

Becoming a Full Professor  
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I'm a full professor in a university. For those not familiar with how the professor ranks are set up, typically it works as follows: You get hired as an assistant professor. You are on probationary status for six years, with a couple of reappointment decisions made during that time--so there are no guarantees that you'll make it through the probationary period, although most do. After the probationary period, your record of accomplishment is reviewed at the department, college, and university levels and you are either granted tenure, permanent status, or it ends there for you. If you are denied tenure, you probably are given a year to find other employment. Along with tenure, you are usually promoted to associate professor. There is one more promotion possibility, to full professor. No guarantees with that: a good number of faculty--I don't know the exact percentage--remain associate professors for the remainder of their careers. For the most part, salary follows rank, though there are more than a few exceptions to that.

Faculty at my university are represented by a union, and the criteria for making reappointment, tenure, and promotion decisions are a matter of negotiation between the union and the university. As things currently work, individual programs, departments, and colleges can play with that agreement--add specificity, and even change the criteria, as long as, so it goes, they don't make the standards more rigorous than those negotiated. I've never been able to follow the rationale for that arrangement. Both sides ought to play by the rules agreed to; any add-ons by one side or the other are unjustified. But as far as I can tell, no one I work with shares my perspective.

This past year, the faculty committee in my college responsible for matters related to faculty concerns developed a proposal that specifies the criteria for promotion from associate to full professor. The idea is that the proposal will be adopted by departments and/or the college as a whole and its provisions, in combination with those negotiated, will become the standards for assessing applications of associate professors to become full professors.

I volunteered to be on a work group in my department to review that proposal. Prior to the group's first meeting, I wrote a

statement that outlines my perspective on criteria for assessing applications for promotion to full professor in general and the college committee's proposal in particular. This writing includes that statement along with a follow-up statement I submitted to the group following that first meeting.

Much of what is here is not of general interest and won't make sense absent an understanding of the particulars of my college. My suggestion to readers is to push through that, keep going. What I hope to communicate in this writing is not what is going on in my immediate context, or even what ought to happen with promotions to full professor. Rather, I hope this writing communicates in a general way what it's like in the university these years.

The basic contention in the statements I include below is that the way we promote professors serves to maintain the left-of-center ideological and operational orthodoxy currently in place in the university. It is one tactic in an overall strategy to institutionalize, permanently embed, in higher education what has come to be known popularly as political correctness. Other means include 1) controlling hiring to make sure that people with "wrong" perspectives never get on the faculty in the first place and discriminating in hiring against individuals in the group currently deserving of disfavor--white gentiles, particularly the men among them, or as they are called in the parlance of the day, "white males"; and 2) creating offices, career lines, and organizations, and instituting curricular requirements, directed at promoting the neo-Marxist concept of "social justice" (an egalitarian and collectivist ideal), inculcating the ideology of diversity, stamping out white privilege and generally "de-Europeanizing" America, and eradicating among white students their virulent and ubiquitous racism. It might be noted that the idea of diversity in the university most certainly does not include philosophical or ideological diversity, or any concern for, say, how many conservative Christians, or low income or rural whites, are on the faculty.

A secondary contention in what I offer below, mostly tacit, is that the current full professor promotion system is, call it, pseudo-rigorous: it looks tough to get through, but as a matter of fact, even if you aren't any great shakes as a scholar, if you plug on with middling diligence and don't make waves you'll very likely get through the system just fine and become a full professor.

Last, you'll pick up my concern for the way the majority uses

voting to silence outliers and force them to go along with the program. If you have the numbers, put what you want up to a vote --the "clean" label for what you are doing is democracy, or the democratic process--and you win the day and everybody has to go along with you. If for some reason you can't ignore the naysayers, which is strategy one (a way of doing that is if they insist on being heard ask them for their "input" and then toss it in the wastebasket), put their proposals up to a quick vote--no need to debate the merits of what they want, that would take up valuable time and just muddy the water--and vote them down and in the process get rid of them, and then move right on with your agenda.

All to say, if you actually meet some full professors some time, don't be surprised if they strike you as being pretty much all alike in outlook and you aren't exactly dazzled by their intellect and insight (me included, I worry) and they seem to have no problem with stifling difference and compelling conformity in an institution, the university, that nominally values academic freedom.

In truth, I don't think anything you'll read here will have any effect on my colleagues. They know all this; they simply don't want it; the system is working for them as it is; I'm not one of them, why pay any attention to me. As for raising quality standards, why should people with less than top tier talent and work ethic want to impose that on themselves? They aren't stupid. I suppose that if this thought is of any worth it will be to give readers from outside the university a better idea of what is going on in our universities, at least from my perspective.

So, first the statement to the work group and then the follow-up. I'll set them in and put them in smaller type to underscore that they were submissions.

I worked for two years in recent times on the Faculty Evaluation Committee [a college committee] reviewing RTP [Reappointment, Tenure, Promotions] applications. I came away from that experience with a very high respect for the CBA [Collective Bargaining Agreement] standards. They provide guidance without imposing bean-counting, one-size-fits-all-for-all-time requirements that stifle individual difference and lock in a definition of the professoriate that should be allowed to evolve.

It was my experience on the FEC that regardless of what the specific standards for promotion and tenure are supposed

to be, the Committee members used platonic ideals of a sort to direct their yes-no RTP judgments, or at least were strongly influenced by them. They would compare a candidate to their largely inarticulate image/concept of, say, a tenured professor and make the call, "Yes, this candidate matches up well enough" and then find particulars in the papers that would justify that determination. Or, of course, do the reverse. All to say, while you can try to compel reviewers to stay within objective criteria, you are never going to take these kinds of overall assessments out of the review process. And I don't think that is a bad thing. I trust human beings more than attempts to replace them with lists and quantifications and matrices and the like. Determinations of quality, merit, whether in the public or private spheres of life, always involve subjective judgment. What's great literature? a great marriage? great scholarship?--those are judgment calls. There isn't just one definition of greatness, excellence, exemplary achievement; they take many forms. Which underscores the need to ensure that the wisest, the fairest, among us are the ones making the judgments about RTP.

My experience is that the CBA is friendlier to faculty, to call it that, than a rubric-like list of specific criteria. In fact, I know of no one who applied for full professor and didn't get it, and this goes back years. There is the thinking that a specific list will make it more difficult for an unsupportive administrator--a department chair, a dean--to impede a promotion; the candidate can come back with "I met all the specified qualifications." Sounds good, but there are problems. A list that works for one faculty member may not work for another. Anybody putting together a specific list of criteria has to take into account that they could be unintentionally doing in a fellow faculty member who is excellent but not on these specific terms. More, a list, whatever it is, gives people a handy set of weapons to use against you. The professor role is very broadly defined--teaching, service, and research/scholarship. If all the competencies in those areas are spelled out, somewhere in there every faculty member comes up short, at least arguably. If I'm an administrator and I like you, I punch up your strengths in the list and overlook your weak points on the list. If I don't like you, I do the reverse, and you've given me really good objective-sounding, defensible, easily employed ways to it, the list. I point to one and say, "Doesn't match up here"--no fuss, no muss. I'm in a weaker position if I have to

construct a sentences-and-paragraphs negative critique of your work, which you can counter in a grievance--or threaten to counter, which is often just as good--with your own sentences-and-paragraphs rebuttal along with those of supporters. It becomes more of a he/she claims-they claim situation, one interpretation of the standards versus others, and that works to the your favor, puts you on more of an equal plane. Too, if an administrator, or committee, has to marshal an argument rather than simply point to a specific criterion and say "Didn't get the numbers here," it involves more work, and unless somebody is really out to get you, they may well decide not to go through all that bother.

One of the biggest impressions I was left with from the Faculty Evaluation Committee experience was that the RTP system was set up for faculty success if they used it--actually applied for tenure or promotion or sabbatical, whatever it is, didn't sit back and sulk or feel victimized, and went after it hard, including letting it be known that they were ready to employ the grievance provisions. Nothing is foolproof; if somebody is out to do you in, they can make it tough for you, perhaps even block your career, no matter what system is in place. But in the main, faculty have fared very well under the CBA and, before that, the Officers Handbook (prior to the collective bargaining agreement, the statement of rules and regulations in the university--the CBA has tended to mirror it).

In any case, it is certainly a more complicated matter than, "Well, this will clarify what it means to be a full professor." We need to be very careful to think deeply about the possible unintended negative consequences of changes in the system, even those that appear on first blush to be incidental, before we institute them.

My view is that the associate and full professorships are not different in kind; they don't involve distinctly different requirements, accomplishments, and responsibilities. Rather, a full professorship is more a matter of the acknowledgment of someone's continued and evolving excellent work. So it isn't so much that a full professor is different or better than an associate or assistant professor. It is good that the CBA has not attempted to differentiate associate and full professors as if they were two ranks or specialties in the military.

Prescribing that scholarship be disseminated in certain forums--"respected publishing houses, and articles in peer-reviewed journals"--shapes the direction, the content, the

substance, of scholarship. The nature of scholarship under this standard must be such that it conforms to what is acceptable, preferred, by commercial publishers and the editors and reviewers of establishment journals; that is to say, it must be of the sort that pleases the people currently in power, and that retards innovation and reform. This standard discounts other forms of dissemination--the Internet, public speaking, op-ed columns, didactic fiction, self-publishing (sometimes the only way to get needed ideas into the public discourse), and so on. It is a narrow, and dated, view of the professoriate. And it goes a great distance toward equating the quality and impact of scholarship with the dissemination vehicle: if you publish in the "right" places, that is quality; and if you don't, that is not quality. The measure of a full professor, any faculty member, should be the quality and impact of their scholarship and not primarily --or, as it too often plays out in practice these years, completely--by the fact that the current establishment, with its ideology, its politics, its agenda, gives it a stamp of approval. I've seen too much pap in refereed journals to assume that something published in them is truly meritorious.

Beyond that, and this is a major concern for me, pushing faculty into discipline-, or academic-field self-definitions, or dissemination outlets, discourages interdisciplinary and other integrative, and creative, scholarship. As careers mature--and we are talking about maturity here, a full professor--scholarship may move beyond the traditional definitions of a field and interconnect with other fields or even redefine the field or create a new field. Work in these directions can make significant contributions to both theory and practice. We need to be sure not to create standards or criteria that have the effect of discouraging or closing off scholarly inquiry of this sort. We need to be humble enough to ensure that our own limited visions do not retard the visions of those who will follow us in the profession.

The same goes for teaching. We need to give it room to evolve. My experience on the FEC was that the quality of teaching was equated with the summary statistics from the instrument used to record student evaluations of teaching. The numbers were given great credence: a 4.3 [on a 1-5 scale] is better teaching than a 3.8. Yet there was no reliability and validity data accompanying these decades-old instruments, nor was there any analysis of the assumptions

about good teaching that underlie them. Nor was there any consideration of the weight that should be given to student judgments. The best books, the best technological and scientific advances, the best anything, do not necessarily have a one-to-one fit with what the clients or consumers think is best. The best films are not necessarily the summer blockbusters. It is more complicated than that. And the consequences of a strong reliance on the opinions of students--who, in many of our courses, are supposed to be learning about teaching, not already experts on it--for assessment and reward of faculty need to be examined. For instance, if students are the ones that decide what my teaching is worth and I need a 5 rating from them, whether I realize it or not, I'm going to think twice about telling them something they don't want to hear about themselves or the world or give them anything but a high grade. And generally, more than is healthy, I spend a lot of my time thinking about how well students like me. What makes this complicated is that peer review isn't perfect either. History shows, in all areas of life, that peers, human beings like us all and prone to be entrapped in their own preconceptions, can be wrong. So while we want to tap student and peer perceptions, we have to be careful about treating them as gospel. Which gets us back into human judgment and the importance of both wisdom and humility--we don't know everything, the evolution of human understanding and morality didn't end with us, we're not the last word on how life should be conducted.

This set of criteria unfairly changes the rules during the game for faculty. Someone going up for full professor has, in all likelihood, been here a long time. Suddenly, the criteria for promotion change, and they change in response to the assumptions and predilections of people many of whom are not his or her peers, that is to say, not tenure-track faculty. These criteria reflect the tendency currently--troubling to me--to institutionalize particular favored orthodoxies and ways and force others to give their hearts and minds and bodies over to them. An example in this proposal, the standard related to "[i]nfusion of diversity themes into teaching practices, curricula, and content." I believe it fair to assume that means teach diversity, promote diversity; that's a way to get promoted here. From a writing I posted on my web site recently ["How University Academics Think"]:

Diversity is a central construct in an

ideological/political movement that has taken form over just the past several decades, since the Bakke Supreme Court case in 1978. It is not a neutral term, nor is it the only viable term (cultural pluralism is one alternative). Indeed, diversity as a construct, its genesis, its place in a movement, its implications for policy, what its proponents and critics contend about it, along with considerations of alternative perspectives from which to view racial and cultural difference, should be studied in an atmosphere of free and open dialogue and debate. That approach is consistent with the history of the American university, at least at its best. If diversity is propagandized, inculcated, preached, that is not the American university's way. That is someplace else's way. History has shown us that when there is no debate, no visible difference in perspective, no dissenting voice--and that has been the case around diversity--there is oppression. A university should be the setting for unfettered explorations of all sides of any matter of current social and cultural import, and the articulation of all points of view free from intimidation and reprisal. Might has been in the hands of the diversity advocates, but might does not make right, and it absolutely should not make right in a university.

In addition to intimidation, marginalization, and demonization, one of the major ways might is exercised in the university is majority vote. Put something up for a vote and in the process silence dissent, compel conformity, dictate adherence, stifle freedom of inquiry and expression, squelch freedom of conscience, and deny academic freedom.

My own view is to go with the CBA requirements for RTP as assessment criteria for full professor, period. No college- or department-specific requirements. Beyond what has been discussed above, a full professor is a University of Vermont rank and responsibility, not a program, department, or college one. We recommend to the university whether we think a candidate is worthy, but we don't make the final call, the university does. Also, now with collective bargaining, I'm uncomfortable with one side, in this case the faculty, operating out of standards other than those negotiated or, after the fact, unilaterally changing them, no matter how slight the alteration.

What to do?

Before our department approves anything, it should get clear on the rationale and status of criteria approved by the College. Specifically, what is the rationale for a change from the CBA? What need prompts this proposal, and how does this proposal serve that need? What are the goals of this proposal, and what justifies these goals? Also, terms should be clearly defined (e.g., supplementary criteria? what exactly does that mean?) Included in a rationale should be a discussion of the extent to which this proposal promotes, or retards, individual uniqueness, academic freedom, intellectual integrity, innovation and change, and philosophical and ideological difference. Second, what is the relationship between college guidelines and department guidelines? Can a department operate on different standards than the college, should it?

And last, we ought to engage in serious and extended dialogue and debate about RTP criteria generally and for full professor specifically. Something of this import is worth more than a fifteen minute item at a faculty meeting ending in a quick (and, the pattern in recent years, unanimous) vote.

If the college or department adopts something other than the CBA standards, its employment optional for candidates for full professor. They should have the choice to be judged by these standards or the standards as outlined in the CBA. They should not be compelled to use someone else's add-ons.

Now the follow-up to this statement, which I submitted prior to the next week's meeting:

The issue as I see it is what, if anything, to do with the possibilities opened up by the CBA stipulation, "Any additional criteria specified in college, school, unit and department guidelines shall supplement the above list [of evaluation criteria for tenure-track and tenured faculty]." Rather than one-size-fits-all lists of "must-conform-to's," a better way forward, I believe, is for the department to affirm a set of principles that will guide its implementation of CBA guidelines with regard to candidates for full professor. Some possibilities along this line:

- The department is committed to adhering to the faculty promotion criteria outlined in the CBA agreement. It is also committed to continually assess those criteria and, where

advisable, working with union representatives to modify them.

- The fundamental criterion for measuring candidates for full professor is that, in achievement, capability, and potential, they demonstrate, at the highest level, *quality* worthy of a full professor in teaching and advising, scholarship, and service. Of particular importance is the scholarship dimension of this most senior rank.
- There is no single measure of quality. It can take many forms, and its determination inevitably involves subjective judgments.
- The department is committed to academic freedom and integrity as well as philosophical, ideological, and intellectual diversity.
- The department is committed to innovation and change as well as tradition and continuity. One value is not *a priori* of higher worth than the other.
- Both candidates and those that assess them are responsible for compiling evidence and rationales with respect to the quality of an application for full professor. If candidates are denied promotion, the individuals and elements responsible for that denial should provide detailed reasons for it. Candidates are encouraged to employ the grievance option when they deem a denial unjustified.