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The Uncertain Path to Full Professor

Vague criteria may signal to some faculty members that a promotion to the top is out of their reach

By Audrey Williams June | FEBRUARY 14, 2016

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D.L. Anderson for The Chronicle

Douglas Kline, for 13 years an associate professor of information systems at the U. of North Carolina at Wilmington, "wasn't trying to push the clock" in applying for a promotion, he says. His application, which included two binders of material, was successful.

They have national, even international reputations for groundbreaking research and scholarship. They write lauded books, win coveted prizes, draw graduate-student disciples. Their institutions and their disciplines tap them as leaders.

They're full professors, the elite class of the professoriate. But the path that scholars must follow to join their ranks is hardly clear-cut, which can make it more difficult for some people — particularly women and minorities — to get there.

Any successful bid takes several years of striving to meet institutional expectations that are often expressed as lofty rhetoric. Bucknell University's provost has said, "Every outstanding university depends on its full professors as a brain trust." Duke University's faculty handbook says they "play a critical role in determining the intellectual quality of the university." Becoming a full professor, as the University of Wyoming puts it, means "you are at the top of your game."

While the tenure process has an established timeline, the requirements and timing of

further promotion are murkier.

"The criteria tend to be vague. That concept of bigger and better is really sort of nebulous," says Jeffrey L. Buller, dean of the honors college at Florida Atlantic University and an expert in academic administration. "There are people who will say about full professors, 'We'll know one when we see one.' "

That leaves some associate professors trying to figure out what they should focus on and when the time is right to "go up for full," as they say. Some of them, confused, daunted, overworked, or beset with posttenure inertia, eventually decide that a promotion isn't worth pursuing.

Those who do become full professors join a relatively homogeneous group — more so than at the lower ranks (see chart at right). About 80 percent of tenured full professors at four-year institutions are white, and almost three-quarters are male, according to the latest federal data. Asians, at 9 percent, represent the largest minority group, followed by black and Hispanic full professors, at 3.3 percent and just shy of 3 percent, respectively. Native Americans and Pacific Islanders together make up less than one-half of 1 percent of the nation's full professors.

As students around the country call attention to a general lack of faculty diversity, and some colleges commit to raising the proportion of underrepresented-minority professors, the top-tier members of the faculty are instrumental in setting departmental culture.

Where Are the Minority Professors?

Where Are the Minority Professors?

An examination of the demographics of more than 400,000 professors at 1,500 colleges shows where those of each rank, gender, race/ethnicity, and tenure status can be found.

By Ben Myers | FEBRUARY 13, 2016

On average, 75 out of every 100 full-time faculty members at colleges are white. Five are black, and even fewer are Hispanic. But that's only part of the whole story. Among the higher ranks and at certain types of colleges, say, small, private master's universities — the faculty is even less diverse.



Who are professors of all ranks - with or without tenure - male & female -



Look up the racial and ethnic breakdowns of 400,000 professors at 1,500 colleges, and see which employ the most faculty members in each group.

The presence of black and Hispanic full professors, for example, can help in recruiting faculty members and students from those groups. Full professors are also among the key determinants of who else will join their ranks. When the criteria are vague and

mentorship is hard to come by, that may signal to some faculty members that a promotion to the top is out of their reach.

One upside of the pursuit is that, unlike with tenure, a failed bid won't cost a scholar his or her job. Associate professors can try more than once. The divergent paths they take show that they rely on different, sometimes shifting strategies to be successful. What works one year may not the next.

"Everyone knows that the standards are silently being ratcheted up," says Frank J. Donoghue, a professor of English at Ohio State University. "But no one knows what the ratcheting-up process looks like."

What it takes to reach the rank of full professor varies by institution and department as well as discipline. Generally, committees want to see that the same research, teaching, and service that earned candidates tenure has had further impact. Publications in first-rate journals, single or co-authored books reviewed by noted scholars, and major research grants are among the markers. Visibility — being invited to speak at high-profile conferences, serving as editor of a journal, holding a leadership position in a scholarly association — matters, too.

"Publishing papers, getting funding, and doing research is important," says Mary Lou Soffa, a professor of computer science and former department chair at the University of Virginia. But candidates shouldn't underestimate the role of leadership in the field, she says. "Committees are looking to see that when you come up for full."

Douglas M. Kline was encouraged to apply for promotion, even though, by his admission, he "wasn't trying to push the clock."

"For five or six years I was a really good candidate to go up for full," says Mr. Kline, who moved to the University of North Carolina at Wilmington in 2001 as an associate professor of information systems. After 13 years, he applied for a promotion, motivated in part by having to go several years without a raise. When he was promoted last year, Mr. Kline shared the news on LinkedIn: "I'm very grateful to be recognized in this way."

Daniel Aldridge got similar encouragement at Davidson College. In his fifth-year review as an associate professor of history, he learned that his dean was looking forward to his application for full professor the following year.

"I published enough articles to get tenure, and my mentor advised me to write a book to get promoted to full," says Mr. Aldridge, who got the promotion in 2012. "I wrote a book for that reason."

Signals of readiness in a particular department sometimes come from mentors. But associate professors can't always find them.

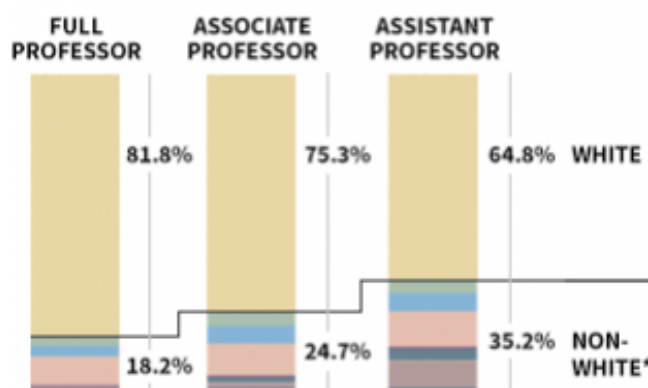
Sonya T. Smith knows what it's like to navigate the path to full largely on her own.

"I didn't have as much mentoring and guidance as I would have preferred," says Ms. Smith, who was the first woman to get tenure in the mechanical-engineering department at Howard University and the first woman in that department to be promoted to full professor, in 2010. She measured herself against colleagues at peer institutions and others, she says, and made sure her research output and grants were in line with theirs.

Ms. Smith is principal investigator of a project funded by a \$3.4-million grant to help increase the number of female full professors and academic leaders in the STEM fields at Howard. The effort, which began in 2012, provides mentors for female faculty members as well as "unconscious-bias training" for members of search-and-promotion committees.

Less Diversity at Higher Ranks of the Professoriate

More than four in five full professors are white. Among assistant professors, a smaller group over all (about 83,000 compared with 134,000 full professors), the proportions of black, Hispanic, and Asian scholars are somewhat higher.



* Non-white includes Hispanic, Black, Asian, American Indian, Unknown, Pacific Islander and Nonresident alien and two or more races

Note: These figures, for 2013-14, represent full professors with tenure, associate professors with tenure, and assistant professors on the tenure track at degree-granting, Title IV-compliant, four-year public and private nonprofit institutions, categorized by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education as research, master's, or baccalaureate, with at least 15 full-time staff members. The data set considers Hispanic and nonresident alien as racial/ethnic groups mutually exclusive of any other.

Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System

"Women nationally tend to plateau at associate professor," says Ms. Smith, who is now chair of her department. "For our institution, we want to make sure that we have some policies and assistance in place to move the needle for us."

Even when associate professors think they have a handle on the criteria for promotion, they sometimes find out otherwise.

Mr. Donoghue, the English professor at Ohio State, had already written one book, on 18th-century literary careers, that helped him earn tenure in 1995. But his second book, about the growing corporatization of the university, didn't initially bolster his promotion bid, as he thought it would. And his decision to switch to the then-fledgling field of critical university studies complicated his path.

In 2008, his second book was under contract, with a publication date, and he made it known he wanted to go up for full. But the full professors in his department, including the chair, advised him to wait until he had established an international reputation — a standard he says wasn't mentioned in the written requirements for promotion.

"I was resentful about that," says Mr. Donoghue. He could have applied for promotion anyway, but "I knew it was a huge amount of work to put together my dossier, and I didn't want to do all that work more than once."

In 2010-11, after being invited to Spain to give a lecture about his second book, he applied for a promotion to full professor and was successful.

"Early on, I was thinking in the broadest possible sense of what I'd been told it takes to make it — I had a contract for a second book," Mr. Donoghue says. "Once I had that I thought, Well it's time for me to go up. It turned out to be a more complicated process."

David W. Szymanski, who became a tenured associate professor of geology at Bentley University last year, is already thinking about "how to craft a narrative for full professor that looks different than an associate professor." He says he's particularly focused on which direction to take his research, which includes several fields — geology, science policy, pedagogy, and forensic science. "In what area do I want to develop my scholarly strength?"



Aaron P. Bernstein for The Chronicle

When men are encouraged to go for promotions while women are told that they're not ready, the academic playing field is tilted, says Venetria Patton, head of Purdue U.'s School of Interdisciplinary Studies.

Mixed signals about the criteria for full professor can make promotion a protracted pursuit. Venetria K. Patton, a professor of English and African-American studies at Purdue University, knew she needed a second sole-authored book, but the advice she got about how far along it must be shifted over time.

"At first I was told I should be fine if I got it under contract," says Ms. Patton. "Then there was a change in department heads, and I was told, 'We really want to make sure your book is in the galley stage.'"

She chose to wait for her book to be published, even as a colleague in another department (whose book came out after hers, she says) applied for a promotion at his department head's encouragement — and became a full professor before she did, in 2014.

"I just decided, I'm not going to gamble on this, so I just waited," says Ms. Patton, the newly appointed head of Purdue's School of Interdisciplinary Studies. "I think for me, as a black woman going up for full, I really felt like I needed to dot all my i's and cross all my t's. I wanted to play it safe."

As a full professor, Ms. Patton says she can better see how race and gender play into the promotion process. When men are encouraged to apply, but women are told they're not quite ready, she says, that makes for an uneven playing field.

Institutions have taken steps to understand and try to minimize stumbling blocks that can keep associate professors from advancing. Some colleges hold events designed to demystify the promotion process; others have yearlong programs to help associate professors — particularly women in STEM fields and underrepresented minorities — navigate the path to full.

The focus on midcareer advancement is growing by some measures, even as progress for some groups of faculty members remains slow.

The self-initiated advancement to full professor stands in sharp contrast to the tenure clock that drives faculty-career trajectories at the outset. For some people, a tendency to underestimate their own readiness for full can thwart their aspirations, at least temporarily.

Marie A. Kelleher, a medieval historian at California State University at Long Beach, could have applied for a promotion in the 2013-14 academic year. "I reflected on what I had done, especially in terms of publications," she says, "and I just didn't feel like I had enough."

Ms. Kelleher applied for promotion the following academic year — and got it. She was later told that she probably could have been promoted earlier, she says. "I needed to reassess the internal yardstick I was using, because it was not the same as the institution's yardstick — even if the institution's yardstick was vague by design."

Ms. Soffa, of the University of Virginia, often hears such things from female colleagues in computer science. "Women tend to think they're not ready for full professor, when really they are," says Ms. Soffa, who co-founded a national program to help female associate professors in computer science get promoted to full professor. "They just need more confidence."

Academics may be motivated to move up by intimations of second-class citizenship, when duties like serving as chair or on a presidential advisory committee are given only to full professors. Certain types of administrative and service work are among the roles reserved for full professors.

By virtue of their rank, the newly anointed can also typically look forward to a salary increase. The national average for full professors is \$113,419, about 44 percent more than the average for associate professors.

Having reached the top, full professors also have even more freedom to speak freely about various issues, many say, and to pursue the next big thing — of their own choosing. "Now I have another 15 years here," says Mr. Kline, of UNC-Wilmington. "What do I really want to spend my time on?"

The perks are tempered, however, by what some see as the diminishing power of faculty, even at the top. The tradition of shared governance, they worry, is on the decline. Institutions that a few generations ago looked to full professors to shape not only the curriculum but also a vision for the future now have a more professionalized class of administrators for that.

"So many of the big administrative decisions at American universities come from the top down," says Mr. Donoghue, of Ohio State. "I feel as if an era of faculty governance in which full professors had a real say is disappearing."

And full professor isn't necessarily a stop on the way to campus leadership. "It used to be the case that university presidents had careers as scholars, full professors, before they assumed those positions," Mr. Donoghue says. "Now, increasingly, that's not where administrators come from."

Even so, the title of full professor still conveys an aura of prestige.

Jennifer Clark, an associate professor of public policy at the Georgia Institute of Technology, says she's been focused on rising to full since arriving there.

"I didn't think, I'll meet this benchmark and then think about the next benchmark," says Ms. Clark, who earned tenure in 2011. "For me this was always about career progression. The steps were always on my mind."

For those who make it to full, of course, there's yet another step up, with its own set of vague criteria. They can be named to an endowed chair.

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