



Removing the Barriers to Full Professor

A Mentoring Program for Associate Professors

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Message to deans, department chairs, and other administrators in higher education: Pay more attention to associate professors—particularly women, for whom the path to promotion is often murky and less traveled.

This recent quote from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (June, 2009, p. 1) calls attention to a neglected topic in higher education: the career-development needs of mid-career faculty. Perhaps because of the high-stakes, up-or-out consequences of promotion decisions for tenure-earning faculty, universities do tend to take seriously the career development of junior faculty. This is evident in the prevalence and purported success of a wide range of programs designed to facilitate the successful promotion of assistant professors.

But there appears to be a void at the next rank up, one that no doubt contributes to recent findings that many faculty—especially women—often get stuck at the rank of associate professor. Although associate professors comprise only about 20 percent of all full-time instructional faculty in degree-granting institutions (IES, 2009), the rank is important because it is the primary pipeline from which institutional leaders emerge.

Here, we describe the results of a campus-wide needs assessment at the University of North Carolina (UNC), Charlotte, that identified career challenges facing associate professors, as well as a comprehensive mid-career mentoring program for associate professors that is part of our institution's response to these challenges. This program is supported by an ADVANCE institutional transformation grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF), a national initiative to increase the representation, retention, and career advancement of women faculty in STEM disciplines. However, because our needs assessment indicated that all associate professors might benefit from career-development opportunities, most of our initiatives are open to all associates, regardless of gender or discipline.

We also report the results of a survey—administered two years into the program—to examine the effects the program might have had on faculty perceptions of the processes and expectations regarding promotion to full professor. While our findings revealed commonalities across genders, we also observed some significant gender differences that reinforce and extend emergent findings from a string of recent studies on mid-career faculty, as summarized below.

WOMEN STANDING STILL AT ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR

The title of a 2009 report by the Modern Language Association (MLA), *Standing Still: The Associate Professor Survey*, summarized the broad problem of the career plateau that faculty land on when they fail to move from associate to full professor. However, the fine print of the report framed the problem more narrowly as “*women standing still at associate*”: The survey found that, on average and across institutions, it takes women one to 3.5 years (or 24.2 percent) longer than men to attain the rank of professor. This gap, the survey noted, was independent of marital or parental status and was present at all types of institutions, though more pronounced at doctoral institutions.

Geisler and her colleagues had earlier (2007) observed the same phenomenon, which they dubbed “the 13+ Club.” Members of this club are those faculty who still hold the rank of associate professor 13 or more years since earning their highest degree. The authors found that women were 2.3 times more likely to be members of the club than men. The 2010 Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) report found that not only do women associate professors move up the ranks more slowly, but they also report lower levels of job satisfaction than their male counterparts.

This gender divide in career progression and satisfaction drives the need to understand its underlying dynamics. Toward that end, our study identified mid-career challenges and barriers to promotion that, although present for both sexes, seem especially problematic for female faculty.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT: WHAT DO ASSOCIATES PERCEIVE AS THE BARRIERS TO PROMOTION?

In 2008, we set out to design a faculty-development program that would facilitate the promotion of associate

professors to the rank of full professor. To ensure alignment between our program and its targeted participants, we undertook a comprehensive needs assessment that included focus groups with women associates in STEM units (20 of 37 eligible faculty participated) and a follow-up survey of all associate professors.

Both methods were designed to elicit faculty perceptions of the processes and expectations regarding promotion to full professor, as well as their ideas about what they would find helpful in overcoming these barriers. In all, 96 faculty (44

TABLE 1

Barriers to Promotion	Illustrative Quotes from Associate Professors
1. Lack of attention to career planning by associates	“After receiving tenure, I was working just as hard, and making good contributions, but I wasn’t thinking strategically about my career.”—female associate
	“My choice was to do the work that needs to be done to have the department run efficiently, but that will probably not lead to promotion.”—male associate
2. Lack of institutional and departmental attention to and support for the career-development needs of associates	“Lack of support/interest from the chair to target promotion as a career goal”—male associate
	“Our department puts the bulk of our resources aside for junior faculty. They are protected from service, receive significantly lighter teaching loads, and get more travel money. This puts additional burdens on associates. ... It seems impossible to meet the standards of full.”—female associate
3. Lack of career-development opportunities for associates	“Although I have been asked (repeatedly) to serve as a mentor for junior faculty, I have never been asked if I could use a mentor myself.”—female associate
	“The absence of effective mentoring opportunities”—female associate
4. Disproportionate service demands/ administrative duties for associates that interfere with progress toward full	“We hate service as a means of advancement, yet load associate professors up with service obligations. If you are selfish and avoid these obligations, you get your research done and sail into the promised land of full professor.”—male associate
	“My publication record is lower than I would like, but I feel I have A LOT of service that I am involved with (much more than the average tenure-track faculty member)”—female associate
5. Lack of transparency and clarity regarding promotion criteria	“Unclear path to professor”—male associate
	“Unclear criteria. ... You only find out what you are missing when you are denied. More importantly, you find that even though you have been busy doing what they asked of you, and doing it well, it suddenly doesn’t count.”—female associate
6. Need for more flexible and inclusive “paths to professor” that recognize a broader range of contributions	“Policies that would provide different tracks for promotion could help.”—male associate
	“More varied models of ‘success.’ ... Scholarship is important, but contributions can take many forms.”—male associate

women and 52 men) completed the survey, for a 34 percent response rate. Although this study reports only the results of the survey, the focus groups yielded almost identical themes, which have been reported elsewhere (Huet & Buch, 2008).

There were two open-ended survey questions: “Are there specific barriers you perceive as preventing or delaying your promotion to full professor?” and “Are there policy changes that you see as needed to help remove barriers to promotion to full professor?”

We categorized the responses into six major themes; these appear in Table 1, along with supporting quotes from male and female associates. These themes—shared by male and female associates—suggest that for associate professors, the major barriers to promotion transcend gender.

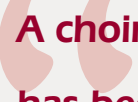
Previous research by Wolf-Wendel and Ward (2006) has suggested that faculty experiences are influenced by institutional type: 1) research universities, 2) striving comprehensives, 3) regional comprehensives, 4) liberal arts colleges, and 5) community colleges. The researchers defined *striving comprehensives* as those “caught between old expectations connected to teaching and new, increasing research expectations” and noted that faculty at these institutions face the greatest career challenges.

Institutional type may have contributed to our findings. UNC Charlotte was officially re-classified as a Doctoral/Research-Intensive institution in 2000, and it is likely that the careers of many of the associate professors in this study overlapped with the university’s striving-comprehensive stage, which preceded this re-classification. However, our results are consistent with the findings from other, more established research institutions.

Researchers at Michigan State University were among the first to focus attention on mid-career faculty’s unique challenges, many of them arising from the career-development void previously mentioned (Baldwin et al. 2008). Their mid-career interviewees reported feelings of neglect (“the mid-career faculty get less attention”), uncertainty about the next career step (“what do I do now?”), and confusion about how to chart a career trajectory (“what do I do for the next 13 years?”). From these findings, the researchers noted the need to engage mid-career faculty in proactive, intentional career planning—a conclusion that is consistent with our first theme in Table 1.

Several recent studies have focused attention on the need for institutional changes that are consistent with themes two through five. Recommendations in the MLA’s *Standing Still* include the need for “focused mentor programs that begin the moment scholars are promoted to associate professor,” as well as for clear and transparent promotion criteria: “We mean making it clear to associate professors what the path for promotion looks like and helping them get there” (June, 2009, p. 2).

Similar recommendations for clarity in promotion standards emerged from a recent AAAS report finding that too often, faculty perceive their performance as judged by “an arbitrary scorecard” (Elghanayan, 2010). Joya Misra and colleagues’ findings echo our fourth theme, that associate



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professors carry a disproportionate service burden because “departments try and shield junior faculty from service, and full professors are usually in a better position to say no” (Misra et al. 2011, p.4).

Consistent with our sixth theme, a choir of disparate voices has begun calling for a faculty promotion system that recognizes a broader range of faculty contributions. For example, President Gordon Gee is leading discussions at Ohio State University on how to change the way faculty are evaluated for promotion to full professor. He points out the harmful limitations of the dominant model, which defines success very narrowly and only in terms of traditional measures of research excellence:

First, it generates cynicism among productive faculty, as they realize the “game” being played. Second, it frustrates productive faculty who contribute to their disciplines and the university in unique and powerful ways other than—and in addition to—traditional research. Third, it flies in the face of everything we know about the need for a balanced portfolio of skills to achieve institutional success. (*Different Paths to Full Professor*, 2010, p. 2)

Accordingly, Ohio State is working to redefine promotion guidelines that would, as Gee puts it, allow “multiple paths to salvation.”

And Gee is not alone. Researchers at the University of Colorado at Boulder agree that narrow faculty reward systems constrain faculty’s ability to do their jobs well and argue for a “new type of system based on a holistic, long-term view of faculty careers. Allowing individuals to evolve over time, the system would provide more flexibility and permit more variability among individuals” (Laursen & Rocque, 2009, p. 25).

GENDER DIFFERENCES: THE SAME CHALLENGES, BUT MORE WIDELY SHARED

In spite of the shared perceptions across genders revealed in our themes, our findings also identified some dramatic gender differences that may help to explain the phenomenon of more women than men standing still at associate. First, while both men and women agreed on the types of challenges facing associates (summarized in Table 1),

The mid-career planning process...helps ensure that all initiatives align with our program goal to re-engage associates in proactive, intentional career planning while removing institutional barriers to their advancement.

women were far more likely to report them as “preventing or delaying their own promotion”: 51 percent of men and 73 percent of women agreed with this survey item—a large and significant difference. There was an even greater gender gap in agreement with the statement that “policy changes are needed to remove barriers to promotion”: 83 percent of women but only 54 percent of men agreed with this item.

Furthermore, women were significantly (57 percent) more likely than men (40 percent) to disagree both that “the criteria used in my department for deciding on promotion to full professor are clear,” as well as that “I have received guidance from my chairperson about what I would need to do to be promoted” (63 percent of women and 43 percent of men). Perhaps most disturbing was the finding that while the vast majority of males (87 percent) agreed with the item “I believe that decisions about promotion to full professor in my department are made fairly and are not influenced by gender, race, or other non-performance factors,” 40 percent of women did not share this view.

Another set of items focused on faculty’s motivation to seek promotion to full professor. Again, dramatic gender differences emerged. Only 10 percent of males reported that they were “unsure” whether they would seek promotion in the future, but almost a third of women (30 percent) reported being unsure. Similarly, 80 percent of men agreed that “It is important to be promoted to full professor at some point in my career,” while only 63 percent of women shared this view. Women also were less likely to agree (22 percent) than men (36 percent) that “the university has incentives in place to encourage achieving promotion to full professor.”

A final set of items asked associates whether they had a mentor and whether they felt that having one would be helpful to them in preparing for promotion. Here, no gender

differences were observed. Just under 12 percent of both men (11.8 percent) and women (11.6 percent) reported that they currently had a mentor “who is helping me develop my record in order to be promoted.” In response to the item “Do you believe that having a mentor would be helpful to you in preparing to be promoted?” 71 percent of all respondents said “yes”—again, with no differences across genders.

RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGES: A MID-CAREER MENTORING PROGRAM FOR ASSOCIATES

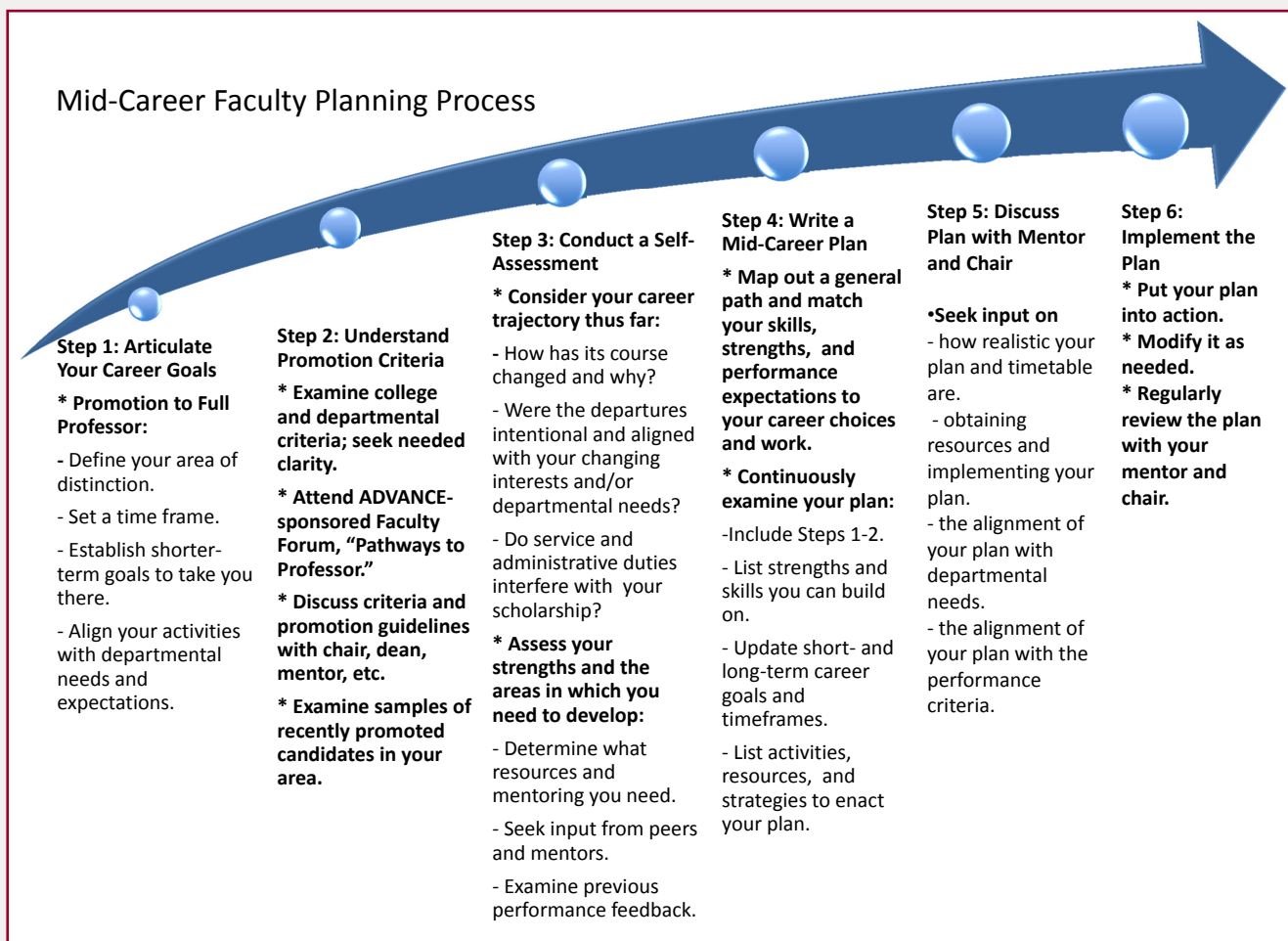
The needs assessment had several implications for the development of a mid-career mentoring program at UNC Charlotte. First, it was clear that associate professors felt that they were not receiving guidance from a mentor or administrator in charting their path to professor, even while they also acknowledged not being proactive and intentional enough in their own career planning. And the high percentage of both men and women reporting they would find a mentor helpful indicated that a mentoring program could address both concerns.

Second, associates felt a need for criteria that were transparent, consistent, and fair, and that recognized the range of contributions needed to meet the diverse goals and broad mission of the institution. Third, both men and women perceived little incentive for seeking promotion to professor, but men were more motivated than women to seek it in spite of this perception. Finally, it was clear that while men and women associates shared the same career challenges, women were much more likely to perceive them as barriers to their own promotion.

These findings informed our decisions as we developed a mid-career mentoring program that would re-engage associates in proactive, intentional career planning in a supportive environment committed to removing institutional barriers to their advancement. Toward that goal, we developed a six-step “mid-career planning process” that became the centerpiece of several separate mid-career mentoring initiatives: a vertical-dyad mentoring program for women in STEM and both informal and formal peer mentoring programs for men and women within and across disciplines.

The vertical-dyad model matches a full professor with an associate professor, usually in the same discipline or department, for one-on-one mentoring. This is relatively resource intensive and is limited by the availability of appropriate senior mentors. We therefore confined this model to three STEM departments with a paucity of women professors and invited all female associates to participate. All but one eligible woman agreed to do so, and we matched each with a full professor mentor of her choice. Following mentor training provided by ADVANCE, the mentees were expected to work through the mid-career planning process with support and guidance from their mentors.

Peer mentoring is a horizontal model in which associates mentor each other. These can be dyadic relationships, but they are more commonly group-based; they can also be formal or informal. With formal peer mentoring, there is a

FIGURE 1

dedicated group of associates who meet regularly; informal peer groups allow associates to drop in to monthly or quarterly meetings without making a commitment to the group or to the full career-planning process.

We started with an informal peer mentoring initiative called Focus Energy Fridays, monthly meetings led by ADVANCE staff. All associate professors on campus were invited to attend any or all meetings and were encouraged to engage in the mid-career planning process. Since no commitments were required, each month's attendees included both "regulars" and "first-timers."

Our formal peer mentoring initiative emerged organically from Focus Energy Fridays when a group of engineering faculty regulars expressed the need for a smaller, more dedicated group. We responded with our first formal peer-mentoring program, led by the regular faculty member who had proposed the idea and to which all other associates in the college of engineering were invited.

At the first meeting, the mid-career planning process was introduced and attendees were asked to make a commitment to monthly meetings for the full semester and to accept the role of both mentee (i.e., to actively engage in the mid-career planning process) and mentor (i.e., to assist peers as they engaged in the process). As associates from other disciplines learned about the engineering group, they asked us to start

similar peer groups for associates in the behavioral sciences and the humanities. Both of these groups were started within the last year; they both work like the engineering group.

The mid-career planning process provides structure to all the groups. It also helps ensure that all initiatives align with our program goal to re-engage associates in proactive, intentional career planning while removing institutional barriers to their advancement. Although the focus of the planning process is on the individual, its success requires strong institutional support.

For instance, we created several institutional mechanisms to help faculty navigate Step 2 in the planning process, including the development of clearer and more inclusive promotion criteria and efforts to more effectively communicate them. We have fostered a campus-wide dialogue about "pathways to professor," which has culminated in a faculty forum of the same name that is now offered to associate professors each year; at it, senior administrators publicly share their perspectives on the processes and expectations regarding promotion to full professor. Some units now offer workshops to associates on how to build and present a compelling case for promotion, and some have revised workload policies to help ensure that service loads are more equitably shared by faculty across rank. Thus, our program combines both individual and

institutional approaches to career development—both of which, the literature agrees, are vital to success.

In recognition of the gender differences in perceiving barriers to promotion, we have focused special attention on meeting the needs of female associates and creating an environment free of gender bias. Besides the vertical-dyad mentoring program, we offer other career-development opportunities exclusively to women, including an ADVANCE-sponsored competitive-grants program. Other ADVANCE initiatives, though not under the faculty-development umbrella, promote gender equity and may help reduce female associates' perceptions of bias in promotion decisions. We also have raised awareness among women and administrators about the advantages—both to individuals and to the institution—of achieving gender equity at the rank of full professor.

MONITORING SUCCESS: A SECOND SURVEY OF ASSOCIATES

We administered a second survey two years after the first one to determine if participation in the mid-career mentoring program had changed faculty perceptions of the barriers to promotion identified by the needs assessment. A 55 percent response rate yielded surveys from 179 associate professors (56 percent male and 44 percent female), of whom 28 percent had participated in at least one mid-career mentoring initiative and 8 percent in more than one.

We found that faculty participating in the program were significantly more likely to have “a mentor who is helping me to develop my record in order to be promoted” and to report that “it is important to me to be promoted at some time in my career.” Furthermore, we found that when associate professors (male or female) reported having a mentor, they were significantly more likely to perceive that there were incentives in place for seeking promotion and that promotion criteria were clear. Associates with mentors were significantly less likely than associates without them to feel that policy changes were needed to remove barriers to promotion.

The second survey also showed a significant reduction in the gender gap that was revealed in the first survey. Although women still perceived more barriers to promotion and a greater need for policy changes to remove those barriers than men, the following items showed no significant gender differences: “The criteria used in my department for deciding on promotion to full professor are clear”; “I have received guidance from my chairperson about what I would need to do to be promoted”; “I believe that decisions about promotion to full professor in my department are made fairly, and are not influenced by gender, race, or other non-performance factors”; “It is important to be promoted to full professor at some point in my career;” and “The university has incentives in place to encourage achieving promotion to full professor.” Finally, we found that women participated in mid-career mentoring initiatives at slightly higher rates than men.

LESSONS LEARNED AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

The survey results affirm the existence of unique career challenges facing associate professors, mirror previous findings of gender differences in perceptions about the processes and expectations regarding promotion to full professor, and shed some light on the dynamics underlying the problem of women standing still at the associate level. They also provide strong support for the efficacy of mid-career mentoring, in the context of a supportive institutional environment, as a means to address these challenges.

Our experience in implementing and monitoring a mid-career mentoring program has yielded some lessons for others who may follow in our path. First, we have found that the career development needs of faculty at all ranks, including associate professors, can be addressed through a comprehensive mid-career mentoring program that is responsive, inclusive, flexible, and organic. The program should be preceded and informed by a thorough needs assessment, though, since what has worked elsewhere will not necessarily be transferable.

The program to promote career success and equity across ranks should be directed at both individuals and the institution. The parts of it that are focused on individual faculty should actively engage them in a mid-career planning process; tools such as Figure 1 can help structure this process and create a shared language for mid-career faculty development. This process is adaptable to many mentoring models, including peer and dyadic relationships and formal and informal arrangements, and it can be creatively linked to approaches directed at the institution.

With respect to those latter efforts, our findings and the literature agree that

- criteria for promotion from associate to full professor need to be as clear and transparent as the ones for promotion from assistant to associate professor.
- inclusive “pathways to professor” should recognize multiple models of faculty success.
- service loads need to be equitably distributed across rank and gender.

“Institutional strategies...are vital to faculty success, whether or not they are embedded in a mentoring program.”

- training and tools should ensure that promotion decisions at all ranks are made fairly and are not influenced by gender, race, or other non-performance factors.
- associates should receive regular developmental feedback on their progress toward promotion to full professor.

But removing barriers to promotion is not enough.

Perceptions matter: Gaps between what administrators think is reality and what faculty perceive it to be should be bridged through enhanced communication. Campus leaders also need to provide incentives for all faculty to seek promotion and to raise awareness about the advantages—both to individuals and to the institution—of achieving gender equity at the rank of full professor. And they need to monitor and evaluate the success of the program in order to guide its improvement.


The alignment of multiple change levers and consistent messages are vital to the perception of change and the creation of an institutional climate that truly supports all faculty across rank and gender.

But while mentoring programs should be part of comprehensive faculty-development and support efforts and are the centerpiece of the program at UNC Charlotte, mentoring is **not** a panacea. The institutional strategies listed above are vital to faculty success, whether or not they are embedded in a mentoring program like ours. Indeed, we view our mentoring program as a vehicle for leveraging institutional strategies. For example, data show that attendance at our faculty forums has increased since mid-career mentoring participants have begun attending as cohorts, and the ADVANCE Office supports and promotes many other faculty-development and equity efforts that are synergistic with the mid-career mentoring program.

We must acknowledge several challenges to the ongoing success of our mid-career mentoring program and to our efforts to demonstrate its impact. First, there is the challenge frequently reported in the faculty-development literature: “If we build it, will they come?” Many career-development opportunities are under-utilized by faculty at all levels, and perhaps because of the unique challenges of mid-career faculty, they may disproportionately opt out of potentially valuable ones.

In spite of our diligent efforts to promote our mid-career mentoring program and to encourage faculty participation, 72 percent of associate professors chose not to participate in any program initiative. And some faculty who do participate fail to fulfill their commitment to the initiatives. This is especially problematic for peer mentoring groups, in which a drop-out means losing a mentor as well as a mentee. So we are seeking ways to attract a wider audience of participants and to retain participants longer in order to realize full benefits of the program.

Another challenge is the need to translate attitude change—as demonstrated in our survey—into bottom-line results. While it is too early to determine, we know that the program’s success must ultimately be measured by increased numbers of associates being promoted to the full professor. We also hope to realize other benefits of focusing on the career-

development needs of associate professors: reducing number of faculty who land on the career plateau, along with its costs to both individuals and institutions; the under-utilization of talent; faculty disengagement and dissatisfaction; and gender disparities at full-professor ranks. 

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