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FACULTY AGENCY IN APPLYING FOR PROMOTION TO PROFESSOR

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose In the United States, faculty who wish to pursue promotion to the rank of professor do so without clear guidance or structure. Even the timing of such a process is nebulous. As such, an individual engages in agentic action to pursue the rank.

Background This study examined the experiences of faculty members who chose to pursue the application process to be promoted to professor but were rejected or dissuaded.

Methodology Utilizing a case study of one institutional setting, we conducted 10 in-depth qualitative interviews.

Contribution Very little is known about the process of promotion to full professor in the U.S. and even less empirical research exists. This study advances knowledge of the process and the experiences of those undertaking it.

Findings We learned that cues from the social context greatly influenced these faculty members' sense of agency.

Keywords promotion, faculty rank, agency

“IF YOU DESERVE IT YOU SHOULD DO IT”: FACULTY AGENCY IN APPLYING FOR PROMOTION TO PROFESSOR

Full professors represent senior faculty on most campuses. Full professors typically represent top scholars in their fields, often nationally and internationally recognized for their work (Clark, 1987). Senior faculty members also provide mentoring to junior faculty members, expertise to their students, and leadership to their institutions; in short, “senior faculty members are integral to the progress and success of higher education” (Trower, 2011a, p. 3).

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In 2014, 182,414 individuals held the rank of professor or “full professor” in the United States – or 36% of the total tenure-stream faculty in institutions of higher education (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2016). Of these full professors, a staggering 73% were men and 82% were White (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2016), pointing to disparities in gender and race at this highest academic rank. At the same time, associate professors – and women associate professors, in particular – continue to be reported as the least satisfied among all ranks (Trower, 2011a), leading to what some have seen as a “crisis” as many of these individuals battle fatigue, feeling over-worked, and under-appreciated (Wilson, 2012). While senior faculty are indisputably important to academia, many have wondered why more faculty do not apply to the rank of professor and why more are not promoted.

Whereas the tenure-promotion process in most academic settings in the United States requires that application for tenure be submitted after a certain interval, such as six or seven years (Chait, 2002; Clark, 1987; Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006), the application to move from the rank of associate professor to professor is not mandatory (Clark, 1987). Faculty members can choose when to apply for promotion to professor, if ever, and rarely is a suggested time interval provided (Clark, 1987). In turn, the decision to apply for the rank of professor, or “full” professor, is one that is determined most often by the individual faculty member. At the same time, a faculty member’s choices are often shaped by the context in which he or she is situated (O’Meara & Campbell, 2011; O’Meara, Terosky, & Neumann, 2008). In other words, the individual faculty member will decide when and if to apply for a promotion to full professor, which may often be influenced by external cues from the surrounding environment about his or her probability at receiving the promotion (Gardner & Blackstone, 2013). In this way, the individual faculty member’s sense of agency plays a predominant role in the decision to pursue a promotion. In relation to academic faculty, agency has been described as “a reflexive purposefulness, a thoughtful directedness born of personal desire and valuing” (Neumann, 2009, p. 139).

The extent to which one’s actions and experiences are shaped by social structure as opposed to individual agency has long been debated within sociology and across various social scientific disciplines (Bunzel, 2008; Mortimer, Staff, & Lee, 2005). On the structural side, scholars note that cultural values and other social patterns and arrangements shape individuals’ opportunities, constraints, and actions. Indeed, the importance of social context in shaping individual experience is at the core of sociology (Henslin, 2012). Yet, scholars differ on the extent to which they believe one has the capacity to exercise agency in taking advantage of the opportunities or overcoming the constraints that structural arrangements provide.

Within academic settings, a university’s organizational structure shapes an individual faculty person’s experience by, for example, institutionalizing gatekeeper roles such as those performed by promotion/tenure committees and academic administrators when a faculty member applies for promotion. Yet, individual faculty members also enjoy some degree of agency when it comes to promotion, particularly at the level of promotion to “full” professor. More to the point, in applying for tenure a faculty member typically has one chance at a given institution in an “up or out” scenario – receive promotion and tenure or leave the institution (Chait & Ford, 1982). In applying to the rank of full professor, however, there is no set limit on the number of attempts one can pursue, meaning that a faculty member may apply and re-apply for full professor in a given institution (Clark, 1987). At the same time, re-applying after an initial failure is more than just putting together a new dossier: as Bieber and Lawrence (1992) explained, it is also about “losing face and reputation” (p. 31). And, for many, adding insult to injury is the loss of pay for these individuals in that delayed-promotion faculty have been found to receive below average raises each year (Bieber & Lawrence, 1992; Blackburn & Lawrence, 1995). From this perspective, a faculty member’s sense of agency may be even more acute as he or she makes the purposeful choice to be re-examined by one’s peers and institution after an initial failed attempt.

In this study, we asked what role faculty agency played in applying for promotion to professor for 10 faculty members at one institution after being initially dissuaded or rejected. We begin with an over-

view of the literature related to full professor and the promotion process as well as that of faculty agency. Methods are then presented along with a discussion of the findings. Implications for policy, practice, and future research are then presented.

PROMOTION TO FULL

Full professors represent nearly a quarter of all faculty members in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2010) and provide expertise and leadership as well as a sense of legacy and institutional wisdom (Bland & Bergquist, 1997; Rice & Finkelstein, 1993). At the same time, the dearth of literature related to the experience of full professors – or the process to achieve the rank – is noteworthy. While a plethora of literature exists about the experience of assistant professors and the process of gaining tenure, a sort of “benign neglect” (Bland & Bergquist, 1997) or “ambivalence” (Rice and Finkelstein, 1993) appears to surround the full professor and, more generally, senior faculty in academia.

In defining this group of faculty, Rice and Finkelstein (1993, p.9) explained:

The most traditional definition of senior faculty is an organizational one; that is, those faculty who have achieved seniority in the employing institution as defined by tenure and the rank of full professor.

Beyond, seniority, full professors also tend to be those who represent a reputation – as judged by peers – that is international, generally also equating to higher salaries and other benefits, such as larger office spaces, involvement in important university committees, and even more access to resources (Bieber & Lawrence, 1992; Clark, 1987).

While there does not exist a predictive formula for ascertaining who will pursue the rank of professor, Blackburn and Lawrence (1995) pointed out that these individuals tend to be highly productive in regard to scholarly output. Indeed, an Internet search for criteria for promotion to professor will demonstrate that scholarly reputation is a requisite trait of this rank at most four-year institutions of higher education in the U.S. At the same time, many have pointed to a need to reconsider the qualifications to earn this rank (Jaschik, 2010), including a stronger emphasis on service or teaching.

The process by which to achieve the rank of full professor is neither particularly easy nor clear, however. The process of promotion to professor at most institutions can be said to be one surrounded by ambiguity (Gardner & Blackstone, 2013). While the tenure-promotion process to associate professor is often dictated by a specific time period, no such time period exists at most institutions for the process of promotion to full professor. For example, Clark (1987) stated that promotion to professor could happen “perhaps after ten, twelve, or fifteen years” (p. 212). Certainly, context is central; expectations to gain promotion at a research university may be quite different from that of a liberal arts institution or a community college (Clark, 1987). In this way, institutional type often determines not only the mission of the institution but also the reward system of its faculty (O’Meara, 2011).

If expectations for time are unclear, the criteria for achieving promotion to full professor may be even more fraught with uncertainty. While teaching, research, and service are still examined in the majority of research institutions as criteria for promotion, there is often an expectation that a faculty member pursuing full professor will reach a certain level of prominence in his or her scholarly reputation – achieving a national or international reputation (Link, Swann, & Bozeman, 2008), which is generally evidenced through publications in prestigious journals or citations of one’s work (Fishe, 1998). At the same time, what indicates such a level of reputation remains shrouded in ambiguity (Gardner & Blackstone, 2013).

This ambiguity can be particularly problematic for those faculty members from underrepresented groups, as it is often ambiguity in criteria that can trigger implicit bias in evaluators (Lamont, Kalev, Bowden, & Fosse, 2004; Valian, 1998). Valian (1998) explained, “Our notions of how to do a job are usually influenced by earlier jobholders’ performance. Thus, we are tempted to see the traits of pre-

vious jobholders as necessary for doing the job well, rather than seeing them as one set of many that could be effective” (p. 318). In other words, if only white men have held the rank of professor in a given unit’s past, one’s implicit biases may influence decisions about who should hold the rank now. Scholars, like Valian, see these implicit biases – or, in her words, schemas – as playing a determining role in how few underrepresented individuals hold the highest academic ranks. In fact, researchers have shown these clear disparities between men and women academics as well as white faculty and faculty of color (Easterly & Pemberton, 2008; Long, Allison, & McGinnis, 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% and faculty of color only 16% of the total in 2009-2010 (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). For women faculty, Buch, Huet, Rorrer, and Roberson (2011) explained the problem as one in which they “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).

Another distinguishing characteristic of the process of promotion to full professor is that it is voluntary. Unlike the tenure-promotion process to associate professor that is often required after an initial probationary period, those who seek promotion to full professor choose to do so and often do so within their own timetable. Indeed, many faculty members may choose to remain at the associate level for the remainder of their careers, giving rise to the term “terminal associate professor,” or one who either opts out of going forward for promotion to full professor or is so advised (Clark, 1987; Miller, 1987).

How many individuals actually apply for full professor in a given year and are successful is quite unknown, as is the rate of failure. Certainly, not all who apply are successful; nor should they be. At the same time, a sense of “stigma” and “second-class citizenship status” has been attributed to those faculty who either fail to earn promotion or who are “frozen in rank” (Blackburn & Lawrence, 1995), giving rise to myths about faculty “deadwood” and a concern about the lack of vitality of senior faculty (Baldwin, DeZure, Shaw, & Moretto, 2008; Baldwin, Lunceford, & Vanderlinden, 2005; Bland & Bergquist, 1997; Rice & Finkelstein, 1993). And, while there are certainly a significant number of associate professors who are happy to remain at their current rank and continue to do what matters most to them (Bland & Bergquist, 1997; Jaschik, 2010), the level of dissatisfaction measured by institutions across the U.S. at this rank (Trower, 2011a, 2011b) points to concerns worthy of examination.

While the rewards to those who gain promotion to full are plentiful, the risks are also daunting. Given the lack of clarity that surrounds expectations to gain full professor and the lack of timetable to do so, an individual who chooses to apply for promotion is often faced with many uncertainties.

FACULTY AGENCY IN PURSUING PROMOTION TO FULL

The concept of choice is prominent in the individual faculty member’s experience with the promotion process. If, when, and why one faculty member chooses to pursue promotion over another may be best explained through the framework of agency.

Agency can be defined as a sense of a power over one’s work (Elder, 1997) or the active process of choice in one’s life (Mortimer & Shanahan, 2003). Agency has also been utilized in the academic literature as it relates to faculty in explaining faculty members’ choices about their learning in post-tenure environments (Neumann, 2009), engagement in service work among faculty of color (Baez, 2000), and in faculty decision-making related to work and family (O’Meara & Campbell, 2011).

The sociological foundations of the study of agency are rooted in theoretical debates over the primacy of social structure or individual initiative in determining an individual’s behaviors and experience (O’Donnell, 2010). These debates have been applied in life course studies (Marshall, 2000), thus lending to a temporal basis for understanding one’s choices in a given context as influenced by “a sense of past experiences, current circumstances, and projections of future” (O’Meara & Campbell,

2011, p. 449). Agency is also rooted in the context in which one is situated (Marshall, 2005). This context provides cues to the individual about the range of choices possible and the potential success of such choices (Elder, 1994, 1997). For example, a faculty member who is considering applying for full professor may do so based on the cues that she or he may be successful in this bid, while another may avoid it due to dissenting cues received.

Similarly, agency is also shaped by social status. As Hitlin and Elder (2007) explained, “Members of privileged groups have more social opportunity to shape their lives and direct their actions than the less endowed. Males, whites, and those with money are structurally more likely to have the resources and capital to exercise agency” (p. 39). From this perspective, academia has historically privileged White men over other groups, as evidenced by their predominant representation in the senior levels of the professoriate, and, as such, may feel most comfortable exercising agency within this context.

Nevertheless, scholars like Baez (2000) have taken a critical perspective of agency in regard to junior-level faculty of color choosing to engage in race-related service work when they were given explicit and implicit cues to avoid it. These faculty members used their agency to engage in activities that had personal and professional meaning to them. In this sense, agency can reflect a reflexive property – that individuals can shape social forces as much as they can be shaped by them (Neumann & Pereira, 2009). It is this understanding of agency – the abilities and efforts of faculty members to contribute productively to the construction or reconstruction of their environments (Neumann & Pereira, 2009) – that frames this study.

METHODS

The research question guiding this study was, “How did faculty members who applied for promotion to full professor experience agency in their decision-making?” In particular, we were interested in learning about agentic decision-making from faculty members who pursued promotion but were initially denied or dissuaded from doing so. In this way, we sought to understand the sense of reflexive agency engendered in these faculty members’ choices and the contexts that influenced them.

We utilized a qualitative case study approach to this study as it best allowed for an understanding of (a) “the *meaning*, for participants in the study, of the events, situations, and actions they are involved with and of the accounts that they give of their lives and experiences,” (b) “the particular *context* within which the participants act, and the influence that this context has on their actions,” (c) “*unanticipated* phenomena and influences, and (d) “the *process* by which events and actions take place” (Maxwell, 2005, pp. 17-18). We chose one institution for examination as it allowed for a more in-depth examination of one context or setting in which the participants experienced the promotion process. Given how expectations for promotion tend to be discipline- and institution-specific (Clark, 1987), the choice to examine one institution’s setting was appropriate. In this way, the study was of a specific case. A case study, according to Merriam (2009), is an “in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p. 40) or a single entity. More specifically, this case study was instrumental in nature, wherein the case allowed for further insight into the issue of promotion to full professor (Merriam, 2009).

The specific case examined, hereafter referred to as Land Grant University (LGU), is classified by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching as a RU/H or a Research University with high research activity (The Carnegie Foundation, 2010), with aspirations to further grow its research profile, as reflected in its most recent strategic plan. When the study was conducted in the fall of 2011, a total of 577 full-time faculty were employed at LGU, reflecting a predominately White institution in its racial make-up (7% faculty of color) and an uneven gender balance in the associate and full professor ranks (41% women and 20% women, respectively), with an almost equal proportion of women to men at the assistant professor rank (48% women).

The participants in the study included 10 faculty members who had applied for promotion to full professor at LGU and were either denied or dissuaded from doing so. The 10 faculty members had

responded to an email that we sent to all associate and full professors at LGU requesting participation in the study. We were purposeful in including both associate and full ranks as we wanted to understand the experiences of those who had attempted to be promoted but were unsuccessful as well as those who had been successful.

The 10 participants included six men and four women, including two faculty of color. The faculty also represented disciplinary diversity, with six in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, one in the social sciences, and three in the humanities. We identify the demographics at these levels due to confidentiality, given the small number of women in many fields and the few faculty of color at LGU.

Of the 10 faculty members, seven had received promotion at the time we spoke, whereas one did not and two had planned to reapply. Table 1 provides more detail and pseudonyms for each participant.

Table 1. Study participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Disciplinary Group	Initial Experience	Promoted
Paul	Man	White	Social Sciences	Discouraged but applied	Yes
Bob	Man	White	Humanities	Discouraged but applied	Yes
Tim	Man	Non-White	STEM	Withdrew and reapplied	Yes
Jill	Woman	White	STEM	Withdrew	Not yet
Stacy	Woman	Non-White	STEM	Withdrew and reapplied	Yes
Brian	Man	White	Humanities	Rejected and reapplied	Yes
Thomas	Man	White	STEM	Withdrew	No - will not reapply
Peter	Man	White	Humanities	Rejected and reapplied	Yes
Angela	Woman	White	STEM	Rejected and reapplied	Yes
Joan	Woman	White	STEM	Withdrew	Not yet

The mean number of years these faculty were employed at LGU was 19.8. The average number of years before these individual sought promotion was 12.5 from the time of their initial hire, or approximately 6.5 years after receiving promotion to associate professor.

We interviewed the participants face-to-face after securing informed consent. Interviews lasted 60-120 minutes and were guided by a semi-structured protocol asking about their promotion application experiences. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. We analyzed the data through the use of the constant comparative method, “a research design for multi-data sources, which is like analytic induction in that the formal analysis begins early in the study and is nearly completed by the end of data collection” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 66). The steps of the constant comparative method, according to Glaser (1978) include: (1) Begin collecting data; (2) Find key issues, events, or activities in the data that become main categories for focus; (3) Collect data that provide many incidents of the categories of focus; (4) Write about the categories explored, keeping in mind past incidents while searching for new categories; (5) Work with the data and emerging model to discover relationships; and (6) Sample, code, and write with the core categories in mind. The steps of the constant comparative method occur simultaneously during data collection until categories are saturated and writing begins.

In accordance with Glaser's (1978) method, we continued interviewing participants until we had reached saturation of our categories: in our case, this point was reached after interviewing 10 participants in the examined context of LGU. In addition, we utilized Glaser's steps in data analysis, which allowed for emergent themes to develop from the data and provided a means by which large amounts of data were compressed into meaningful units for analysis. We complemented this analysis with an analytical lens using the framework of agency. More to the point, each of the authors participated in collecting data and began the analytical process while interviews were held. At the end of the data collection phase, each author independently compiled a list of key issues and themes that emerged after reviewing all transcripts. We then met to compare and contrast our independently created lists of themes and to discuss how our individual perspectives aligned or were related. We then created one final list of themes that reflected our collective perspectives.

From the perspective of seeing ourselves as the instrument in our study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003), we disclose that we were both at the rank of associate professor with tenure while in the midst of collecting data for this study and neither of us had yet pursued a promotion to full professor, but both of us have this goal in mind. We did not know any of the individuals on a personal level but had some professional involvement with two individuals, although not aware of their experiences pursuing promotion prior to conducting the study. Specifically, we were tasked with initiating this study at an institution for which a grant was received to better improve the promotion and advancement of faculty members. It was brought to our attention that LGU had issues in women advancing to full professor, in particular, and we were interested in understanding why this was occurring.

We obtained trustworthiness of the analysis through peer debriefing, in which we coded each transcript independently and then compared our analysis jointly. During this session, we each brought our individual accounts of emerging themes. We then compared our conceptualizations, finding that while we didn't necessarily use the same verbiage to describe the emergent themes and categories, we did agree on overall themes. In addition, member checking occurred, wherein we sent key informants an overview of themes from their individual transcripts for verification. These four individuals responded to e-mail requests by stating that they were in complete agreement with our conceptualizations of the data and that these were in line with their personal and professional experiences.

Limitations to this study included the small sample from one institution and one that was unable to discern major disciplinary differences, due to the small sample size. In addition, given the lack of institutional data to point to any recorded instances of application withdrawal or failure, we had to depend solely on self-report of individuals who responded to our request for participation.

FINDINGS

To pursue a promotion to full professor inherently entails the exercise of one's agency, given that there is typically no requirement nor timeline in which to pursue the rank. In this way, all faculty members in our study were agentic in making the decision to apply for full professor. As agency can be viewed as an intersection between the individual's choice embedded in and influenced by the surrounding social context (Marshall, 2005), the faculty members we interviewed also discussed the influences their surrounding environments had upon their decision-making and choices to pursue promotion or withdraw.

Below we describe these (a) influences upon their internal decision-making to pursue application to the rank of full professor, (b) the cues from the social context they received, and (c) their ultimate decision or agentic perspective in relation to these internal and social cues. Given the strong connection between context and agency (Marshall, 2005), we begin with more details about the context for our study – LGU – and its influence upon the participants.

THE CASE AND CONTEXT: LGU

I think there ought to be a little less opposition to successful people moving right up. I guess part of it is a tension from maybe the way LGU used to be. I think LGU has been gradually changing to having a higher research expectation than it used to. I think that's pretty clear. And I think the days of having - well, for lack of a better term - "a gentleman's agreement" that we'll just all put in our time and people will get promoted without necessarily earning it, just putting in their time, are over.

In many ways, this quote from Paul aptly describes the context in which these 10 faculty members found themselves. At the time of the study, LGU found itself caught in between two worlds: how it "used to be," in the words of this faculty member, and a present in which a stronger emphasis on research is expected and rewarded. While never ranked among top institutions in periodicals such as *US News and World Report*, LGU nevertheless has aspirations to do so. In its last strategic plan, LGU officials expressed their intention to be ranked in the top 50 of research universities in the U.S. This desire to gain prestige and rankings is also commensurate with the economic and political context in the state in which LGU finds itself: one in which public higher education has faced deep cuts in the past 20 years and faces an uncertain future economically.

From this perspective, Paul's quote above points to a past at LGU that rewarded faculty for longevity to one that is highly defined by a strong reputation in scholarship to gain the rank of professor. Indeed, the tension that he discussed is one that riddles the campus. While LGU was once teaching-centered in its mission and reward structure – much akin to a comprehensive institution – it is now considered research intensive by the Carnegie Foundation (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2007). In the literature, a campus such as LGU has been described as a "striving institution," or an institution that seeks to gain prestige in the academic hierarchy (O'Meara, 2007). These institutions tend to place a heavier emphasis on activities that will gain them more market advantage and prestige – such as research and the procurement of external funding (Brewer, Gates, & Goldman, 2001), which in turn affects the faculty reward system (O'Meara, 2007, 2011). As such, there are two distinct faculty generations at LGU: one that was hired prior to the advent of these striving ambitions with a heavier emphasis on teaching and the one hired since, which is focused more exclusively on scholarly activities. While some may consider faculty as the common denominator of prestige (Clark, 1987), the converse can also be true: "Quality of faculty and work load, in turn, influence research norms and productivity" (Volk, Slaughter, & Thomas, 2001, p. 387). This generational divide between the faculty results in what the social scientist above described as "tension," wherein expectations for faculty work has shifted.

The 10 faculty members in this study represent interesting perspectives on this generational divide. While all participants were hired by LGU prior to 2002, four were hired in the 1980s, four were hired in the 1990s, and two in 2001. When examined in concert with the mission statements of these corresponding years, the changing aspirations of LGU become more evident. For example, during the entirety of the 1980s through 1992 LGU's mission statement in regard to research stated, "Basic and applied research appropriate to [State] is an ongoing responsibility, while other creative endeavors, including basic research of national or international significance, are encouraged." This statement, it should be noted, was mentioned at the end of the paragraph describing the mission of LGU. In other words, nationally and internationally recognized research – often that which is required for the status of full professor (Clark, 1987) – was not expected, only "encouraged."

In 1993 and beyond, however, LGU experienced a dramatic shift in its mission related to scholarship. Indeed, the mission was completely redesigned in 1993 with the first sentence now stating, "Land Grant University is the principal research and graduate institution of the State." While the words "scholarship" or "research" were mentioned twice in the 1980's mission statements, by 2001, these terms appeared no less than seven times.

From a disciplinary perspective, the 10 faculty members in this study also represent noteworthy differences. Six of the participants were members of STEM fields, which have traditionally had a strong

focus on scholarship and external funding – and are male-dominated (Volk et al., 2011), whereas four of the participants were in social science and humanities fields. These latter fields of study tend to be female-dominated (or at least more equally balanced in gender representation) and have a stronger emphasis on undergraduate curriculum and tend to be less connected to the large federal funding pools for external dollars (Volk et al., 2001).

From an individual perspective reflecting social status, all held the terminal degree in their field prior to employment at LGU, although not the Ph.D. in two cases. As stated previously and reflected in Table 1, six participants were men and four were women, which reflects a higher proportion of women in the sample than those who hold the rank of full professor at LGU (80% of full professors at LGU are men). Similarly, a higher proportion of the sample reflected faculty of color (N=2) than that on the LGU campus (93% of faculty are White). Two of the individuals held prior academic appointments before coming to LGU while, for the other eight, this was their first tenure-track appointment. In those two cases, these individuals were allowed to come in with years toward tenure but came in at the assistant and associate level, without tenure. All of the participants described their tenure experiences while at LGU as “typical,” or even “easy,” in the words of one faculty member. Except for the two individuals who had previous academic appointments, all other participants followed the typical six-year process for pursuing associate rank with tenure. Their discussions of the promotion/tenure experience at LGU alluded to relatively understandable and clear expectations to receive promotion and tenure at the rank of associate professor. In all of these cases, however – with the exception of one – no clear criteria existed in their departments about how to achieve the rank of full professor. Stacy explained:

It's funny because on many levels people think the big thing is getting tenure, which it is because now you have your job; you get to keep your job. And many people decide to stop at that point. You don't have to continue. But, when I got my associate rank, I wanted to know what I had to do in the next couple of years to get full. And there's really not any mentoring for that next step. There really isn't.

Despite this lack of clarity and mentoring for pursuing a promotion to full professor at LGU, when we asked participants if more clear criteria would be helpful, not all uniformly agreed. Specifically, two faculty disagreed that more clear criteria would be helpful. One faculty member said, “Well, our department has fought pretty hard to be vague, but that also leaves some room for unprofessional behaviors.” While another stated, “I think the things that we really value are just too difficult to quantify. I think these things need to be subjective. I know that opens other cans of worms, though.” Nevertheless, each and every single participant in this study believed they merited the promotion to professor when they initially decided to pursue it.

INFLUENCES ON THE CHOICE TO APPLY FOR PROMOTION

Unlike the generally lock-step expectation of tenure after a requisite interval, the choice to pursue promotion to full is just that: a choice. The faculty members in the study discussed myriad reasons for their choice to pursue promotion to full professor but all were dictated by external cues they received about success and what would constitute a successful application. Specifically, certain markers of success were seen existing in their disciplines or observed in previous applications to professor in their departments that provided them with cues about their own potential to achieve full professor.

To gain the rank of professor, most often a faculty member is recognized at a national and even international level for scholarly productivity (Long, Allison, & McGinnis, 1993; Miller, 1987), as evidenced through publications, for example, or the awarding of prominent or substantial grants. The participants in our study all discussed feeling that they had reached this external marker of success. Jill explained:

I was encouraged to go up for full by the chair of the department at the time because my research program was going great. I had a lot of money. I had supported my own graduate students. I had even gotten the campus teaching award. I was on every bloody committee from here to Nevada, I think. I was even chairing some inter-

national committees in my own field. I was really productive and working hard. The chair said, "You know, you're as far along as a lot of people are a lot later; let's do this."

In other cases, it was recognition for this body of work from disciplinary groups outside the institution. For example, a STEM faculty member discussed receiving a prominent national award. Most often, though, the participants talked about their high-quality publications in highly competitive outlets. Peter explained, "I'm the only one in this department who's ever published in the [top-rated journal of my discipline] and I had done that before tenure."

Cues also came from inside the faculty members' departments. Several of the participants had observed peers and had gauged themselves to be as productive, if not more productive, than those who had achieved promotion previously. These observations were normative in nature, however, as 9 of the 10 faculty members were from departments that did not have guidelines about timing to pursue promotion. Tim explained, "I thought I was pretty productive and it was the normal length of time in our department [to go up]."

Of note, LGU is an institution with a post-tenure review process every four years after tenure-promotion to associate professor. The faculty members in our study had all gone through at least one review with positive outcomes. A woman faculty member in STEM, Stacy, described her experience with post-tenure review as another indicator of potential success to achieve full professor, stating, "I went through two post-tenure reviews and with the second one I got really, really strong accolades from my supervisor. He told me I was doing an outstanding job."

There was only one faculty member in humanities, Bob, who said that no external cues influenced his decision to pursue promotion. He expressed plainly, "That was a decision I made on my own."

CUES IN THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

Once the decision was made to pursue the rank of professor and the application was started, however, these faculty members all received cues from their surrounding social contexts that belied their earlier decisions. From where and from whom these negative cues emanated varied.

As is typical in most institutions, the application process at LGU consists of the preparation of the dossier, the solicitation of a number of external letters from prominent individuals in the discipline, approval by peers in the department, and approval from the department chair, dean, provost, president, and then the board of trustees. Unlike the majority of other research institutions (Dobbie & Robinson, 2008), LGU is unionized. This union agreement with the administration has allowed for the applicant to view all external letters and to choose among them to send the three "best" beyond the department in the application packet. The committee of peers in the department is able to view all letters, however.

In this way, the participants who decided to pursue the promotion application were able to accurately understand the perceptions of their external evaluators, unmistakably an important part of the deliberation process for promotion and tenure in academia (Rhoades-Catanach & Stout, 2000; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996). One faculty member in the social sciences, Paul, talked about how his chair was actively against his application and tried, in his words, to "thwart" the process. He explained:

He didn't like all the people I suggested to get as far as outside letters so he asked a friend of his to be one of them, somebody he knows quite well. Not surprisingly, of my external letters – there were five – he was the only one who didn't comment on whether I should be promoted. He said, "You know, that's up to you guys," but everybody else was unanimous that it should go through.

For other faculty members, it was the cues about their work that they received from colleagues which ultimately informed their decision: too much teaching, as in the example of Thomas; or too many books and not enough journal articles, in the case of another. For some faculty members, however, the cues they received related to their identities or demographics. Jill's experience, for example, was age-related: "Several of the [external] letters, when I went back and looked at them, said something

about being a ‘promising young scientist’ and that kind of stuff. This word ‘young’ showed up and that’s what the provost took as meaning ‘not accomplished.’” When she talked about the situation further, comparing it to a male colleague’s promotion experience in another unit at the same time, it made her wonder what role gender played in her predominately male discipline:

It was very interesting because he and I came in the same year. Our records were very similar. I mean, we had both been very productive as junior faculty and all this kind of thing; identical ages. And his went flying through.

The faculty members who were asked to withdraw, however, received these cues from various sources. Another STEM woman faculty member, Angela, was told by her chair to wait a bit longer, and she said, “So I did.” Similarly, Peter was told to wait and applied again in four years.

Two faculty members in STEM who were told their application would be turned down by the dean decided to withdraw. Tim said,

I guess it was like November, when the package leaves the department and goes to the dean’s office. The committee chair at the time knocks on my door and he says, “I just had to go to the dean’s office and he’s not going to support your package.” The dean instructed the committee chair to tell me that by the end of the day and I had to decide whether I still wanted the package to go up the chain with a negative letter or whether I wanted to withdraw. So, I was given that choice – which really isn’t a choice at all.

The other STEM faculty member, Joan, explained, “I guess the rationale [the dean] gave the chair was that to be full professor you had to be excellent and I was average.”

THE ULTIMATE DECISION

Ultimately, half of the faculty members withdrew their applications before they became “official” and three of the faculty members were rejected by the end of process. The remaining two faculty members were dissuaded from applying but did so anyway, finally receiving the promotion despite this dissuasion. We wondered what influenced these faculty members’ decisions to withdraw or pursue, particularly in the face of stark opposition for those in the latter category. From this perspective, the agency – or lack thereof – exercised by these faculty members was of interest to us.

For those who were told to withdraw and did so, such as Joan, talked about the defeat she felt after discussing it with her chair: “I said, ‘This is the end for me. I can’t go any higher.’ I left with tears thinking, forget it, I’ll never try again.” She talked about seeing only men receive promotions in her department and seeing the only other woman who attempted it rejected. Angela – the only woman in her department – who was asked to withdraw initially and was reconsidering whether to go up again, explained it this way:

Some poor sucker like me from the inside has to feel compelled to want to do it. I could have just said, “Well, you know, screw them. I’m just going to do, I’m going to just go with the criteria, make my full, and then I’ll deal with the whole women in [STEM] thing.” But I’m not. I’m not going to be here that long if I do.

For one male faculty member in STEM, his request to withdraw led to a lot of bitterness and resentment. When we asked if he would reapply, Thomas said, “It’s ridiculous to even think about it. I’m thinking more about retiring.” When he was told the rationale for his withdrawal it was that he taught and advised “too much” instead of conducting scholarship. Another STEM faculty member, Angela, who was told to withdraw her application, and has not yet reapplied, said, “I consider myself chronically misjudged. Maybe that’s just arrogant and unfair, but that’s the way I view it. I’m not really surprised if I’m undervalued.” Later, she continued, “The eventual outcome that I wouldn’t be promoted is not a shock to me. I think the eventual outcome is that I *will* be promoted. It’s just a question of when and what do I have to do to do it.”

Those who withdrew or were denied, and then reapplied, however, used the initial experience to provide them with more impetus, in Brian’s words, “to show them.” He explained, “It pissed me off. It

got me productive in the sense that, yeah, I'll get a lot of publications in the next few years and just show whoever that I could do it." Jill decided to be proactive about her next attempt, given that she felt she experienced some harassment by a few individuals in the first attempt. She explained,

I went over to the Office of Equal Rights. I said, "I'm not filing grievances but I just want you to know that there is this kind of undertone by a couple of individuals who just constantly like to bash me for no good reason." I sent the Office of Equal Rights a package of things to look at, including the original letters that had gone through two years before that. She looked at the stuff and was very encouraging about going forward. I'm not walking away with my tail between my legs.

Also noteworthy were the two faculty members – both men – who were advised to withdraw but disregarded this advice. Instead, Paul and Bob persevered in their applications and were promoted. When we asked why they made this choice, they responded similarly – fascinatingly enough, using the same phrase: “slam-dunk.” Paul described his application as such a strong case that it couldn't have been turned down. He explained, “It was such a slam-dunk that there was no way anybody could have argued against it with a straight face.” He said, “I wouldn't let anyone stop me. I didn't care about whose toes got stepped on.” Only one male faculty member who was told to withdraw – Thomas - did so. He explained this incident by saying that he belonged on the “wrong side of the fence” in a department culturally and historically divided by teaching and research.

DISCUSSION

If agentic perspectives can be defined as “a set of perspectives or views taken as individuals approach the opportunities and constraints they inevitably find waiting for them in the journey toward achievement of objectives” (Archer, 2003), then the faculty members in this study indubitably exercised agency in relation to their decision-making about applying for full professor. Given that the rank of professor or full professor is one that is optional in a tenure-track faculty member's career path, the choice to pursue promotion is agentic in and of itself. Moreover, given the ambiguity surrounding the expectations to achieve the rank in the departments studied at LGU – and we would hypothesize at most other institutions, as well – the agency required to ultimately decide to pursue such a decision is highly influenced by the external social context and the cues received from it. As such, the participants in the study demonstrated how agency is truly an interplay of the individual's choice nested within the social context (O'Meara, Terrosky, & Neumann, 2008).

Given how interrelated context and agency are, the institutional setting also played an instrumental role in these faculty members' decision-making related to pursuing a promotion. As LGU is an institution that can be described as striving, in that it seeks to gain prestige in the academic hierarchy (O'Meara, 2007), the shifting messages about expectations for scholarly work, also characterized in tensions between faculty generations hired at different time periods in LGU's history, added an additional layer of ambiguity for these faculty.

At the same time, it was interesting to see how power and status may play into agentic decision-making and how much agency one can exercise given his or her social status (Hitlin & Elder, 2007). For example, in our study, only two individuals disregarded the advice of peers or administrators when told to withdraw their applications – these individuals were both men. In almost all other cases, when told to withdraw, those individuals did so. We do not find it a coincidence that most of those who heeded this advice were women – often the only woman or one of few in male-dominated departments. The man who was told to withdraw and did so was one who explained he belonged on the “wrong side of the fence” in a department culturally and historically divided by teaching and research. In this way, those with less power and status – women in male-dominated fields and the more teaching-inclined in research-dominated departments – were those who were most likely to choose to heed withdrawal advice while those with more power and status – men – were more likely to disregard it.

For most of the faculty members, no clear criteria or expectations existed for pursuing a promotion to full professor. The quote above by one of our STEM women pointed to the lack of mentoring and expectations at LGU to pursue this rank. Of course, LGU is not alone in this as most institutions lack mentoring for this step in the professional ladder (Buch et al., 2011). In our minds, this point illustrates the agency required to pursue promotion but also the isolation and ambiguity involved; indeed, without formal expectations, mentoring, or even clear guidelines, there is little else for an individual faculty member to go on. When constant concern has been voiced over the past several decades about the lack of women and faculty of color at the full professor level (e.g. National Science Foundation, 2006; Valian, 1998), it is not surprising that without clarity or guidelines that it is those with the least status and power in academia that must have sufficient agency to overcome these ambiguities. At the same time, if agency is mitigated by the social context and provides the scope of possibilities to the individual or the possible chances for success, those without status and power may never have enough the opportunity to overcome these contexts. It is our contention that these scenarios are those that require more clarity and guidance in promotion expectations. If research has demonstrated how clarity in tenure expectations is strongly related to job satisfaction for women and faculty of color (Trower, 2009), then further research should examine how clarity in promotion expectations might benefit those in groups that tend to have less agency.

At the same time, expecting faculty who are already in positions of reduced power and status to exercise agency could result in potentially risky outcomes on their part. The underrepresented woman in her STEM department made the point that she was unwilling to be the test case or guinea pig to test the waters of pursuing promotion despite being told to withdraw. In this way, this woman expressed the calculated risks in exercising agency when one is in a position of reduced power. Ultimately, without clear expectations or mentoring, the lack of women or faculty of color at the highest rank might be explained partially by a fear of risk that many may not feel comfortable taking.

IMPLICATIONS

Institutions, departments, and their faculty should consider several implications stemming from this study's findings. We begin by discussing implications for policy and practice and then conclude with implications for future research.

In regard to policy and practice, we first recommend instilling more clarity in promotion criteria. While a controversial subject for many (see Rockquemore, 2011), numerous studies have borne out that clearer criteria in promotion and tenure are not only desired, but they ultimately assist faculty in knowing how to target success and makes the decision-making process easier for those who evaluate the dossier's contents (e.g., Tierney & Bensimon, 1996; Trower, 2009). Moreover, researchers have found that clearer criteria are particularly helpful to those from underrepresented groups, such as women in STEM fields, or faculty of color (Lamont, Kalev, Bowden, & Fosse, 2004; Valian, 1998). Given the underrepresentation of both groups at the rank of full professor, perhaps room can be made in departmental conversations about what is to be gained and lost in better articulating criteria. Along these lines, institutions such as LGU that can be considered to have striving ambitions

In addition, workshops, websites, and policy language can be developed at individual institutions to provide more guidance for faculty who are considering applying for a promotion to full professor. Many institutions, particularly those affiliated with the National Science Foundation's (2006) ADVANCE program, have instituted panels of recently promoted faculty to assist in better articulating the process. Similarly, progress toward implementing mentoring programs for associate professors has also been made at many institutions (Buch et al., 2011). Inasmuch as pre-tenure faculty have been shown to benefit from mentoring by senior colleagues (Boice, 2000; Hilmer & Hilmer, 2007; Wasburn, 2007), so too can associate professors benefit from mentoring by their more senior faculty. Providing even an informal network of colleagues to whom faculty seeking promotion can be referred may be advantageous. In this light, institutions with post-tenure review, like LGU, can consider

how to better organize and construct the feedback offered to assist those who might consider pursuing promotion.

Providing support to faculty who seek promotion to professor is not only vital to assisting those through the process but also to retaining current faculty. As scholars have pointed out, the stakes are not only high with associate professors who often find themselves under-appreciated and over-worked (Trower, 2011) but a lack of a promotion can be devastating to the individual facing it (Bieber & Lawrence, 1992; Blackburn & Lawrence, 1995). While we do not imply that all who seek promotion should necessarily achieve it, clarity, guidance, and support are nevertheless important in the equation for success for all involved.

While this study was limited in examining one institutional context, different disciplinary and demographic perspectives arose in our research that may lend to a better understanding of the relatively understudied process of promotion to professor. Future researchers should continue to examine the factors related to decision-making among faculty in different demographic groups and in different disciplinary and institutional contexts. Similarly, our study was limited to a self-selected sample of faculty at this one institution. Future studies should examine quantitative outcomes of promotion or withdrawal rates in relation to variables such as criteria specificity, self-efficacy and other indicators of initiative and agency, and other demographic variables.

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