



# MULTIPLE PATHS TO FULL PROFESSOR:

Challenges to the Academy  
in the 21st Century

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In the United States, the *Academy* is feeling tensions and pressures reflective of changing economic, political, and social realities. Current institutional structures, established decades and even centuries in the past, are based upon foundations that are experiencing profound tremors. Indeed, in the context of faculty promotion, specifically from tenured associate professors-to-full, the 21<sup>st</sup> century is presenting a fairly consistent pattern of factors that challenge institutional foundations that have supported a traditional model for advancement. This dynamic environment gives rise to a number of questions regarding four-year colleges and universities. Does the traditional path to promotion for tenured associate professors-to-full best serve the institution's mission, its role in society? Is the institution's mis-

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sion reflective of larger economic, political, and social expectations that continue to exist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

To explore these questions, this article first explains the dominant form of faculty promotion used in U.S. colleges and universities. Second, key economic, political, and social factors are discussed in the context of an institutional mission linked with promotion in light of the 21<sup>st</sup> century university. Lastly, considerations regarding the movement toward multiple-models of promotion are explored in the context of Oakland University.

### *Becoming a Full Professor in the United States*

Four-year colleges and universities play a key role in providing post-secondary education for students, and they are integral to the economic and social well being of all levels of society: local, state, national, and beyond.

In a world where brainpower outstrips muscle power, where innovation trumps conformity, where the nimble and creative stand to inherit the earth, higher education is the key to the next American century. Forget the ivory tower: colleges and universities are catalysts of economic development, stewards of public health, incubators of social policy and laboratories of discovery. (Von Drehle, 2009)

Among four-year higher education institutions, the dominant model for promoting associate professors to full professors prioritizes the publishing of research (often narrowly defined) in professional journals (frequently termed scholarship) over accomplishments in teaching and service (Boyer, 1990; Cummings and Finkelstein, 2012; Youn and Price, 2009;).<sup>2</sup> Though

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<sup>2</sup> Criticism regarding the traditional, dominant narrow definitions of “scholarship” and “research” focus on the weak linkage between those definitions and larger variables linked, for example, with disseminating new ideas and/or techniques to others, upon peer-review. See, Boyer, 1990; Rice, 2005; Jordan, 2007; Youn and Price, 2009).

the phrase “publish or perish” is usually associated with promotion from assistant professor to tenured associate professor, the adage remains relevant for promotion to full professor.

On May 14, 2009, during his annual address to faculty, Ohio State University President E. Gordon Gee became a vocal advocate for challenging the traditional model. He asked,

Are our promotion and tenure criteria the right ones? Is it really necessary that all faculty be all things to all people—fabulous teachers, leading-edge researchers, and dedicated hands-on public servants? Whom does that model exclude from our institutions? What talents are left untapped? What kinds of scholarship do those criteria reward—and discourage?

Gee followed through on his challenge, arguing that valuing publishing in scholarly journals over excellence in teaching and other contributions is outdated, not reflective of 21<sup>st</sup> century economic, political, and social reality: “The recession has helped highlight the importance of higher education to the economy so now is the right time to make big changes” (quoted in Welsh-Huggins, 2010). He recognized that changing deeply entrenched thoughts and behaviors would take more than words; it would take courage and a pioneering mindset.

Cultivating faculty collaboration and innovation requires us to think in new ways about how we acknowledge and recognize faculty scholarship. We will never totally forsake recognition for publishing in the usual academic journals (which are fading and may soon disappear), but we must be brave and wise enough to appreciate and reward other forms of scholarship as well. (Gee, February 8, 2009)

The heavy emphasis on publication within a narrow definition of scholarship, much more than teaching and/or service excellence, has its genesis in the post-WWII era, particularly the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The labor market for faculty in the 1980s was tight, and with concurrent intense competition among institutions, the heavy emphasis on publi-

cation provided a way for universities to distinguish themselves from their competitors (Youn and Price, 2009).<sup>3</sup> A number of studies have concluded that increasing numbers of colleges and universities, *including* institutions that espoused a teaching mission (Boyer, 1990), were using research-oriented criteria in both promoting and hiring. Hence, particularly within the past few decades, the dominant basis of faculty reward among all types of institutions has emphasized research productivity rather than teaching load, quality, and/or other factors (Rice and Sorcinelli, 2002; Youn and Price, 2009;).

Gee was not the first to articulate problems with the dominant model. Two decades earlier, Ernest Boyer, then president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, stated,

At no time in our history has the need been greater for connecting the work of the academy to the social and environmental challenges beyond the campus . . . [It] seems clear that while research is crucial, we need a renewed commitment to service, too. Thus, the most important obligation now confronting colleges and universities is to break out of the tired old teaching versus research debate and define, in more creative ways, what it means to be a scholar. It's time to recognize the full range of faculty talent and the great diversity of functions higher education must perform. (1990, p. xii)

Boyer expanded the definition of scholarship to reflect a four-fold dynamic:

- **The scholarship of discovery:** discovering new information and new models; sharing discoveries through scholarly publication;
- **The scholarship of integration:** integrating knowledge from different sources; bringing findings together from

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion regarding why research and publication became the dominant value for hiring and promotion, see Boyer, 1990; Youn and Price, 2009.

different disciplines to discover convergence; identifying trends and seeing knowledge in new ways.

- **The scholarship of application:** discovering ways that new knowledge can be used to solve real world problems.
- **The scholarship of teaching:** searching for innovative approaches and best practices to develop skills and disseminate knowledge. Involves both formal and informal modes such as teaching, advising and mentoring (Boyer, 1990; McNabb and Pawlyshyn, 2014).

For those in the Academy intrigued by Boyer's assertions, the next challenge involved 1) determining how to operationalize the expanded scholarship definition, providing understandable metrics that could be adapted throughout an institution for purposes of its promotion/rewards system and 2) obtaining consensus to further what would be a dramatic shift for most colleges and universities. Apparently, over the ensuing years, the challenge proved too much for most, precipitating both Gee's comments as well as others,

On many campuses there still exists a significant disconnection between what institutions say is important and what they reward. Research and publication remain the primary criteria used in promotion and tenure decisions with far less importance still being given to teaching and community service activities. (*Diamond, 2006*)

One of the comparatively few attempts at breaking the status quo is a 2007 effort by the University of Washington's Peer Review Workgroup from the School of Health Sciences. The group developed a guide for departments seeking to use a broader definition of scholarship, which included work that involves a level of *community engagement* along with associated research and/or teaching (Jordan, 2007). It drew upon Diamond and Adam's "Recognizing Faculty Work (1993)" and embraced community engagement that reflects work that is public, peer reviewed, and available through a platform that

others may build upon as one type of community engagement (Jordan, 2007).

Though it is anticipated that the portion of community engagement that is also scholarship (involves research, results in publication, and is peer-reviewed) may be comparatively small, this model recognizes that there is such a category that deserves to be recognized as such. Recognizing that community engagement may involve research and/or teaching also echoes the Carnegie Foundation's discussion of the purpose of community engagement,

The purpose of community engagement is the partnership of college and university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good. (New England Resource for Higher Education, 2015)

Though the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education (CCHE) developed a classification system of colleges and universities in 1970 to support its program of research and policy analysis, its classifications are frequently used throughout the academic and larger policy environment for myriad purposes (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2015). Many people are most familiar with its classifications related to the number of degrees of a particular type awarded (e.g., doctoral) and/or the intensity of research activity. In conjunction with its 2005 update, the CCHE added a "community engagement" classification to further recognize the diversity of institutions of higher education. An institution must apply for this classification and the next cohort will be in 2020. A wide variety of institutions ranging from those with doctoral programs and very high research activity to community colleges have received the Carnegie community engagement classification. Examples include Wayne State University,

Michigan State University, Eastern Michigan University, Western Michigan University, Lawrence Technological University, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Ohio State University, Saginaw Valley State University, and Salt Lake Community College.<sup>4</sup> As of 2015, Oakland University does not have the community engagement classification.

The entire proposition for change involves initiation of action and momentum. Those innovative institutions that break the pattern of perpetuating an unhelpful status quo will set the tone for the rest of the academy. As Gee observed in his October 7, 2010 address to Ohio State University’s faculty,

Our campuses have long had faculty committees devoted to looking at revising promotion and tenure standards. And yet, the status quo remains. Inertia is winning. When can we finally speak aloud the truth—that some arbitrary volume of published papers, on some narrowly defined points of debate, are not necessarily more worthy than other activities?

Hence, the prospect of multiple models of promotion that reflect the valuable contributions of a diverse faculty is not incongruent with the mindsets of myriad stakeholders. Like Boyer, others are recognizing the need for change in the context of the economic, political, and social factors that are quite simply different than those of the past (Bataille and Brown, 2006; Gappa et al., 2007; Schuster and Finkelstein, 2006).

### ***21st Century Economic, Political, and Social Factors as Reflected in Promotion Criteria***

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the United States is a nation wrestling with the challenge of being competitive in a truly global economy. In addition, developing public policy that addresses global

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<sup>4</sup>For a full list of institutions with the 2015 “community engagement” classification see [http://nerche.org/images/stories/projects/Carnegie/2015/2010\\_and\\_2015\\_CE\\_Classified\\_Institutions\\_revised\\_1\\_11\\_15.pdf](http://nerche.org/images/stories/projects/Carnegie/2015/2010_and_2015_CE_Classified_Institutions_revised_1_11_15.pdf)

competition does not happen in a vacuum because domestic policy issues operate simultaneously (e.g., an increasingly demographically diverse population, increasing education levels, civil rights issues, recessionary and post-recessionary economic concerns, immigration, wage and salary debates, and societal complexity). These policy areas all represent the environment in which higher education operates.

Promotion criteria reflect an institution's expression of its values as it sees its role in relation to students, the surrounding communities, the state, the nation, and the world. Promotion criteria are embedded within this complex, multi-level policy environment and have real-world implications for myriad stakeholders including students, employers, and college and university stakeholders.

For example, greater percentages of people are graduating from high school than ever before. In 2014, approximately 91% of adults, aged 25 to 29, had received a high school diploma or the equivalent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Comparatively, in 1947, 51% of the population, aged 25 to 29, had received a high school diploma or the equivalent. In terms of higher education, the proportion of the population over age 25 with education beyond high school has also grown. In 1940, five percent of adults 25 years old or older had a bachelor's degree or more. By 2014, that number had risen to 32% (United States Census Bureau, 2015).<sup>5</sup> These dynamics in themselves indicate just a few differences between the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century environments in which higher education operates.

Hence, the numbers of stakeholders in higher education policy are growing and related dialogue increasingly discusses what colleges and universities provide to society. The collective dialogue calls for encouraging future generations to think innovatively, develop an entrepreneurial spirit, and hone a passion for developing creative solutions to increasingly complex

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion regarding how the factors contribute to an increase in the percentage of Americans obtaining college degrees, see Thelin, 2011.



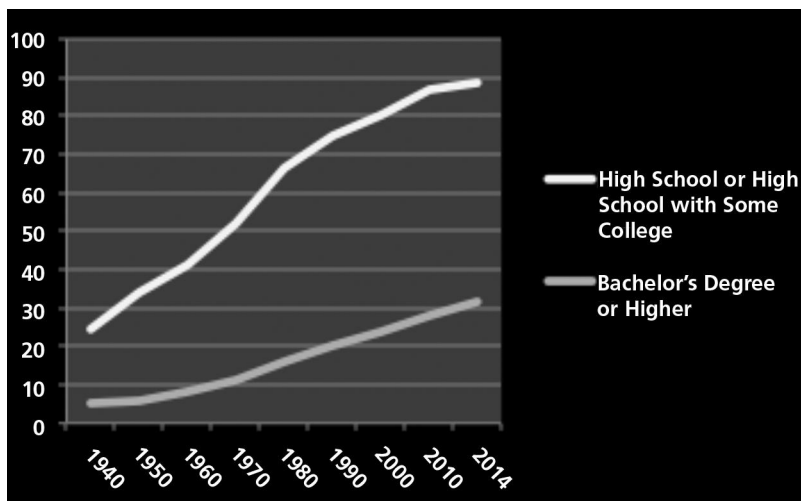


Figure 2. Percent of Population Age 25 and over by Educational Attainment, 1940–2014. Data from the United States Current Population Survey, 1940–2014 and the United States Decennial Census, 1940–2010.

public policy problems. Relatedly, though politicians have always lent a critical eye to the flow of federal funds to higher education, recent years have seen a dramatic reduction in funding not only at the federal level but also at the state (Matthews, 2012). Elected officials express concern that among competing demands for public funds, higher education must take a deeper look into what it is providing society and how it can best consolidate limited resources for marked and measurable societal benefit. This is not exclusively linked to the type of research and publication that currently tends to receive the highest merit in many promotion assessments for associate professors seeking full.

The political, social, and economic pressures of the 21<sup>st</sup> century together provide the lens through which an institution’s mission and resulting activities are viewed. As that mission informs the criteria for promotion, the need for a multiple-model approach to promotion is intrinsically tied to this challenge. In short, to remain relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the

institution must deeply examine its strengths and weaknesses and decide where it fits into the larger policy environment that includes how it fits with the goals of society, how it helps students succeed, and how it contributes to knowledge. Funding sources (students, government (all levels), private sector) will be measuring the value of its contributions via the economic, political, and social expectations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, not the 20<sup>th</sup> century

### *Oakland University*

Oakland University's criteria regarding promotion of an associate professor recognize three primary categories—scholarship, teaching, and service (see, Oakland University, 2003). Those categories are further defined by department-created standards. Each department structures its standards based on factors specific to its profession. Though the University's institutional criteria recognize value for scholarship that fits a broad definition (e.g., includes applied research), each department's standards, whether intentional or not, may vary from that, even rendering certain types (e.g., applied research with community engagement) of comparatively little value in promotion assessments. This reflects a challenge. Although it provides respect for departments in crafting promotion criteria deemed by a majority of faculty to represent commonly-held intra-departmental priorities, such criteria may not synchronize with those expressed at the highest institutional level. To further confound the issue, written criteria and/or standards may not always reflect those that have become the norm in practice.

In addition, the University's mission statement articulates a core role for public service. Nevertheless, public service may be measured as relatively inconsequential to a faculty member's pursuit of promotion to full professor. The operative term here is "may." Criteria for promoting an associate professor to full in the Department of Chemistry in the College of

Arts and Sciences and the School of Engineering and Computer Science's (SECS) articulate the possibility of several models of success, but other departments do not, or if so, they do not clearly indicate this option in their written review statements. The Department of Chemistry recognizes Types A, B, and C models for promotion to full. Each model indicates combinations of "outstanding," "strong," and "satisfactory" metrics for scholarship, teaching, and service (Department of Chemistry, 2004). The School of Engineering and Computer Science's review statement posits that,

In reviewing dossiers for promotion to full professor, the department and the school are primarily concerned with the evidence which bears on the academic maturity of the candidate. In addition to earning a rating of satisfactory in each criteria area, the candidate must have demonstrated excellence and creativity in teaching, or have achieved recognition beyond the institution as an authority or leader in either scholarly work or professional service. (excerpt, SECS, 2013)

As universities and colleges struggle to find their way in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the status of women and underrepresented minority faculty offer new ways of viewing productivity and contributions in academia. Research has shown repeatedly that women and underrepresented minorities are often engaged in activities such as service, mentoring, and community work that is undervalued in the current tenure and promotion system (Misra et al, 2011) and are likewise underrepresented in full time full professorship positions (National Science Foundation, 2015). Oakland University aligns with this trend with 89 male full professors and only 27 female full professors as of 2015. It is important to note that this is out of 254 full time female faculty and 305 full time male faculty overall. However, the criteria from Engineering and Computer Science and Chemistry offer an opportunity to recognize that a full professor of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has a variety of talents and skills that can manifest in multiple ways. WISE@OU also recognizes the diversity of fac-

ulty contributions and has implemented a review of tenure and promotion guidelines throughout the STEM fields in addition to mentoring mid-career faculty and continuing to seek equity on campus.

### *Concluding Considerations*

As previously mentioned, Gee has been an outspoken critic of the traditional, dominant model of promotion in which a narrow definition of scholarship is heavily valued and in which teaching and service are marginalized comparatively. During his presidency, Ohio State University created alternative paths for associate professors to be promoted to full professor: “Many of our academic units are beginning to write criteria that would reward things that are not the traditional two grants, 20 articles” (Vice Provost for Academic Policy and Faculty Resources Susan S. Williams quoted in Wilson, 2012).

Key to broadening the understanding of the qualities of a full professor in the context of promotion is a two-fold consideration: that faculty bring diverse skills and talents that contribute to an institution’s mission and that even if scholarship continues to be valued more than excellence in teaching and/or service, it has a broader definition than traditionally provided.

Though there are myriad challenges in the movement toward the adoption of a multiple model approach for promoting an associate professor to full, two factors are particularly noteworthy. First, a department has to desire a multiple model approach. After researching the appropriate approach, a majority of faculty members must agree to change the review statement to reflect the new approach. That need for consensus is a hallmark of self-governance at the department level. Nevertheless, the dynamic among dominant, influential personalities may mean consensus toward change (a multiple-model approach) may be nearly impossible. Second, even if a multiple-model approach is adopted in writing, its application

may not mirror the written provisions. This can present an inconsistent message for associate professors planning their work agendas.

Nevertheless, these challenges should not stifle efforts to bring a multiple model approach to a department. To make the discussion more concrete, consider three alternative career paths open to mid-career faculty in the context of promotion

- Suppose an associate professor takes time from research to focus on developing a series of new courses, or perhaps an entirely new degree program. Could such a contribution to the mission of Oakland University serve as the signature accomplishment when being considered for promotion to full professor?
- Suppose an associate professor sets aside research to take on a key administrative position within the university that helps other faculty members accomplish their own goals. Must such an administrative role represent a dead end in the journey toward becoming a full professor?
- Suppose an associate professor suspends a research program to lead a crucial public service role that improves the lives for all citizens and engages the university with its surrounding community. Should promotion to full professor nevertheless be blocked because of the lack of peer-reviewed articles in scholarly journals?

These are the types of questions that must be discussed, debated, and ultimately answered when reevaluating criteria for full professor. The answers will not come from scholarly articles or from university administrators. They must come from a reassessment by the faculty of what it means to be a full professor.

In summary, one thing is certain: the economic, political, and social environment in which institutions of higher education now exist is sufficiently different than the environment that gave birth to the traditional, dominant promotion model

discussed in this article. That simple model no longer reflects this century's complex needs regarding students, employers, and government. Colleges and universities should heed the common sense adage that "if you don't like change, you are going to like irrelevance even less" (former U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs, General Eric Shinseki in Dao and Shanker, 2009).

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