Most of us in academics know exactly what it takes to be promoted to associate professor because the standards are typically clearly spelled out. Many departments and universities even have guidelines that specify the criteria used to determine promotion to associate professor. Unfortunately, the path to becoming a full professor is much less clear. If you don’t believe me, just ask the chair of your department what one has to do to be promoted to associate professor versus full professor. When it comes to promotion to associate professor, I suspect he or she will rattle off the average number of publications necessary, where those publications should be, and precisely what is expected in terms of service work. However, the criteria will become much more vague when he or she discusses what it takes to be promoted to full professor. Words like “impact” and “contribution” are often stated, but no quantitative values are linked to these terms. Such ambiguity makes it difficult to figure out what one must do to achieve full professor status.

To better understand the path to becoming a full professor, I asked a few individuals who have considerable experience with the process. Four full professors, two of which are also department chairs, agreed to speak with me about these issues: Angelo DeNisi (chair of the Department of Management at Texas A&M), Ruth Kanfer (from Georgia Tech’s psychology program), Kevin Murphy (chair of the Department of Psychology at Pennsylvania State University), and Philip Roth (from Clemson University’s Department of Management). Both psychology programs and business schools are represented because I was hoping to determine if becoming a full professor varies according to which area one belongs. As you’ll see, there are more similarities than differences.

The Road to Becoming a Full Professor

You’ve just been promoted to associate professor with tenure—now what? Well for one thing, you are no longer shielded from dreaded service work. You’ll be expected to take on more committee responsibilities (even at the university level) and generally take on more administrative roles. Unlike the road to becoming an associate professor, service to the department
and university are important for achieving full professor status. As Ruth points out, an associate professor needs to demonstrate the ability to contribute to the department and university in meaningful ways.

In addition to internal service, those seeking promotion to full professor will also need to engage in more professional service activities. This includes being on editorial boards and becoming more active in professional associations (e.g., SIOP, Academy of Management). Being active at both the local and national level will demonstrate that you have the leadership abilities to warrant full professorship.

With all these service activities it seems like associate professors should be required to do less in the way of research, right? Wrong! Research productivity is just as important to being promoted to full professor as it was to becoming an associate. However, the definition of a productive researcher is fairly ambiguous at this stage. As Angelo points out, everyone knows what it takes to become a tenured associate professor, but criteria are generally not available when it comes to becoming a full professor. As an assistant professor, you are expected to crank out a number of single study publications. This single study mentality may not cut it for promotion to full. As Kevin suggests, if you continue to focus on one-shot studies, it is difficult to do the sort of major integrative work required to make full professor. Yes, at some institutions you can achieve full professor status by continuing in the same vein as you did as an assistant professor by conducting single study publications that answer important, yet limited, research questions. However, at most places you’ll need to show you think bigger than that and have a broader impact on the literature. This generally requires conducting longer term projects and publishing multiple study publications that have far-reaching implications or writing major chapters or review articles that help pull together some body of research. Further, writing or editing a book on a topic you are becoming associated with is a good way to expand your horizons and make a larger impact on the field.

OK, so how is “impact” and “far-reaching” defined when it comes to evaluating your potential for promotion to full? Well, that’s the problem. They are very difficult to directly operationalize. As Angelo points out, it’s one of those things “you know when you see it, but you can’t describe it.” However, some indicators may shed light on these issues and are often used by departments to determine the quality of research a faculty member has conducted. For instance, Phil points out that external letters of influence are often sought when a person comes up for full professor, as are number of top-tier publications and citation analyses. These types of criteria may help determine just how much of an “impact” you’ve had on the literature.

Finally, a record of successful grantsmanship may also contribute to one’s success at promotion to full. At most universities, the failure to get grants will not prevent someone from being promoted, but a strong grant history can
support promotion. Ruth notes that success in the competitive grant review process provides additional evidence of scientific competence and progress. Since universities certainly benefit from rewarding those who bring in large amounts of money, learning how to write successful grant proposals can help you to become a full professor.

In summary, take Angelo’s advice and the moment you become an associate professor “start acting like a full professor.” This means you need to get more involved in service activities, become a member of editorial boards, submit grant proposals, and most importantly, think about the bigger picture and work on longer-term and riskier projects. Realize research is still what gets you promoted, so don’t get too bogged down in service. Kevin suggests thinking about the contribution you want to make to the field early on. Do large-scale studies that address the issue you want to focus on to ensure you make a far-reaching impact on the literature. This is the surest way to be promoted to full.

Pitfalls to Avoid on the Way Up

I also asked our experts the most common reasons people are denied promotion to full. First, it seems the most common reason is simply a failure to continue being a productive researcher. Some faculty stop doing research after tenure or do considerably less. This often happens because newly promoted associate professors “take a break” from research after being promoted. As Kevin notes, although there is no set time clock for promotion to full, if your productivity drops substantially for a while it may be very difficult to ramp back up. In fact, it could take years to recover.

Associate professors may also fail to be productive because they get caught up in all the new administrative duties that come with the promotion (e.g., committee work, editorial board member responsibilities), so they’re not able to do as much research. To avoid this, Phil suggests you must balance the need to be a good departmental/college citizen and being a researcher. This can be tough because you will get a lot of appreciation from those around you for taking on more administrative duties. However, when the time comes, those same people will be quick to deny you promotion if that’s all you’ve been doing. So, be sure not to forget that research productivity is still key to being promoted to full.

A second reason people get denied promotion to full is because they continue doing only one-shot studies instead of major integrative work. Some associate professors think that to become a full professor you just do “more of the same.” This couldn’t be less true. Ruth suggests that the 2 years following tenure are important ones. This is the time to make a decision about how you’re going to proceed. Some folks just slow down the pace too much after tenure sinks in. This isn’t the time to slow down, but rather a time to perhaps change your focus and keep yourself motivated. This is the time to do more large-scale projects that may be risky but will have a larger impact.
Finally, some people just stop being collegial after they are promoted to associate. This can influence perceptions of a person’s leadership abilities and can decrease the chances of being promoted to full professor.

**Psychology Departments Versus Business Schools**

Are there any differences in the path to full professorship if you’re in a business school versus a psychology department? Generally, business schools and psychology departments have very similar expectations. There seem to be only two exceptions. First, while psychology programs will consider all the typical outlets of the work of I-O psychologists as acceptable, some business schools may not value these psychological journals to the same extent. As Phil says, some business schools may devalue journals such as *Journal of Applied Psychology* and *Personnel Psychology* and microlevel research in general. They may require you to publish in *Administrative Science Quarterly* or the *Academy of Management Journal*. However, it should be noted that most business schools that hire I-O psychologists are likely to strongly consider psychology journals in promotion decisions. But, it is always important to ensure you understand what your school or department values to make sure you are going in the right direction.

Second, if you are in a business school it may be more difficult to convey the meaningfulness of your work to folks who are in very different areas. Most I-O psychologists do not have a background in economics, accounting, or operations management. Therefore, it may be tough to relate to other faculty in your area. They may see the world differently and may not see the importance of your work. This can make it even more likely that the criteria by which you are judged will be ambiguous. Therefore, it’s very important to understand what they value and make connections with them.

Now what?

Let’s say you’ve made it—you’re now a full professor! What happens next? First, since there is no longer tenure and promotion to worry about, the new full professor will be asked to take on both formal and informal leadership roles. For instance, they’ll be asked to chair committees that can take a tremendous amount of one’s time.

Second, the national recognition that resulted in becoming a full professor opens up a whole new set of opportunities. For example, it may be easier to obtain funding for your research and there may be more opportunities to do consulting work. This means you need to think very carefully about where you want your career to go. Do you want to be department chair, spend more time consulting, or focus on funding opportunities?
Conclusions

The road to becoming a full professor is different from that of associate. While it’s clear what one needs to do to become an associate professor, there is considerable ambiguity regarding what it takes to become a full professor. The experts agree that thinking big and working on long-term projects are keys to reaching full professor status. This generally requires a change in perspective from the assistant level. The faster you can reorient yourself, the better the likelihood that you’ll be successful in becoming a full professor.

Make a Note...

REMEMBER!

July 1

Awards deadline is now July 1!