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# You're a Full Professor. Now What?



By Kathryn N. McDaniel | JANUARY 06, 2019

**A**t some point in my associate-professor years I began Googling "midcareer slump," looking for inspiration and motivation. Most of the post-tenure advice I found suggested I either change ladders (i.e., seek administrative positions) or dig more deeply into my research.

That advice works for some academics but was neither inspirational nor motivational for me. Although I have served as chair of my small department, I do not feel called to higher-level administrative service. I enjoy being a faculty member and teaching in my field of study. Yet by the time I earned the rank of full professor, my research had started to feel stale to me, so digging more deeply into the same subject seemed like a dead end.

As a full professor, I have the luxury of no longer being on the hamster wheel of academic success; I can

stop worrying about external reviewers and promotions. But how best to make use of this prize? Perhaps more to the point, on what grounds should I determine where to invest my time and energy?

In the three years since my final faculty promotion — and looking ahead to another 20 years in this position — I have established four criteria for the new responsibilities and projects I take on. I am still perfecting how I apply these criteria, but they have allowed me to anticipate my future work with excitement. Before taking on a task, I ask myself the following four questions.

Question No. 1: Is it fun? That may sound glib, but like many other faculty members, I got into academe because I was entertained, excited, and deeply fascinated by what I was studying. Despite the poverty and powerlessness of graduate school, I could devote my life to this one thing because I loved it. It was, in short, fun to read, write, and do research in my area of study.

With promotion, I have gained the benefit of being able to choose anything at all to investigate. The world of knowledge is more open to me than it has been since I first set foot in graduate school. There's no fear of someone telling me that a topic is not worthy of scholarly study, not sufficiently within my field, not important, not serious. I get to decide all of that now, and submit my work to the wider public for its response.

Some full professors remain deeply enamored with their research specialty and use their full professorship to publish more widely and become more recognized in their field, or to tackle an adjacent field. But for others, full professorship is a time in which to turn a scholarly lens onto entirely new topics, such as their own outside interests or hobbies. For me, that was co-editing two books — *Harry Potter for Nerds II* ([on Harry Potter](#) and tourism) and *Virtual Dark Tourism: Ghost Roads* ([on](#)

["virtual pilgrimages"](#) to sites of death and calamity). But for others it might be popular culture, photography, travel, gardening, or, really, anything at all to which you can (and want to) apply your academic skills. You get to study what you really love.

Likewise, my teaching is also (mostly) fun and enjoyable at a very basic level. Nowadays I focus on keeping my courses fun for me:

- Choosing topics I find stimulating, delightful, even humorous (for example: showing video clips from Monty Python movies to analyze 1970s British culture).

- Designing courses in new areas of interest ("Harry Potter and the Liberal Arts") as well as team-taught, interdisciplinary classes ("Icelandic Sagas," "Historical Fiction," and "Story and Culture.")
- Presenting material in ways that emphasize contemporary relevance (for example, comparing France's modern burqa ban with the 1920s Soviet unveiling campaigns in Muslim areas).
- Encouraging creativity in assignments and discussions to allow room for the unexpected (for example, using game simulations to explore the origins of World War I).

Not surprisingly, my students have responded favorably to this attitude. When I'm having fun, it is contagious.

Question No. 2: Is it helping me to grow or develop in a new area? Learning itself has always been fun for me, and sometimes I miss being on the other side of the desk. So another question I ask is whether a particular project or role will allow me to be a student again.

Getting out of my comfort zone can be frightening and nerve-racking, but it also makes me feel the excitement of exploration and the possibility of growth. With my full-professor status, I have the confidence to put myself into new situations in which I'm often quite inexperienced. Even though I am a historian, I have presented at pop-culture conferences on films and fantasy literature. Recently, despite my Luddite tendencies, I took a giant leap into new media and the Harry Potter fan universe by hosting [a monthly podcast](#) called "Reading, Writing, Rowling."

For other faculty members, that could mean developing a new field of study and even going back to school for additional coursework or certification. It could mean learning to use new technologies or forms of writing and communicating ideas. It could mean attending conferences and workshops in new-to-you fields in order to explore those possibilities. Or it could mean engaging with a new community of scholars and professional organizations, or exploring travel to new places for research or with students in overseas-studies programs.

More than any other time in my life, I feel free not to be immediately good at a particular new thing I'm trying. The frustrations and embarrassments that accompany the beginning of any project are more easily swept aside because I don't need to climb higher on the ladder of academic success. Once again, I am in the learning mode that drew me to academe in the beginning.

Question No. 3: Is it connected to something I feel passionate about? Some projects are neither fun nor designed for my own continued growth but represent an opportunity for me to advance ideas, movements,

or causes about which I care deeply, making them worth my energy and effort.

Being a full professor means not only having a wealth of experience but also status and institutional power that can be put to positive use. That can include service to the college or community, or to certain segments of the community who have been neglected and might benefit from advising and mentoring. This could mean using my talents for political or community causes, to educate people about aspects of my field not commonly understood, or to organize lecture series on crucial topics of immediate political relevance. I am particularly interested in helping women in early stages of their academic careers navigate a system that is still fraught with obstacles for them.

Committed to the value of liberal-arts study, for example, I accept opportunities that help me promote the liberal arts among students, parents, and the public. I have also taken on more mentoring roles and been willing to speak truth to power when something appears to be going amiss in my institution or in my community. Having full-professor status affords me the authority to advocate strongly for my values and to advance the causes dear to my heart. Doing so provides a motivating sense of direction and a higher purpose.

Question No. 4: Does it provide me with a sense of accomplishment? At this point in my career — unless I change my mind and go into administration — there are few rewards within my institution to feed the internal need we all have for advancement. Selecting the right kinds of projects and responsibilities can fill that validation void. I am now in a position to figure out what kinds of work make me proud of myself.

Publishing, podcasting, teaching, faculty leadership, advising, travel, mentoring, public and community roles — whichever of those allows me to look back with a sense of having accomplished something important, to me or to the world, is worth doing.

The things I choose to do may not be the projects a tenure committee would use to tick off a box. But now, I get to be the arbiter of what constitutes an accomplishment worthy of pride. Some of my choices are also more personal, related to church or family matters, that nonetheless imbue me with a sense of having done what is useful and valuable.

I apply those four questions to every task I'm asked to undertake or every project that comes across my radar. My rule of thumb: The projects and roles I choose should inspire a "yes" to at least one of the questions.

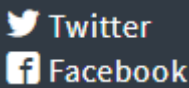
The letter from the committee promoting me to full professor urged me to remember that with this role comes responsibility for college service and leadership. Such a charge can make saying "no" especially difficult. In the last year or two, I settled on another rule for that: If something I am asked to do generates a "no" when applied to all four criteria, then I politely decline the request.

Ultimately, these questions have allowed me to say "yes" to more opportunities that might be fun, a learning experience, an expressions of my values, and vital to my sense of purpose and accomplishment. And all of that will make me a better scholar, teacher, and full professor. I am feeling full, indeed.

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