



**Study of Experiences in the Process of
Promotion to Full Professor
at the University of Maine**

Table of Contents

Why Study Promotion Experiences? 3

Study Overview 4

Study Findings 5

Conclusions and Recommendations 9

References 10

Why Study Promotion Experiences?

Faculty at the rank of professor or “full professor” most often represent an advanced level of expertise in their field (Finnegan & Hyle, 2009) as well as a national or international reputation for this expertise as evidenced through scholarship (Long, Allison, & McGinnis, 1993; Miller, 1987). The rank of professor is often imbued with increased status, prestige, and influence, not to mention higher salaries (Light, Marsden, & Corl, 1990; Long et al., 1993; Perna, 2002). As such, the failure to promote a deserving faculty member to the rank of professor may result in a loss of that individual to a different institution (Long et al., 1993). Despite existing at the highest tier of the professorial ranking system and their arguably influential role in higher education institutions, the rank of professor and the process to gain this rank have been largely forgotten in the literature. Indeed, while voluminous scholarship exists regarding the rank of assistant professor and the accompanying promotion and tenure process to the rank of associate professor, a dearth of literature exists regarding the process of promotion to professor in academia. Baldwin, DeZure, Shaw, and Moretto (2008) alluded to the dearth of research about mid-career faculty, stating that this lack of attention is also symptomatic of how many of these faculty may feel on their campuses.

At the same time, it is known that gender imbalances are very much present in the rank. Many scholars have commented on this gender imbalance (Easterly & Pemberton, 2008; Long et al., 1993; Misra, Lundquist, Holmes, & Agiomavritis, 2010; Misra, Lundquist, Holmes, & Agiomavritis, 2011; Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006) and, truly, the numbers bear out these disparities. Women at the rank of professor in four-year institutions constituted only 26% of the total in 2009-2010 (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Buch et al. (2011) explained the problem as one in which women faculty “stand still at associate” (p. 39). Moreover, when women faculty do advance to full professor it may take up to 24.2% longer than men to attain the rank (Modern Language Association, 2006). At the University of Maine, for example, only 23% of all full professors are women, whereas 40% and 46% of associate and assistant professors are women, respectively (Office of Institutional Research, 2013).

It appears that while tremendous focus has been placed on the experiences of those seeking promotion from assistant to associate professor, almost none has been focused on the experiences of faculty who seek promotion to “full.” From what literature exists, it is known that the promotion process to the rank of professor is one that is fraught with even more ambiguity than what surrounds the tenure and promotion process to the rank of associate professor (Buch et al., 2011; Youn & Price, 2009). Yet, little is known about the faculty experience of applying for promotion or the individual outcomes of such applications, particularly when such applications are not initially successful.

Study Overview

In the fall of 2011, 10 associate and “full” professors (hereafter referred to as professors) were interviewed regarding their experiences in the promotion process at the University of Maine (UMaine).

An email was sent to all UMaine associate professors and professors in the early fall asking for participation in the study. Specifically, faculty were asked if they had applied for promotion but were either rejected or told to withdraw their applications. From this initial email, 12 individuals made contact but only 10 ultimately consented to be interviewed.

In total, we interviewed with 6 men and 4 women; all but two of the individuals identified racially as White. In terms of disciplinary group, 6 were in STEM fields, 3 in the humanities, with the remaining individual from the social sciences. Seven of the individuals interviewed eventually received promotion, 2 did not but will reapply, and 1 individual indicated (s)he would not reapply.

Findings

From the data analysis, several themes emerged: (a) timing, (b) a lack of clarity, (c) a gendered experience, and (d) problematic procedures.

Timing

The issue of time loomed largely in the discussions with these 10 faculty members. Specifically, questions arose in these faculty members' experiences in relation to: When? How long to wait? And, When is too soon?

- Several of the faculty members talked about waiting a particular amount of time before submitting their applications for full professor. This amount of time varied greatly by discipline and was rarely explicitly outlined in any particular department. Instead, faculty members generally guessed about application timing by observing others:
 - "I had gotten tenure in [year] and it was eight years and I thought I was pretty productive. And that's probably about the normal length of time in our department anyway."
- As such, it was often expressed by the faculty members that *one had to put in one's time* to be promoted. Indeed, time appeared to be a more important criterion in some departments than the evaluation of applicants' professional accomplishments.
 - "Time is really the key. Is it something that you sort of deserve from being here long enough?"
- In turn, the idea of "hurrying" and one's application being submitted "too soon" was an interesting theme that arose in many of the faculty members' conversations, particularly since few departments had explicit expectations about the timeline for the process. The fear around submitting too early was one that was based on not wanting to "make waves."
 - "I think there's a less explicit, or maybe a little less strong, expectation about full that you're expected to wait until you're not going to raise any eyebrows when you go up."

Lack of Clarity

- Not only was the timing of the application unclear, but faculty members repeatedly spoke to the lack of clarity around the expectations to gain the rank of full professor. Moreover, many talked about the expectations surrounding their hiring shifting over time, thereby requiring different components than those for which they were hired.
 - "I specifically was hired to teach a lot. Then my peer committee gives me shit for not having a steady stream of graduate students. I don't do that kind of work."

- When expectations were more spelled out, there were still issues that arose. This lack of clarity led to quite diverse interpretations within departments of their own criteria.
 - “They’re not that explicit. They use words like ‘normally,’ but there are no numbers. I think it’s something like ‘substantial amounts of research.’ It’s been discussed at other times that to come up for tenure one needs either a book or a handful of articles. How many fingers you have on that hand is a big question mark. So, it was my understanding that to come up for full one would probably need double that amount, but we don’t have [anything explicit].”
 - “The *implied* expectation in our department is that [number of publications] will be a minimum to go up for full, and I think at the time I had [more than that] in refereed journals.”

- What was ultimately problematic when faculty members sought full and were denied, then, was there were no criteria upon which to base these decisions. For example, one faculty member’s letter from the peer committee expressed he hadn’t met all of the departmental criteria for teaching and service, but that the criteria didn’t state any requirements about teaching and service.

- But, when asked if more clear criteria would be helpful very few faculty agreed.
 - “Our department has fought pretty hard to be vague but that also leaves some room for unprofessional behaviors.”
 - “In my department we’d never agree on any language that was more specific because we discuss other things and we always have problems.”
 - “No, because I don’t think there’s any one of our faculty who has ever *looked* at the criteria. I don’t know where it is. I don’t think anybody’s ever seen it.”

- As such, it is perhaps not surprising that when asked how these experiences impacted their job satisfaction, that all participants remarked it that it had influenced their satisfaction on some level.
 - “I remember telling myself that if I can’t get over this I gotta get out of here. Because I’m not going to live with that kind of stress in my life and angst and resentment.”
 - “I considered just skating through for the rest of my years not really caring, and just doing the bare minimum until I retire.”

A Gendered Experience

While the issue of gender did not come up in every single interview we conducted, we were aware of differences based on gender in the responses of the participants.

- For example, one woman was quick to point out gendered differences in her experience, pointing out that there had never been any women promoted to full professor in her area before she applied and was ultimately asked to withdraw her application.

- “I saw one woman who had tried three times to get promoted, and didn’t get it every time. That’s what I saw. I saw the men getting promoted only.”
 - “It’s very common for women who devote time and energy to this to have this happen.”
 - “It was very interesting because [name], who was at the time in [another field], he and I came in the same year. Our records were very similar. We had both been *very* productive as junior faculty and all of this kind of thing, identical ages, and his went *flying* through. And he came back to me and he said, ‘I just can’t imagine how they can do that.’”
- Beyond these examples, it was perhaps even more interesting that it was more often men than women who chose to apply for the promotion even when they had been dissuaded to do so by department chairs and their peers. Women were more apt to listen to this advice and wait, even if later they were told they shouldn’t have. Men were more likely to respond thusly:
 - “I really think that if you’ve put in the work, and you deserve it, then you should do it. And you shouldn’t care about whose toes get stepped on.”
 - Whereas women, when they were told to withdraw, stated, “I left with tears thinking: Forget it, I’ll never try.”

Problematic Procedures

The final theme that emerged from the 10 faculty members’ experiences dealt with the procedures and guidelines utilized in the promotion process.

- Half of the participants discussed issues related to policy misinterpretation by their department chairs, peer committees, or deans.
- Similarly, half of the participants also discussed problematic voting policies in their departments.
 - For example, several faculty members discussed how people not at the rank of professor were able to vote on promotions in their departments, as well as faculty members who talked about the formal, but unwritten, policy that all voting in their department had to be unanimous. In effect, this practice of unanimous voting had a chilling effect on some faculty members’ intentions to pursue promotion, particularly in already divided departments.
 - “The people in the department who want to vote yes get their arms twisted or the people who want to vote no get their arms twisted.”
- There were cases also of faculty discussing how policies and guidelines had been misinterpreted or miscommunicated by decision-makers in their application process.
 - “The dean supported my candidacy [for tenure], and the letter was positive, although there was one mind-blowing thing that he wrote: When I came up for associate professor I could not use my first book, because it was outside of the time period. So, when I came up for full I said, ‘Well, here’s my opportunity

because it's supposed to be your entire career.' (Name of dean) said I could not use my second book, because that was the basis of my tenure case. So, in effect, I was screwed for a second time."

- Or even outright discrimination
 - "My promotion was turned down at the provost's level. When I asked for a reason I was told that I had been referred to as a 'young scientist.'"

Conclusions

- Clarity in guidelines and criteria for attaining full professor may be somewhat controversial in some units, but countless studies have shown the positive outcomes of clear criteria for gaining tenure, including higher job satisfaction and retention (e.g., Hurtado & Sharkness, 2008; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996; Trower, 2009)
 - Consider what is generally the timetable to gain promotion in your unit
 - Discuss the expectations for scholarship, teaching, and service and what has been expected in the past of successful applicants
- Clarity in criteria can also be helpful for those serving on the peer committee to facilitate the deliberation process and in writing letters
- Mentoring of associate professors to gain the rank of professor can be as effective as the mentoring of junior faculty by senior faculty (Buch et al., 2011; Jaschik, 2012; Modern Language Association, 2006; O'Connor, Gahn, & Bowen, 2012).
 - Provide a mentoring program that pairs full professors with associate professors who may wish to seek promotion.
- Women continue to be under-represented at the full professor rank both nationally and at UMaine
 - Consider pairing women professors with women associate professors in mentoring programs

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