Award Selection Committees have better things to do than solicit nominations of individuals having no chance of success.

Award Selection Committees are often faced with choosing from a list of several worthy candidates, each of whom is competitive with recent awardees. This common situation generates a queuing phenomenon to govern award winners of the next few years. E. g., “This year we’ll give to Susan, followed by Tom and then Dick and then Harry.”. In order for Dick to maintain his position in the queue, it’s probably necessary for Dick’s nominators to, from time to time, remind the Award Selection Committee of Dick’s qualifications.

But what should be done when a nomination expires with no encouragement to re-nominate? In this case, the list of recent awardees should be consulted to look for a trend that would be discouraging. For example, a recent tendency to favor nominees from a particular subdiscipline or a trend that indicates an increase in the quality of award winners could indicate the prospective nominee has a vanishing chance of success.

Referees for the candidate can provide valuable guidance about the candidate’s chances. If the candidate still appears competitive with recent awards, and the referees agree, the nomination should be updated and re-submitted. Cases are known at UBC where nine annual updates/re-submissions eventually generated award success.
A prototype letter/email that solicits a letter in support of a nomination

Dr. Referee
Address
Email address

Dear Dr. Referee:

I have a favor to ask of you. We will be nominating Professor Nominee of this Department for Name of Award, of the Name of Society, which is annually awarded for “criteria of excellence”. See web address of society and web address for award.

As you are one who could provide expert commentary on the significance of Professor Nominee’s achievements, I am contacting you to solicit a letter in support of our nomination. As an aid in preparing your letter, I have attached:
1) a copy of Nominees’s CV/publication list
2) a statement that lists the principal accomplishments of Nominee’s career
3) a list of Nominee’s ten best papers and short description of each paper’s significance
4) your letter of prior date, that was submitted in support of our (un)successful nomination of Nominee for name of award. This letter, when modified in the obvious places, would provide a strong endorsement of our Nominee-New Award nomination.

If you have the time, I ask you to please examine Nominee’s statement, ten-best paper list, and CV and modify your earlier letter accordingly. Your hard copy letter (signed emailed letter on letterhead) will be needed here by date (chosen to be at least one week before the nomination deadline) to meet our internal and external deadlines. Your letter may be addressed to me (or to whomever it should be addressed).

If needed: The above award web site specifically mentions xxx and yyy (quote verbiage) that should be addressed in your letter.

I suggest that to be safe, you also send me your letter, signed and on your letterhead, as an email attachment. If you require any additional information before preparing your letter, please contact me about your needs.

Finally, I recognize that there are many legitimate reasons why you may be unable to supply a letter as described above. All I ask now is that you notify me at your earliest convenience as to whether you will or will not be able to support, as described above, our Nominee-New Award nomination.

Thank you for your attention to this email/letter. My colleagues and I really appreciate the efforts you have made in the past to help us get Nominee the recognition that he/she deserves.

Best regards,
Professor Nominator
Professor and Chair, Department Awards Committee