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# Meeting the Challenge of an Aging Professoriate: An Opportunity for Leadership

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The composition of the American professoriate by age is a matter of considerable contemporary importance and controversy. Just as the American society is growing older, so is the American professoriate, but even more so. It is well documented that the average age of higher education faculty has been steadily increasing since the late 1970s (George & Winfield-Laird, 1984). In the most recent study conducted in 1987 by the United States Department of Education (1990), the average age of full-time faculty was 47. By 1995, it is projected that the mean age of faculty will be approximately 50; and, by the year 2000, the percentage of United States faculty 55 years of age and older will be 52 per cent, more than double the 25 per cent of today.

The chronological age structure of the American professoriate is compounded by two indicators of career age: academic rank and tenure status (George & Winfield-Laird, 1984, p.7). Fully two-thirds of today's full-time faculty are tenured, and over half are in the senior ranks (U.S. Department of Education, 1990). Schuster (1990, p.9) has used the term "congealing" to indicate that the American professoriate is growing older and increasingly more tenured.

The issue of an aging professoriate holds particular relevance to faculty developers who have as their ongoing responsibilities the development of programs and policies that foster faculty productivity and vitality, regardless of age. Philosophically, most of us who work with faculty believe in the capacity of people to grow and develop throughout their lives. Therefore, we look favorably at ways to assist faculty to continue to

be productive and involved in their profession and in the life of the university as long as they so desire.

Given that much of the current literature speaks of the detrimental outcomes associated with an aging faculty, a critique of the recent research literature on faculty productivity and aging will be provided that supports a more humanistic and balanced view of the issues surrounding an aging faculty. Included in this analysis will be the latest findings dealing with the impact on higher education of the elimination of mandatory retirement for tenured faculty. With the expected increase in demand for faculty and possible faculty shortages in the near future, policy implications that call for effective and humane leadership and appropriate strategies for senior faculty renewal will be explored as well.

## **The Issue of an Aging Professoriate: Perspectives in Conflict**

There has been much conjecture on the implications of an aging and “congealing” faculty on the quality of higher education and on academic careers. Those who take a more pessimistic view contend that the increasing percentage of aging faculty results in a litany of administrative woes. Cited among the chief concerns in the higher education literature are: (a) less openings of new and tenured positions for women and minorities, (b) lack of mobility and advancement in academic careers often seen as crucial to continued faculty productivity and vitality, (c) increased costs to the institution given the higher salaries paid to older faculty, (d) deterioration of educational quality due to a decline in scholarly productivity and teaching effectiveness often associated with advancing age, and (e) loss of the infusion of new knowledge and skills brought in by new PhDs (Clark & Lewis, 1988; Keller, 1983, & Mehrotra, 1984).

A somewhat more optimistic perspective is provided by Bowen and Schuster (1986). Although they concede that the mean age is currently on the rise, in their judgment, the referring to the “graying and staying” of the faculty with dread is unwarranted. They contend that a balance will be reached over the next two decades as the large number of faculty hired during the great expansionary period in higher education from the late fifties to the early seventies begins to retire, thereby creating more positions for new faculty, not less. They predict that by the year 2009 the number of appointments that will be needed may well equal nearly two-thirds of the total number of faculty employed in 1985—more than 500,000 new positions (p.198). Schuster (1990, p.9) has characterized the

result of such an employment shift as potentially leading to a "bipolar" faculty by the mid 1990s, simultaneously large cohorts of younger and older faculty posing extraordinary challenges to college and university policy makers well into the next century.

Connellan (1987) using data from the 1984 Carnegie Corporation survey of faculty to project faculty retirements concludes that "the retirement rate — assuming all other things being equal — will double over the next two decades" (p.5); the highest numbers of retirements are anticipated to begin in the second half of the 1990s. This exodus coincides with the expected increase in postsecondary enrollments during the mid-1990s as the children of the "baby boomers," now increasing elementary school enrollments, begin to graduate from high school.

Both demographic trends should free up tenured positions for new doctorates regardless of sex or race and, if given the proper incentives, lure back to academe those working in the private or government sectors of the economy as well (Bowen & Schuster, 1986). Already there is evidence from an American Council on Education survey (1989) of an upturn in hiring rates for new faculty over the next five years, and even the possibility of faculty shortages in the not too distant future first in the sciences and business and then in engineering and the humanities.

## **Planning for Faculty Shortages on the Horizon**

An even more immediate concern may well be the availability of an equally qualified, committed, and vital faculty in the coming decade to replace the large faculty cohort waiting in the wings to retire, particularly given the current stiff competition for new hires (Lozier & Dooris, 1987). Recent research, based in large part on surveys of doctorate recipients (Bowen & Sosa, 1989), predicts that if the share of PhDs seeking academic positions continues to decrease at the current rate, a 92 percent increase in the number of new doctorates in the humanities and social sciences and a 64 percent increase in the number of new doctorates in the arts and sciences will be needed to meet the demand for faculty positions projected for 1997. In addition, McGuire and Prince (1989) project from a sample of private, liberal arts colleges a 16.2 percent increase in the number of new professors needed between 1990 and 1998, while the number of new PhD recipients is expected to rise by only 2.9 percent during the same period.

Equally troubling are those who contend that the academic career is no longer as attractive as it once was for the best and brightest of our nation (Lozier & Dooris 1987, p.2).

Even Bowen and Schuster (1986) concede that while the majority of faculty are dedicated to the profession and feel great satisfaction from academic life, the loss of status, the decline in compensation, and the erosion of the work environment are bringing the academic profession to a critical juncture. In addition, with increasingly attractive career alternatives in business, industry, and government, many new doctoral graduates are choosing not to enter the academic profession while a significant number of faculty are drawn away to other fields as well.

The decreasing interest of today's college freshmen in college teaching and scientific research and lack of desire to pursue the doctorate itself portend even greater difficulty in recruiting a sufficient number of highly capable persons over the next 25 years (Lozier & Dooris, 1987, p.2). There are even questions concerning the quality of talent pursuing the doctorate in recent years as the result of the "brain drain" to other professional fields (Hartnett, 1985).

## **The Impact of "Uncapping" the Mandatory Retirement Age (MRA): Implications of Recent Findings**

To compound the conundrum, beginning on January 1, 1994, by virtue of amendments in 1986 to the Age Discrimination in Employment Act by the United States Congress, colleges and universities will no longer be permitted to mandate the retirement of tenured faculty on the basis of age. Until then, "tenured faculty" is one of the four categories of the nation's workforce granted exemption from the immediate elimination of mandatory retirement.

There continues to be much speculation in higher education circles about how faculty will respond to the "uncapping" of MRA (Bader, 1988). Similar to the discussion on an aging professoriate, much of the higher education literature to date has focused on the need to find alternative incentives to encourage faculty to retire in order to create turnover in faculty positions and promote flexibility in staffing (Holden & Hansen, 1989). Likewise, the concern over the effects of uncapping MRA has created fear that as retirement becomes a personal decision for tenured faculty, many faculty (or at least a significant minority) will continue working past their prime.

Two studies, Lozier and Dooris (1987) and Gray (1989), have found that the end to MRA is not likely to cause a glut of professors nor likely to effect most professors' retirement plans. Among the findings of the

Lozier and Dooris survey of thirty-two universities with a data base of approximately 22,000 faculty were: (a) the average age of retirement bore no obvious correlation to MRA; (b) approximately two-thirds of the faculty had retired by the age of 66; and (c) of the two institutions with no mandatory retirement, only four to five percent deferred retirement until after the age of 70.

In the more recent study by higher education's largest pension provider TIAA-CREF, Gray (1989) found that although faculty were more likely than other workers to project later retirement ages, most nonetheless said they expected to retire before age 70. On the average, faculty members gave an expected or likely retirement age of 67.3. However, of the 600 respondents to the survey, 10 per cent would probably work past seventy, while seven percent were no longer certain about when they would retire. Even with these uncertainties, the general consensus among researchers is that, in the aggregate, the elimination of MRA will have relatively small, short-term effects on the retirement timing of tenured faculty members (Holden & Hansen, 1989).

Chronister and Keeple (1987) state the factors that appear to motivate faculty to retire are multidimensional and interactive. Studies indicate that financial considerations, job satisfaction, negative perceptions of organizational environment, and health concerns are the factors most influential in retirement decisions made by faculty, not compulsory retirement policies (Monahan, 1986).

One of the chief strategies used in higher education to facilitate the retirement of faculty before the normal retirement age has been the development of incentive early retirement programs (Chronister & Keeple, 1987). However, if the studies concerning possible faculty shortages in the near future and the lessening of quality recruits are accurate, the introduction of early retirement programs on some campuses may have been premature and detrimental to the ends first sought. Chronister and Keeple discovered that many institutions offering incentive early retirement programs lost faculty they would rather have retained. The programs encouraged those who wanted to get out to do so. However, they also enticed those who were satisfied with university work and were seen as highly productive to do likewise, often finding other teaching and consulting positions, research opportunities, or even starting entirely new careers.

## Overcoming the Myths Concerning an Aging Faculty

The belief in a need for “new blood” within the faculty ranks, which underlies much of the debate over the effects of an aging professoriate (and to some extent the uncapping of the MRA), has to do largely with two questionable assumptions: professors become less productive with age, and younger faculty are more productive than older faculty. The research simply does not support such stereotypic and ageist beliefs (see Blackburn & Lawrence, 1986, and Lawrence & Blackburn, 1989, for a complete analysis on age as a predictor of faculty performance). Many studies demonstrate clearly that older faculty have both the motivation and ability to continue productive professional lives within the university even beyond the normal retirement age. Dorfmann (1985) discovered that after deciding to retire, a majority of academics continued to perform professional roles and engaged in professional activities often at highly similar levels as before retirement.

A recent empirical study on senior faculty, most over the age of fifty, reached similar conclusions. Fuhrmann, Armour, Caffarella, and Wergin (1989) found that senior faculty were overwhelmingly satisfied, vital, and productive. Their study of a sample of over 1100 senior faculty from several different types of higher education institutions found that 85 percent of the faculty surveyed thought they were currently doing or have yet to do their best work and 70 per cent were more committed to the profession now than when they first started. Also, more than half felt more vital and saw more opportunities in their lives and their careers than ever before. Their satisfaction was related to a number of factors, especially their sense of community, autonomy, and well-being.

Caffarella, Armour, Fuhrmann, and Wergin (1989, p. 406) believe that the stereotype of tenured faculty as “deadwood” coupled with the “fear” that older faculty will not publish in sufficient quantity or teach with sufficient vigor often interfere with administrators taking advantage of the positive attributes of aging faculty: experience, stability, a sense of competence, a need to nurture, and the desire to leave a legacy, which they found to be characteristic of senior faculty. They conclude that “to maintain faculty vitality a positive institutional climate must be set first; only then can the broad range of institutional options for faculty growth be explored” (p. 408).

Clark and Lewis (1988, p.298) in their analysis of the research on age and faculty productivity conclude that

...faculty productivity in the context of the faculty roles of teaching, research, and service is not a function of chronological age, but rather is the result of the dynamic interaction over time of organizational structures, expectations, practices, and policies, as well as individual characteristics.

Given the evidence, the fear of a largely unproductive, increasingly aging faculty as the result of eliminating the mandatory retirement age is clearly unjustified. If anything, "mandatory retirement results in the university losing many of their most experienced, seasoned, productive and adaptive faculty" (Cytrynbaum, Lee, & Wadner, 1982, p.20). The challenge ahead is to broaden rather than narrow the range of opportunities for seasoned faculty and "to focus their talents and interests in such a way as to maximize their contributions to the university in a real and meaningful way" (p.20).

## **Reframing the Aging Issue: The Leadership Challenge**

Even though the actual retirement age in the aggregate is not expected to rise appreciably, there have been a variety of measures proposed as a flexible response to anticipated increases in the rate and number of faculty retirements. Among the most popular strategies have been (a) recruiting new persons to academe from government, business, and industry; (b) hiring new faculty in anticipation of known or expected retirements; (c) increasing enrollments in graduate schools and the overall financial support of graduate education; and (d) providing incentives for promising PhDs to go into academe, particularly in the arts and humanities (Bowen & Schuster, 1986; Bowen & Sosa, 1989).

A more recent trend has emerged which includes such ideas as: (a) altering the perceived notion of the appropriate or "normal" age of retirement; (b) encouraging the retention of senior faculty with incentives to continue to "buy in" to employment either full- or part-time, including phased and partial retirement options; (c) implementing improved faculty development programs, particularly those that focus on senior faculty renewal; and (d) recruiting formerly retired faculty back to academe for teaching, special projects, or consultancies (Lozier & Dooris, 1987; Schuster, 1990).

These more recent policy trends are promising developments in the reframing of the issue of an aging faculty from a problem to be circumvented to an opportunity that addresses ways to encourage those senior

faculty willing and able to continue performing their job responsibilities to do so (Kastenbaum & Schulte, 1988, p. 4).

It appears that a more positive perspective on the phenomenon of an aging faculty is beginning to emerge. It is based on the belief in the tremendous potential for growth of academics in their mid- and late-career stages and the potential influence older faculty members have on their professional and personal communities (Claxton & Murrell, 1984).

## **Providing an Opportunity Structure for Senior Faculty Renewal**

By focusing on the positive aspects of aging and the benefits seasoned faculty bring to their campuses, those of us concerned with faculty development and renewal are supported and encouraged to seek new institutional approaches to enhance senior faculty careers. Simpson and Jackson (1990) assert that “we now know enough about the major changes experienced by faculty over a career and lifetime that helpful interventions at the institutional level could be planned for and implemented” (p.176).

In line with this assertion is the recommendation made by Bland and Schmitz (1988) that to maintain professors’ energy and commitment, campus leaders, including both faculty and administrators, need to work together to forge a critical link between faculty development and institutional mission and policies. “Personal and organizational goals must be merged – [so that] faculty and institutions assume joint responsibility for vitality” (p. 205).

Clark and Lewis (1988) conclude from their review of the literature on faculty vitality that to keep senior faculty

...among the ‘moving’ rather than the ‘stuck’ requires the development and maintenance of an opportunity and power structure that opens career paths, provides developmental activities, facilitates lateral or vertical movement to ensure stimulation, involves people in organizational decision making processes, deliberately builds... relationships within the organization, and recognizes good performance in a variety of ways (p. 308).

Providing the kind of opportunity and power structure to which Clark and Lewis refer presumes not only a commitment to faculty vitality, but also a commitment to an approach to faculty development that is personally and organizationally empowering. As faculty throughout their academic careers become more involved and committed in creating their

own destinies, in concert with mutually agreed upon individual and organizational goals and priorities, both the individual faculty member and the institution become renewed. As John Gardner (1986) has pointed out "...people of every age need commitments beyond the self, need the meaning that commitments provide. ...institutional renewal starts with the individual, with self-renewal" (p. 9).

The leadership challenge to build an opportunity structure for senior faculty given an increasingly aging faculty appears to be twofold. First, a strategy needs to be developed that would seek to change long held attitudes and beliefs within higher education that perpetuate the many myths surrounding the aging process as it influences the talents and abilities of senior faculty. Second, policies and programs must be implemented that would enhance organizational flexibility to respond appropriately to changing personnel and institutional needs with a multiplicity of work, retirement, and renewal options for senior faculty. Such an approach to decision making and program development would lead colleges and universities to make better use of available academic talent regardless of age.

## **Strategies for Renewal**

Simpson and Jackson (1990) contend that many of the faculty development programs once targeted to mid-career faculty are appropriate to late-career faculty as well. Innovative programs that provide career consulting services or life and career planning to mid-career faculty are as valuable to late-career faculty given their continued high level of professional activity even after formal retirement. An essential part of these programs has been the use of faculty career consultants who assist senior faculty in redirecting and refocusing their careers and interests, often resulting in significant personal and professional growth both inside and outside traditional academic settings (Wheeler, 1990). Also, the introduction of more flexible assignments such as consulting and quasi-administrative positions and new interdisciplinary or interdepartmental teaching programs can enhance the overall opportunity structure on campus for senior faculty in both mid- and late-career.

In 1988, The University of Georgia received a three-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) to establish a senior teaching fellows program (Simpson & Jackson, 1990). The program is designed to facilitate "re-entry" into undergraduate education by outstanding senior faculty who first earned their reputations as scholars and researchers. It is the

shared belief of the program directors that late-career faculty are “increasingly sensitive to the needs of undergraduate students and find energy in developing new interpersonal relationships” and they “often better understand the importance of engaging in forums that address issues across departmental and college boundaries” (p.183). The development of mentorships, whereby new faculty are paired with senior colleagues to work on projects dealing with improving undergraduate instruction, are also important to the overall success of UGA’s teaching improvement and teaching fellows programs and may become increasingly important with the anticipated emergence of Schuster’s “bipolar” faculty referred to earlier.

In another effort to encourage the optimum use of academic talent and experience, several higher education institutions have started active programs, institutionally funded and recognized, which serve to mobilize and encourage retired faculty, heretofore a largely untapped human resource (Riley, 1986), to continue their service to the institution and the community (see Auerbach, 1986, for a description of the successful Emeritus College model for retired faculty at Southern Illinois University). In addition, formal programs in which pre- and post-retirement faculty can come together to share ideas, learn from each other, and offer their experience and help to others are being developed (Falk & Crawley, 1989). Retirement options that include phased and partial retirement and post-retirement employment are available at a number of colleges and universities across the country, for example the University of California System and Yale University as well (Furniss, 1981).

Equally important in efforts to facilitate personal and professional renewal for pre- and post-retirement faculty is the removal of institutionalized ageism within higher education. The involvement of faculty developers and academic affairs administrators is crucial to changing social and educational policies, pension plans, and government regulations that impede flexibility in career and retirement options including worklife extension for senior faculty.

## **Summary and Conclusions**

Those senior faculty who have committed themselves to sustaining careers in higher education are a vital human resource (Baldwin, 1985). The “ideal of conserving these vital human resources and honoring one’s right to work are worth striving for” (Mehrotra, 1984, p. 97). In the not too distant future, there will be a steadily growing number of faculty continuing their academic careers well into their seventies and possibly

beyond. This will call for sensitive campus administrators more interested in providing options for career renewal than ferreting out so-called "dead wood." Also, faculty renewal based largely on the infusion of "new blood" has proven to be shortsighted and counterproductive in the long run (Chronister, 1990, p. 159). Given the facts that age is not a valid determinant of faculty vitality and productivity and that a large number of faculty appointments will be needed during the next two decades, those responsible for making decisions regarding personnel policies and staffing need to be concerned with retaining productive, older faculty "heretofore put out to pasture" (Cleveland, 1987, p. 10).

In addition, intervention strategies and programs are needed to keep senior faculty enthusiastic about their careers up to their individual retirement decisions and beyond. With the number of faculty choosing to retire undoubtedly increasing during the next two decades, interventions that help the older faculty member to prepare for retirement and sustain productivity of choice after retirement are also warranted. Retirement is a transition in the career pattern and should not be viewed as "an end of all that has gone before" (Mathis, 1979, p. 22).

The most essential ingredient to any changes in policies or programs for those faculty in their senior years, regardless whether they choose to retire from gainful employment or not, is the societal and institutional expectation that they have the capacity to remain vital and productive, in the broad sense, being accepted as fully contributing members to the community of scholars to which they belong.

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