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To: Joan L. Foster, Ph.D.
Dean, College of Letters Arts, and Sciences (LAS)

From: Andrew J. Bonham, Ph.D.
Chair, Department of Chemistry

Subject: Recommendation Against Tenure and Promotion of Ethan Tsai, Ph.D., Department of Chemistry

As Chair of the Department of Chemistry, after careful review, I must unfortunately recommend **against** tenure and promotion for Dr. Ethan Tsai during this, his fourth probationary year, as he has not adequately met the requirements for Promotion and Tenure as delineated in the Handbook for Professional Personnel and the Chemistry Departmental Guidelines in the area of Teaching. Although Dr. Tsai has become a productive member of the department, taking on teaching, research, and service duties, there remain outstanding concerns regarding his ability to effectively work with all of our students. In this recommendation, I concur with the departmental RTP committee, which also recommended against Dr. Tsai's promotion and tenure at this time.

I remain committed to the success of Dr. Tsai, and believe that he will be able to address these concerns and move forward. I hope that he accepts this opportunity, and I am committed to aiding him in this process.

Teaching:

In the area of teaching and advising, Dr. Tsai has shown progress towards being an effective educator. I would first like to acknowledge that he has achieved a great deal in this area since joining the faculty:

- Dr. Tsai has taught a wide range of courses for the department. For each course, he has demonstrated a commitment to course design, practical skills development, and an interest in student success.
- Dr. Tsai developed a novel course for the College of Professional Studies Department of Hospitality, Tourism and Events, BVG 4810 Brewing Quality Analysis.
- Dr. Tsai's SRI scores fall at roughly department average; for 2016-2017, his average for Question 1 was 4.82 (dept. avg. 4.83) and Question 2 was 5.10 (dept. avg. 5.14).
- Dr. Tsai has worked hard to advocate for and implement curricular improvements in his classes and the organic division, including work to bring high field NMR to our organic undergraduate students.
- Dr. Tsai has been a strong proponent for giving students useful skills and approaching curriculum with an eye to modern techniques.

However, I find recurring, problematic patterns in student feedback on course delivery and course assessment (both SRI responses as well as student feedback filed with my office). To examine this concern, I provide below several pertinent quotations from recent student ratings of instruction (SRIs) for Dr. Tsai:

- "instructor is a complete know it all and can sometimes make students feel stupid while trying to learn extremely difficult content." (Spring 2017)
- "One[sic] the first day when your teacher tells you without a tutor you'll fail.... that's not ok." (Spring 2017)
- "I have never has[sic] such a demeaning and condescending professor. We never received encouragement or advice, it was only criticism (generally followed by humiliation in front of the class when he starts talking very loudly for no reason)." (Fall 2016)
- "Sarcasm and belittling of students were used but only to help remind you that you need to learn more or do better to be anywhere near his level." (Fall 2016)

- "... his antagonistic, patronizing nature makes the class harder than it needs to be." (Spring 2016)
- "Very intimidating" (Spring 2016)
- "A teacher should encourage, support, and lead when a student is willing to put in the time and effort. Not everyone was just your intern over the summer." (Fall 2015)
- "He seems to favor some students over others." (Fall 2015)
- "Even though he is good at answering questions, sometimes he acts like your question is dumb, therefore discouraging you to participate further in class." (Fall 2015)
- "Too much intimidation." (Fall 2015)

Similarly, student feedback received as Chair include similar statements of concern. I agree with and echo the RTP committee that he "is missing the mark at delivering a course that is understandable to the average (and below average) students," and that, "Numerous student comments reveal this approach, which leads to a great deal of student angst, and the student comments also point to Dr. Tsai's arrogance, dismissive remarks, and/or indifference in his interactions."

In Dr. Tsai's response to the RTP committee, he noted that in Spring 2017 "8 of 42 students left comments that would be perceived as claiming the course [was] 'too difficult'." In contrast to his positive interpretation of this data, I find that nearly 20% of reporting students mentioning excessive difficulty and/or poor instructor accessibility is unusual. While for some students Dr. Tsai is an effective instructor, there is a sizable, consistent, and recurrent fraction of students for whom his instruction is ineffective, and it is apparently rooted in student perceptions of a condescending and/or intimidating attitude. This signifies a problem in both instructional delivery and in creating an environment conducive for learning. Although Dr. Tsai primarily teaches upper-division courses that are considered challenging, I believe this represents an opportunity for the faculty member to make the material more accessible and does not serve to excuse poor student outcomes.

Overall, Dr. Tsai **has not yet adequately met the guidelines and requirements for Teaching.**

Scholarly Activities:

Dr. Tsai arrived with an extensive research background, most noticeably in the field of liquid crystals. Since joining, Dr. Tsai has assembled an active research lab working with talented student researchers:

- Dr. Tsai's research projects are currently underway and have utilized departmental start-up funding to enable his research efforts, as well as mini-grant support from the LAS Dean's Office.
- Dr. Tsai was a co-PI on a large (\$200K), funded NSF grant to advance NMR spectroscopy in the classroom and which helped bring high-field NMR capabilities to MSU Denver.
- Dr. Tsai is currently overseeing several undergraduate students enrolled in the department's undergraduate research program, and has helped promote and shape that program.
- Dr. Tsai has close institutional contacts and collaborations with several faculty at the University of Colorado Boulder, which are aiding his research efforts.
- Several of Dr. Tsai's research students have been accepted to prestigious PhD programs.
- Since joining MSU Denver, Dr. Tsai has had three peer-reviewed research articles published in the respected chemistry journals *Langmuir*, *Soft Matter*, and *Journal of Physical Chemistry B*; as well as four reviewed books/book chapters published.

Overall, Dr. Tsai **has met and exceeded the guidelines and requirements for Scholarly Activities.**

Service:

Dr. Tsai has readily embraced service needs of the department since joining MSU Denver in Fall 2014:

- Dr. Tsai took on the extensive burden of establishing our burgeoning NMR facility. This facility serves students, faculty, and external partners. Dr. Tsai is no longer involved in this facility, but it would not exist without his formative efforts.
- Dr. Tsai has served as a member and chair of many departmental committees.

- Dr. Tsai has represented our department and institution to a variety of external committees.
- Dr. Tsai has performed his reassigned time duties to further the goals of the department.
- Dr. Tsai has been a key player in the new Brewing Operations program, spending many hours building rigorous curricula, programs, facilities, and establishing frameworks for the future. This program has been well-received, and I am confident that this program would not be as successful without his efforts.

Overall, Dr. Tsai **has met and exceeded the guidelines and requirements for Service activities.**

On 'Collegiality':

In response to discussions of his behavior from the RTP committee, Dr. Tsai notes that he has been working with the Chair and other university personnel on improving in this area. This is correct, and I have seen Dr. Tsai make efforts to improve in his professional relationships and in his professional conduct. As an important point of clarification for the review process, I note that the AAUP Statements which guide our evaluations make clear that 'collegiality' is an inappropriate metric for evaluation, and should matter only insofar as it impacts the metrics of Teaching, Service, and Scholarly Activities; evaluating by collegiality creates a moving, poorly-defined target for faculty, and opens the potential for abuse of process. However, the RTP committee letter clarifies through reference to the Handbook for Professional Personnel that it is not in fact 'collegiality', but rather standards of professional conduct and behavior that concerns them.

In terms of these professional misconduct concerns, I am glad to see Dr. Tsai has recognized problematic behavior, attitudes, or approach in this area, and I look forward to continuing to work with him in the future on improving in these areas. Given his self-cognizance and extensive efforts at 'turning the ship around' over the last semester and continuing onward, I believe that in the future Dr. Tsai will be able to fully demonstrate appropriate professional conduct and standards as required of faculty members.

Summary:

Reviewing Dr. Tsai's application has been a difficult process, as in the areas of Scholarly Activities and Service, he has fully met and exceeded expectations for the awarding of tenure. However, despite a great deal of demonstrated effort in the area of Teaching, I believe that there remain significant concerns regarding his ability to effectively offer all our students an accessible learning experience and to create an environment conducive to student learning, which leave his performance in the area of Teaching below the standards of the department and university. As such, **I cannot recommend tenure or promotion at this time**, and I feel that additional service at the probationary level, coupled with mentorship in these specific areas, would be the best course of action for Dr. Tsai. My specific remediation recommendations include working with the Center for Faculty Excellence as mentors to observe his teaching, offer guidance, and follow up with him periodically on progress; working with the Chair, other faculty, and/or administrators on creating a more accessible learning environment; and demonstrating improvement through peer or summative observations as well as student responses with less reference to condescension or intimidation.

I write this recommendation aware of Dr. Tsai's concern for his well-being and place in the university, and I wish to re-affirm that the department and I are committed to his success, and that this letter does not seek to invalidate his hard work, nor does it seek to inhibit the work that lies ahead for him. I extend my hand to Dr. Tsai as a mentor and colleague, and I hope that he will take it and move forward together with all of us.

Respectfully submitted,



Dr. Andrew J. Bonham