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How associate professors can overcome impediments to full professorship (opinion)

Submitted by Michael Bugeja on December 18, 2018 - 3:00am

Upon being promoted to full professor in the School of Journalism and Strategic Media at Middle Tennessee State University, Jane Marcellus sidled into the dean's office to retrieve her portfolio in three-ringed binders in a box.

Unbeknownst to her, that box held insight into the politics and policies of advancement.

"It was the end of the day, and I didn't really look at it," Marcellus says. She brought her portfolio home, stowed it in a closet and then fetched it two years later when a colleague wanted to view her dossier as a model.

There were files in the box that Marcellus was not supposed to see. She learned the first committee ballot went against her by one vote but was overruled higher up. She was concerned that not all the reviewers were a good fit for her area of expertise as a feminist critical-cultural historian. "I took the originals back to the office and told our secretary they should probably go in my file," she says.

Marcellus, who holds a doctorate in media studies from the University of Oregon, has published books and peer-reviewed articles in the flagship *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* as well as in *Feminist Media Studies* and *American Journalism*. Promoted to full professor in 2013, she has chaired her unit's promotion and tenure, or P&T, committee twice and has successfully proposed changes to make advancement more impartial.

Precarious Status

Marcellus's goal of working with colleagues to improve the process is commendable, particularly for associate professors.

Much is written about assistant professors seeking tenure and promotion. Typically, they are overwhelmingly successful. They usually enjoy support at all levels of the institution seeking to recoup the investment for searches and start-up packages. Assistant professors with reduced service loads also may participate in mentorship programs to keep research on track.

But as soon as they become associate professors, their service responsibilities increase dramatically. That impacts time for research, which in turn affects their chances for promotion to full professors.

Many institutions do not share P&T metrics. An exception is the California State University system, which publishes an annual report on faculty recruitment and retention. [The 2017 report](#) ^[1] about assistant professor advancement shows only 14 tenure denials across 23 campuses. Some 13 campuses had no denials. The report states that "total denials of tenure and non-reappointments were 0.5 percent of the probationary faculty population, which was less than recent years."

That statistic is typical. But stats on promotion to full rank are harder to come by. Without clear job losses or mandatory time clocks, little data are available. Associate professors also may apply for promotion twice or more without success before accepting their fate.

Their status is precarious.

Advancement policies for associate professors vary. Generally, special committees of full professors are assembled to judge colleagues applying for that rank. But after a spate of retirements or adjunct hires, too few full professors may remain in a department to form a special committee. So professors from other units -- sometimes with little knowledge of the discipline -- are added to the panel.

That is but one of many impediments for associate professors seeking a full-professor rank. An essay in *Inside Higher Ed*, "[Midcareer Melancholy](#)" ^[2], discusses the frustration of associates whose careers have come to a

standstill, blaming in part the adjunctification [3] of academe, with job satisfaction particularly low for women.

How, specifically, does adjunctification play a role? Associate professors require time to turbocharge their career trajectories. But time often is not on their side when it comes to escalating service expectations. Because adjuncts are often barred from chairing committees or taking leadership roles in program development, the burdens of service then fall mostly on associate professors. In addition to teaching, associates are assigned to multiple committees. Some take administrative positions such as associate chair, getting more pay but less time for scholarship.

Leaner budgets also reduce the number of research and teaching assistants who require tuition waivers. As a result, many associate professors work without graduate help that counterparts enjoyed in previous eras with ample budgets.

External Reviewers

Perhaps the most important factor in P&T advancement is the selection of external reviewers. Promotion decisions rely heavily on external letters. All it takes is one negative missive to jeopardize an otherwise worthy application.

Most departments assemble their lists conscientiously, but politics can play a role. Colleagues who value skills over scholarship (or vice versa) might pick potentially negative reviewers. The same may be true in programs that prefer quantitative over qualitative research. The menu of possible bias, unconscious or not, is as varied as personnel.

Make no mistake: the majority of P&T proceedings are as impartial as policies allow. However, aberrations do occur. Perhaps a candidate is viewed as uncivil or a subpar teacher in a department that values instruction more than publication or professional skills more than scholarship. Sometimes methodology may be unfairly suspect or maligned. In addition, there are three Carnegie classifications: doctoral universities with moderate research activity (R3), doctoral universities with higher research activity (R2) and doctoral universities with the highest research activity (R1). An R1 external reviewer

who teaches two classes per semester might look askance at an R3 applicant's productivity without considering that teaching load may be four or more classes.

Reviewers also should be full professors at peer rather than aspirational schools. There are exceptions, depending on the discipline. As Marcellus observes, "Feminist media historian full profs at non-R1 institutions are hard to come by," prompting some units to expand the pool with reviewers from other universities with the highest research activity.

P&T committees should read dossiers carefully to identify potential reviewers with expertise in a candidate's specialty. Crucial decisions happen at this juncture. Associates usually are asked to recommend who would make an appropriate reviewer and whom not to contact because of a conflict of interest. Typically, at least one of the candidate's suggested reviewers should be included in the finalized list of three to six professors.

Recommended Best Practices

Given all the above factors, I also recommend the following to the various people who have a say in the process: administrators who manage it, the external reviewer and the associate professor themselves.

For the academic administrators:

- Create a culture of mentorship for associate professors. Full professors should provide guidance. Provosts should offer resources for P&T seminars, conference travel, sabbaticals and advancement-related opportunities.
- Department chairs should review deadlines with P&T committees and uncover any conflicts of interest that might impede or undermine the process. It is improper for chairs to state why a candidate should or should not be promoted. The process will bear that out.
- Chairs and P&T committees should confer regularly on their progress and resolve any roadblocks, such as late external letters or missed deadlines. Without teamwork, departments may overlook conflicts that come to light after the process has started, potentially inviting legal liability.
- Chairs and P&T committees should strive for impartiality when selecting external reviewers, ensuring they have proper rank and expertise to appraise the candidate's dossier. Chairs are responsible for ensuring

impartiality, especially as it pertains to any previous personal relationship between the reviewer and candidate that might prejudice the evaluation.

- Chairs should challenge external letters that miss the mark. Negative letters may be based on personal criteria, such as not citing the reviewer's work or citing but misinterpreting it.
- Deans should be candid and analytical when assessing the chair's letter, P&T committee report and external letters. They should pay attention to conflicting issues such as a chair advising advancement and a faculty committee voting against it. Deans also oversee the integrity of the process and deal with issues such as too few external letters or the absence of any from scholars recommended by the candidate.
- Deans should note the timing of the promotion, especially if it is under five years or more than 10 since the last attempt, focusing on the candidate's trajectory to assess if they will remain productive upon receiving full rank.
- Provosts should weigh each stage of the process independently and not merely agree with the dean's assessment. Proactive provosts have been known to arrange meetings with candidates to clear up unresolved issues before passing judgment.

For the external reviewer:

- Recognize that the invitation is an honor. Your status as a reviewer is based on your reputation of having earned full rank. Professors elsewhere who may not know you personally have examined your work and chosen you to act as judge over one of their colleagues.
- Either say yes or no but do not communicate in advance what you believe about the candidate before reviewing the dossier. Do not feel compelled to review an applicant whose research area is outside your expertise.
- Inquire what is expected of you to prepare before the dossier arrives. You may be asked to gauge teaching as well as scholarship. Mostly it will be the latter. If the P&T committee fails to send necessary materials, such as promotion requirements and governance documents, request them.
- Ask about confidentiality. While many institutions bar candidates from viewing letters, or do so but redact names and letterheads, some systems permit the practice. This affects what you say and how you say it. Universities may inform you about sunshine laws, often with the disclaimer that nothing is confidential should disputes arise.
- Heed deadlines. Schedule time to evaluate the dossier. This is important if materials arrive via email or Dropbox, as you may overlook or forget them during a busy semester. If so, you will hear from the P&T committee urging you to meet deadlines. That may rush analysis, resulting in misjudgment.
- Read the entire dossier, not only the sample of the candidate's research. Front material typically contains metrics on productivity, responsibilities, length of time between last promotion, teaching and research philosophy, and other pertinent data that may inform your review.

- Don't compare your institution's P&T criteria, disparaging a candidate's department based on perceived inferior standards. Your letter may be discounted on that basis alone.
- Be thorough. State your relationship with the candidate and divulge any previous contact. List credentials that qualify you to be a reviewer. Emphasize your acumen in the research area. Be factual and cite sources to support your observations.

For the associate professor:

- Have a clear theme in your dossier that shows an upward trajectory -- not only in published works but in future material, forecasting the likelihood of ever higher influence on the national stage. Scholarship should have a topic (what's the research about) and a theme (what the research is really about). Theme defines contribution to the discipline. Example: technology and ethics (topic); machine versus moral code (theme).
- Focus your scholarship. Too often, published papers and presentations are scattershot over three or more topics. Often this happens when associate professors are second or third authors, partnering with colleagues who have different research agendas. Collaboration is important, to be sure; nevertheless, first or sole authorship may be vital if you hope to advance.
- Detail future research plans. Reviewers don't only evaluate the quality of published work; they want to see in abstract format a series of proposed articles, books, monographs and the like that you hope to develop over the next several years. Aspirations indicate influence in the discipline.
- Document the impact of your published work. Include citations using applications appropriate to the discipline, such as Web of Science database and h-index. (The latter indicates the quality and quantity of cited work and is easy to calculate ^[4] via Google Scholar.)
- Work with a mentor, preferably a full professor in your department. Associate professors sometimes rebuff mentorship. Yet senior mentors are barometers of possible obstacles and can help overcome them. Share your draft dossiers with them. Accept instruction cordially and revise accordingly.
- Hone the language of the dossier so that it reads like a crisp manuscript. Never pad. Be factual. Insert statements about why your research is impactful. Write for external reviewers, not the department chair or P&T committee. Keep institutional jargon to a minimum.
- Recommend reviewers objectively. Exclude co-authors, dissertation advisers and former supervisors. Nominate a professor who served with you on a conference panel, an editor who used you as an article referee or a scholar who cited one of your papers. Don't base recommendations on pleasantries shared in person or on social media.
- After the process ends, schedule meetings with your supervisor, P&T chair, dean or even provost, especially if you have a complaint. Follow guidelines, policies and procedures in the Faculty Handbook. If

successful, thank everyone who participated. If unsuccessful, find out as much as you can about what went wrong and why.

As an associate professor, you should continue your quest for advancement, especially if your institution has posttenure review. Lapses in productivity can derail careers. If you work with mentors, embrace incentives and reignite your aspirations, you can often not only further your career but also enhance the departmental climate.

Students, as always, are the main beneficiaries.

Author Bio:

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Source URL: <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2018/12/18/how-associate-professors-can-overcome-impediments-full-professorship-opinion>

Links

[1] <http://www.calstate.edu/hr/faculty-resources/research-analysis/documents/facrecurvrep17.pdf>

[2] <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2015/05/29/essay-frustrations-associate-professors>

[3] <https://www.forbes.com/sites/noodleeducation/2015/05/28/more-than-half-of-college-faculty-are-adjuncts-should-you-care/#3d5cf6461600>

[4] https://www.wur.nl/upload_mm/3/1/c/890c6a4a-4ce2-479f-98f0-fabb7ac92a54_Calculating%20your%20citation%20index%20with%20Google%20scholar.pdf