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A "Community of Scholars?": Conversations Among Mid-career Faculty at a Public Research University

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This article reports on a study of issues of faculty isolation and morale in mid-career faculty. Interview questions probed the dynamics of individual careers and asked about the quality of work life in the department and university, and changes in work life over the course of careers. Findings suggest that a majority of faculty, regardless of professional interests or scholarly prestige, would like greater interaction with departmental colleagues, more recognition from their department and university, a reward system based less on outside offers, and more fluid communications with upper-level administrators. Faculty comments clearly illustrate the advantages of an academic career: the autonomy and freedom to pursue one's own interests and set one's own priorities; the ability to have several "careers" in the course of a single faculty career. Findings suggest that faculty needs vary substantially with career stage and that effective faculty development programs will be responsive to this variation.

This year POD and AAHE highlighted the theme of community within academe. Financial constraints, increasing disciplinary specialization, and heightened demands for research and teaching productivity have eclipsed our sense of ourselves as a "community of scholars." What we have gained in time and efficiency has had costs in collegiality and communication. Are the trade-offs between time/productivity and community/dialogue effective as short term strategies, but ultimately detrimental to the academic vitality of individual faculty and the institutions they serve?

Higher education organizations often use their conference themes to promote introspection about emerging national and social trends like the growing diversity of our population, public dissatisfaction with academe, and issues of accountability. In focusing on community within the academy, however, we are faced with a concern that faculty have been discussing implicitly and explicitly for some time. In studies on our own and other campuses, lack of collegiality is a critical issue for junior and exiting faculty (Amey, 1992; Boice, 1991; Fink, 1984; Johnsrud & Atwater, 1991; Olsen, 1992; Olsen & Sorcinelli, 1992). In fact, we found that satisfaction with collegiality actually declines over the pretenure period. Teaching and research pressures militate against interaction (especially informal interaction) with departmental

colleagues, even though faculty have had more time to establish relationships and share common scholarly interests. This pattern of behavior has particular implications for teaching, because faculty must maintain contact with colleagues in the same research area (if not the same campus) to achieve the national recognition required for tenure and promotion at a Research I institution. There is no similar pressure to discuss, review, and collaborate in the instructional arena.

Furthermore, as the interaction among departmental colleagues over the past decade, has become increasingly formal and task-oriented (e.g., hiring and tenure committees, salary review), the dialogue has taken on a more and more evaluative quality (Edgerton, 1992). The culture of academe has always prized autonomy and academic freedom, but may now also foster isolation. Isolation, in turn, is likely to lead to lower morale, less institutional loyalty, and even less creativity. Research has shown that one of the key factors distinguishing faculty who remain highly productive over the course of their careers from those who do not is collaborative work with other faculty (Austin & Baldwin, 1992; Baldwin, 1990).

Reflecting on their own careers and attitudes, a committee of associate and full professors decided to explore some general questions about the mid-career faculty experience at Indiana University. Believing that mid-career faculty are in many ways the "heart and soul of the institution," they described their purpose as "to understand our colleagues' endeavors, their contributions to their fields and to the university [and]...to explore our sense of a rising level of isolation among them, isolation that leaves many issues unarticulated and unaddressed."

With the help of the Office of Faculty Development, these faculty generated an interview schedule and began the task of selecting and interviewing faculty. Results of the interviews were compiled into a report (the text of which follows) distributed to all members of the campus community through the Office of Academic Affairs' newsletter. The Faculty Development office organized forums where committee members could speak directly about their interviews with department chairs and school deans. Finally, the committee, along with the Office of Faculty Development, plans to follow up the report with a series of faculty "conversations" carried out across campus.

These conversations highlight the wide-ranging nature of faculty contributions to scholarship and the institution and help disseminate practical information gleaned from faculty and faculty interviews about coping with the stresses of academic life. Based on their interviews, the committee felt strongly that the seeds of community are still alive within the university, but that they must be more actively nurtured—a "sense" of community being essential to the long-term vitality of individual faculty and the institution.

The study and the follow-up sessions are tangible evidence of faculty's commitment to their careers and to the academic community in which those careers unfold. Such efforts also demonstrate how an Office of Faculty Development can help bring faculty initiatives designed to enhance a sense of community to fruition, working from inception of idea through collection of information to program development.

Study of Mid-Career Faculty: Report of the Family and Work Committee, 1991-92

We defined mid-career faculty as those who were some years past tenure but several years from retirement. The faculty we interviewed were, with two exceptions, between 45 and 55 years of age. We developed a series of interview questions, conducted an initial round of interviews, and identified emergent themes. After discussing the preliminary findings with a group of department chairs, we added several questions to our interview questionnaire and began a second round. In this second wave of interviews, we sought people who differed from our original group in disciplinary affiliation and professional interests. Overall, the second set of interviews confirmed the themes, issues, and dilemmas identified earlier. (Interview questions are available upon request.)

Ultimately, each member of the seven-person committee interviewed three to six faculty members (N=33), with most interviews lasting between one and two hours. Our sample was not selected randomly, but rather with an eye toward representation of different schools, different disciplines, and different stories to tell. Despite the fact that we did not use a random sampling strategy, we feel we

captured a cross-section of faculty views in the thirty-three interviews completed. Of the faculty members interviewed, about 70 percent were male, 30 percent female (proportions comparable to the university as a whole). Approximately 60 percent were from the College of Arts and Sciences, 15 percent each from the Schools of Education and Business, and 10 percent from the School of Law.

In addition to selecting individuals from a range of disciplines, we attempted to interview faculty whose teaching and research interests and stature varied. We spoke with several faculty who were among the most prominent researchers in their department; they had attained distinguished rank and/or were widely cited, published, and recognized as leaders in their own disciplinary area. Other mid-career faculty were less intensely invested in their scholarly research but were devoting substantial time and energy to teaching or service; some faculty were in transition and beginning to explore new directions. We saw our mission as giving voice to the people who told us their stories. A summary of the themes in faculty interviews follows.

Central Themes: Freedom, Control and Recognition

Mid-career faculty members identified three themes that shape the satisfactions and stresses of their lives: freedom, control, and recognition. The greatest source of satisfaction for faculty members was the freedom that comes with tenure to do what they want, when they want, and with whom they want. The quest for tenure had forced them to concentrate on meeting goals and agendas set by others, particularly in developing research programs that would impress leading specialists in their area and be publishable in the short term.

With tenure, many felt freer to explore new avenues of interest, to take on riskier ventures, and to address wider public audiences and concerns. A remarkable number of faculty members reported that their energies and satisfactions now come in working in areas where scholarship intersects public life, in advising non-profit institutions, writing for lay audiences, or in national and international projects. One faculty member stated, "Hard to say I've had the same job all these years. More like four or five. That's the advantage of an academic career." Another described his career as having "gone in cycles." He

was at a low in the mid 80s when "I thought what I was doing was bull. I was bored. [There was] a hole in my vita. [Then I changed the direction of my research.] Now I'm on a high. People are beating a path to my door."

This freedom to be less bound by the expectations of others is not without costs. Control over one's own career also means responsibility for the decisions one makes—decisions about what to study, how to teach, and how to apportion one's time rest firmly with the individual. The locus of control is no longer with outside judges and criteria but within oneself. "I have only myself to blame," mid-career faculty members say, when they have trouble balancing academic responsibilities and commitments. And they spend much of their time on activities that the university does not recognize as teaching, research, or service—in fact, does not recognize at all.

Scientists report that they have become more like administrators writing proposals, hustling resources, and smoothing interpersonal problems in their labs, rather than actually doing science. Humanists report that they are called on to direct national professional organizations, evaluate manuscripts, recommend public policies, and lend their expertise to non-profit institutions and other public programs. Much teaching becomes informal: directing graduate student research, evaluating applications to graduate school, and supervising teaching assistants. Teachers are called on to serve in important and time-consuming activities that set and administer policy in their departments and colleges. One scholar, for example, described one of the greatest satisfactions of the past several years as the vision, development, adoption, and administration of a new doctoral program in his field.

The Committee was struck by the inspiring richness of choices and contributions our colleagues are making. Some publish books and articles that make significant contributions to their fields. Others write for a broader audience outside their discipline—using their scholarly expertise not only to make scientific and social phenomena more accessible, but also to explore and inform the general public about associated legal and moral issues. Others contribute their knowledge so that fourth-graders will have better textbooks or a Civil War museum will include the story of race along with that of battles. Others dedicate energies to running clinics in poor neighborhoods. Still others

study children, the environment, and the disabled and make recommendations to policy-making bodies. These activities all result from the freedom tenure brings, and they establish the true diversity of the university's contribution to public life.

Two basic sources of stress result. The most common is the complaint that faculty members do not have enough time to do all the things they want and are expected to do. They feel harried but can't blame others because they accepted each assignment voluntarily. And yet faculty members find it difficult to balance obligations or set priorities, particularly when urgent appeals to read a student's dissertation chapters or a colleague's article, serve on a committee, or meet a deadline are pitted against long-term projects.

The second complaint is that the current reward structure makes it difficult to recognize or reward adequately those important contributions that do not meet rigid, traditional definitions of research, teaching, and service roles. Research is books and grants; teaching is contact hours; service is the parking committee. What creates coherence and integrity for each faculty member, however, is the particular way that he or she takes advantage of the freedom to accept meaningful challenges. Many faculty members remember as unfair the "old days," when chairs set salaries based on friendship, but also believe that the old system did a better job recognizing each person as an integrated whole. Many faculty believe current salary policies are procedurally fairer but problematic because of narrow definitions of what counts. Faculty members feel that they are unappreciated as individuals and so see little correlation between merit and salaries.

Salary Issues

One of the dominant themes in our survey of mid-career faculty was that of salaries. Faculty are particularly concerned about outside offers. Although there is no formal university policy regarding external offers, many, if not most, schools and departments have raised a faculty member's salary because of another institution's offer. Faculty perceive external offers, if not as common, then at least as frequent enough to be a significant factor in determining overall salary levels.

Almost everyone views outside offers as harmful. They erode loyalty to the university, cause people to look elsewhere to be recognized "at home," and create inequities between those "tied to the university" (usually due to family commitments), and those who are free to move. When significant rewards are based on outside offers, those who are otherwise content seek offers elsewhere. While there may be no initial desire to leave, a serious offer usually causes the person to consider, if not accept. Even negotiations that result in a raise and additional perks at the university often produce ill will and alienation and increase the probability that a faculty member will eventually leave. As one faculty member put it, "The policy [of matching external offers] privileges the gypsy scholar and takes all the loyalty out of the institution. It makes everyone a free agent and takes away all incentive for playing for the team."

Meeting outside offers causes pay inequities within a department that are significant and often not merit-based. This disparity is especially true for faculty perceived as "non-mobile" and who would not be considered seriously for such offers. Because of limited resources, meeting outside offers often becomes the only salary move made in the department, further limiting a unit's ability to reward merit adequately and recognize achievement on its own. "The institution has a Spartan way for the have-nots and a luxurious way for the haves," said one of our interviewees.

Finally, outside offers are an ethical concern for some faculty members. They are aware that to be perceived as valuable and compensated accordingly, they need to seek outside offers, although they do not intend to, or cannot, move. Thus, seeking such offers would be unfair to both the outside institutions and their colleagues. But in order to receive recognition, faculty feel they must pursue such strategies.

Another salary issue concerns the relative pay levels within a unit. Entry level salaries are sometimes higher than salaries of associate professors with many years of experience or even salaries for full professors. Labeling this salary compression, one professor said it was the "most severe problem" facing his department. As one faculty perceived it, "The market operates in the bottom end and the top end, while those in between receive grudging annual increments. [The process is] a real disservice to people in the middle of their careers."

In recent years, many have recognized the problems of salary ranges, inequitable rankings, and outside offers. Still, there was no clear consensus about how to deal with them. Some favored a blanket university policy refusing to meet such offers. Others, however, saw external offers as a fact of life and meeting at least some of them as necessary in order to retain outstanding faculty. What is clear is that continuing as we are causes significant morale problems (and moral dilemmas) for productive faculty members.

Regardless of whether faculty salaries are high or low, faculty members perceive the increments they receive as a measure of their worth to the institution, as well as an indicator of the institution's ability to recognize and reward merit. To the extent that external offers, salary compression, and restricted definitions of scholarship fail to provide an equitable distribution of resources, faculty members feel undervalued by the university and unsupported in their work. Faculty perceptions of a meaningful and consistent relation between merit and reward have a strong effect on their attitudes and morale.

Need for Greater Support and Recognition

Given the wide range of talents, aspirations, and academic success attained by the faculty members interviewed in this study, the Committee was surprised that so many feel a need for more recognition and support from departmental colleagues, their chairperson and the institution more generally. While some of the faculty members we interviewed have withdrawn emotionally and professionally from the life of the department, most of our respondents could be defined as "successful" in traditional academic terms—productive scholars well-known nationally and internationally and well-respected by colleagues at the university and elsewhere. Surely, we thought, this latter group would exude confidence in their abilities, a sense of mastery over their professional endeavors, and appreciate the high regard in which they were held.

What we found, however, was that even among the most successful faculty, the sense of accomplishment is somehow lost in the myriad tasks of reviewing, advising, speaking, and consulting that accompany significant academic achievement. Moreover, while colleagues else-

where express interest and admiration, many believe that colleagues within their department do not appreciate them. As one faculty member stated, "I'm a prophet without honor in my own land," and another, "The most stressful thing in my current work life is lack of recognition for what I have done. All these things I've done. Nobody has paid any attention to them." Similarly, faculty members who focus more on their teaching, or on service to the community, or writing for a wider readership say they are valued by their students or the larger community but not by their departments. When the audience these faculty members hope to reach is outside academe, their accomplishments tend not to be recognized even in salary increments—virtually the only performance feedback most tenured faculty members receive. "I have a good sense of what I am doing from my own standards but trying to meet university standards is difficult, not clear." There is also a strong sense of isolation, indeed loneliness.

Current concern over "local" recognition stems from changes in the university, which is bigger and more formal, and a breakdown in more informal lines of communication. Faculty members continue to discuss issues relevant to their disciplines and departments, but these occasions tend to be formal, prearranged, and highly focused. Because they often take place in specific contexts (e.g., hiring, tenure, and curriculum), discussions are constrained by a "crisis mentality." Other venues for dialogue that allow for more diverse topics and feelings have become less and less a part of faculty members' lives. Faculty lounges are not frequented; hallway discussions take valuable time. It is more productive to work with one's door closed or even at home. More than one person said, "If I'm at the office, my colleagues think I am not working."

Our interviews suggest that faculty members are not dissatisfied with or uninterested in their colleagues, but that the press of work takes up more time than the day has. While some of this pressure reflects greater responsibilities with advanced rank and status, research on pretenure faculty suggests that the recent emphasis on "productivity" in academe may also be changing the nature of the work environment. In particular, the community of scholars one should expect to interact with most are not necessarily those in the department (who may work

in other areas of the field), but colleagues elsewhere who contribute more directly to faculty's research.

One faculty member who is leaving to accept a position elsewhere said, "The big thing is the lack of colleagues who are doing the kind of work I am doing....There is only one person on the faculty [in another department] I can work with, maybe two....I'm lonely intellectually. I keep track of things through electronic mail." And later when asked what he would change at the university, the same faculty member continued, "spirit of collegiality....too much out of your hide to work together. Multidisciplinary programs, joint publications all [come] out of your hide. Responsibility-centered budgeting encourages you to stay within your own department and school. The main reason I'm leaving is I'm lonely."

Faculty in the present study differed from those in other studies carried out on campus in the extent to which comments focused on salary and other monetary issues. One of the negative consequences of less frequent, informal communication about activities and performance is that the few formal indicators take on enormous importance for faculty members. Our guess is that the significance of salary becomes substantially amplified when other forums for feedback and recognition are absent.

Governance

A final issue that emerged from the interviews was faculty governance. Faculty members consistently say that governance is a key issue but interest in actively participating varies considerably. Decision-making and administrative procedures are criticized at all levels but, consistent with the literature on faculty, discontent is greater with administration outside, and usually above, the department. Faculty believe faculty governance is important but that it is also time consuming with no rewards. However, as one faculty member said, "It has to be done. The alternative is not acceptable."

Faculty members also, perhaps contradictorily, are concerned that we have "a very undemocratic process." Faculty members describe the university as having "developed a professional class of administrators who tend to make the decisions for the faculty." A subset of

faculty members also complain about the quality of administration, in particular feeling that there is a lack of "vision," long range planning, as well as a great reluctance to make "hard decisions."

Perhaps the most telling tales of faculty members' feelings about governance and administrative decision-making return to the issue of trust and loyalty. Faculty members sometimes do not believe what administrators say or do not believe that administrators will impart useful information (rather than what the administrators want the faculty members to know). Faculty members point out that the university changes rules in mid-stream with little regard for those caught in the change- over. Finally, this mistrust is often phrased in terms of the faculty member continually having to prove and actualize his or her worth to the institution. One faculty member described his feeling that the university stance was "what have you done for me lately?"

Conclusions and Recommendations

As faculty careers progress past tenure review and into mid-career, the boundaries between the professional roles of teaching, research, and service become less clear. While this spillover among roles may enrich and even make more coherent different aspects of an academic career at a personal level, it appears to prove more problematic at the institutional level where the reward system is based on three separate categories of activity—each weighted and assessed differently. Moreover, many of the faculty interviewed in this study feel that as their professional lives have gained stature and momentum, less of their time is spent on the research and teaching that drew them to academe.

In particular, faculty note that much of their "teaching" no longer occurs in the classroom. Faculty direct honors, masters, and doctoral theses; supervise labs and internships; judge student competitions; supervise teaching assistants. To keep undergraduate and graduate programs functioning at a high quality level, additional time must be spent reviewing applications, revising departmental curricula and advising students. In the press of coping with unending requests and commitments faculty have less time to spend with each other, less time to provide the informal support needed to experiment with their

teaching, and even to adequately reflect on and revise current instructional practices. Nor do many mid-career faculty appear inclined to seek the services of faculty development offices or other instructional support units.

The present report offers some insight into the problems and prerogatives of mid-career faculty and suggests some of the particular needs faculty have at this stage of their professional development. A better understanding of how faculty careers, interests, and values change over time can help us create more effective, better utilized faculty development programs. For example, in the current study it became clear that time-related issues are paramount in the lives of these faculty and that the primary tasks of teaching and research have been redefined by the myriad institutional and disciplinary demands attending academic tenure and accomplishment. Therefore, faculty development programs aimed at serving mid-career faculty may want to emphasize the time-management and professional decision-making skills critical to faculty at this stage. While such programs cannot change the organizational and structural factors that lead to the many demands placed on mid-career faculty, they can help illuminate some of the underlying dynamics and provide information about techniques for prioritizing professional responsibilities and effective use of time.

Faculty development programs also must address teaching in its broadest sense, encompassing many of the "nonclassroom" activities faculty find themselves increasingly engaged in. Some of these activities (e.g, the scheduling and administrative tasks associated with large lecture courses) may inevitably be "necessary evils." Here the best help may be in the form of strategies and suggestions for greater efficiency. Other kinds of nonclassroom teaching (e.g., working with students in a lab, supervising teaching assistants) may, however, hold significant pedagogical promise, both as important and worthwhile teaching endeavors in themselves and as a means of enhancing more traditional classroom teaching efforts.

The findings of this study also suggest that faculty development programs, regardless of their explicit focus, can implicitly create the kind of open, supportive environment that many mid-career faculty feel the university currently lacks. Faculty development programs can thus serve not only to promote individual faculty careers and the

advancement of college teaching, but can further a much-needed sense of community, providing forums for exchange of information and experience. The Lilly Teaching Fellows programs at a variety of colleges and universities across the country are good examples of how faculty development efforts can heighten discourse about teaching, but also create a community of colleagues that recognizes and supports teaching. The current study, and the newsletter and programs that follow from it, further illustrate some of the ways in which faculty development offices can promote faculty careers as well as improve the more general academic work environment. Faculty development has traditionally been synonymous with instructional development, but a broadening of focus may now be warranted. Issues of role-conflict, role overload, feelings of anomie, whether real or perceived, may need to be addressed as part of the larger effort to engage faculty's full creative energies in teaching and research.

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