

Mid-Level Transitions: Associate to Full Professor

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(with help from Eve Riskin)

Expectations

- Achieve promise that was strongly indicated when promoted to Associate Professor with tenure
- Demonstrate leadership in some key dimension(s)

Problems include...

- The field changes, but the person can't transition to new hot areas
- The person becomes discouraged and gives up, become inefficient and (even worse) cynical
- Can almost never say, "It's me" — instead blame is placed externally (on the field, on the department, etc.)

Possible red flags

- Little or no research
- Few or no publications
- No graduated ph.d.s and/or none in the pipeline
- Lousy funding
- Lousy teaching
- Like all those self-assessments: “One or two of these may not indicate a problem, but people with more of these problems are more likely to be stuck in transition.”

Some observations

- Was this a hiring problem?
 - Did you hire for the person or for the field?
- There are few mid-career faculty programs
- It's a career development issue, not a promotion issue
- It's often hard to distinguish problems with the person's ideas from problems with the person's presentation of those ideas

Some ideas

- Seed money to encourage risk, allowing people to transform their focus (and maybe their approach)
- Teach them how to compete with different organizations
 - Mary L.'s NIH workshops are one example
- Gather data on people who have failed at a granting agency several consecutive times, but then hit a bunch in a row
 - Find such people and get them to talk to the stalled person
- Work with them on presentation of their ideas
- Matchmaking stalled people with co-PIs in and out of the department
- Encourage a focus on education for a while
- Internal sabbaticals

One “chair’s pitfall”

- Sometimes these stalled faculty are not pleasant to deal with
 - They often become increasingly marginalized
 - It’s definitely tougher mentoring people you don’t like
- But there’s real value in helping them however you can
 - Every improvement they make is of long-term and significant value to the department
 - Even a 10% improvement that pays off for 20 years is huge

My only high-level advice

- The absolutely best time to give advice about this topic is immediately upon promotion from assistant to associate professor
- There is no question in the person's mind that you are supportive of them, so they are incredibly open to constructive suggestions
- But it's easy to forget people at this stage
 - “They are doing great anyway.”
 - “I can take it easy on at least one faculty review and evaluation this year.”
- And doing that can be costly in the long-term, so keeping with them as early Associate Professors can pay off big-time in the long-term