Dear Very Happy,

Congratulations. First, stay very happy. You have achieved a tremendous step in your career that reflects your creative talent, work, energy, and social skills. In certain ways, tenure may be even more important than moving up to professor. It means significant security as you continue to teach and do research, and it may open up new options such as sabbatical time and a more flexible research to teaching ratio.

You are wise to take a strategic view of your next promotion at this early stage. But first consider why you want to push to be full professor. Will you get benefits that are unique to that title? Maybe more generous tuition benefits for members of your family? Or is the security that comes with tenure a sufficient accomplishment, since you now can enjoy your teaching, mentoring, committee activities, and research with much less stress. (It is rare for people to have the security of knowing that their job will continue for their professional lives.)

If you do decide that becoming a full professor is an important goal for you, recognize that promotion to full professor is not a given in any department or institution. And as you might expect, the requirements with respect to your accomplishments and fundability will exceed those you have experienced so far. Academic institutions have faculty handbooks that are very helpful in understanding those requirements. They list the criteria for each academic step along with the benefits that accompany it. For example, the criteria may include evidence of your expertise in your field. For promotion to associate professor the expectation may be that you have achieved national prominence as shown by service on study sections or committees in your national professional organization and being PI on a research grant, whereas for full professor the expectation may be that you have chaired national committees, been invited to be a keynote speaker at national or international research meetings, have highly cited publications, and be PI on two research grants.

Continue to ask your full professor colleagues for specific advice; remember that they have just voted to include you in their community FOR LIFE. They have a vested interest in your success. You should also talk with professors on your institution’s promotion and tenure committee (or similar committee) about what they consider when looking at a portfolio for promotion to full professor. And ask your colleagues at other institutions about their processes and requirements for promotion. These may differ from those at your institution, but they will give you a good read on requirements in your discipline. (Also, it’s excellent for people at other institutions to get to know you as you move toward promotion, since letters of recommendation from people outside your institution are often solicited as part of the evaluation.)

Finally, Labby encourages you to remember that we all do best at what we enjoy. From among those activities that you know to be valued by the promotion committee, identify the committee and community service work that you like most. Those are the areas in which you will do well and be able to keep your energies directed. With tenure, you can reach even higher as you appropriately bask in the glowing acknowledgment from your colleagues that you are the real deal.

Again, congratulations.

—Labby