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Faculty Vitality: 1990 and Beyond*

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I want to dedicate this talk to my Mother who died a little over a month ago. I have a very real sense that she is here today with us, because she's been following me around ever since. Hi, Mama.

Actually, my Mom's death is an appropriate symbol for my remarks this morning, since faculty vitality is a result of personal as well as professional and institutional factors. Grieving or other personal events can have a profound influence on a person's professional vitality.

The litmus test for faculty vitality has not been found yet. Each of us can identify faculty members on our campus who have vitality and even more readily those who do not. It is not a matter of age, although some people do seem to run out of it in later years. It is not related to money or rank, although rewards seem to follow it. It is aliveness, energy, optimism, and balance. Some of our new faculty never had it and never will; some of them had it and lost it; some still soar. I'm reminded of the story about the very old gentleman who decided to remarry, but his intended was only 45. His friends, very concerned about the physical demands of marriage, attempted to change his mind. They delicately expounded on calories burned and heart strain during marital relations. He listened carefully, pondered their ideas, and finally said, "Well if she dies, she dies." That is vitality.

I think our campuses have always been interested in faculty vitality, sometimes to keep the light burning in the assistant professor and sometimes

*Joan North presented this keynote address at the 15th Annual Conference of the POD Network on Saturday, November 3, 1990, Granlibakken at Lake Tahoe, California. Her presentation was both instructive and interactive. Rather than excise the interactive parts from this printed version, the author chose to leave them in, inviting her readers to participate by adapting the interactive portions to their own situations.

to salvage some worn out, bored, or demoralized post-tenure teachers. Many of you instigate pro-vitality strategies. But the campus personnel scene is rapidly changing. As Jack Schuster so clearly pointed out in his keynote (15th Annual POD Conference, November 2, 1990), supply and demand for faculty is at a new balance (El-Khawass, 1990; Bowen & Sosa, 1989). I see an almost consuming interest in recruiting and retaining faculty, which is unprecedented in my experience, harkening back, I suppose, to the heydays of the 60's, when I was a wee lass. If our campuses were doing a lot to keep faculty happy and vital before, we should see these efforts surge. The campus where faculty vitality is the norm is the campus which will be more successful in getting new faculty and keeping them.

And the panic is spreading. For the past year our campus's Deans' meetings featured more speculation about predictions for faculty shortages than predictions for snow. We are working with search and screen committees to help them move from a screen mentality to a search mentality, and we raised the starting salary for new assistant professors by \$6000 this year (1990).

The University of Wisconsin System recently created a System Task Force to tackle ways of successfully recruiting and retaining faculty members. The 26-page draft report sounds the alarm: "The predicted shortage of faculty in the 1990's has begun earlier than projections said it would. . . . If the predictions are correct, we will have to make an exceptional commitment now, and a major effort over the next decade, to maintain the quality and reputation of University of Wisconsin System faculties." Where the funding for all this is coming from is another issue, and all the tea leaves suggest internal reallocation rather than new monies from our supporters.

I heard recently that new faculty at UW-Milwaukee can expect initial support in computers, lab equipment, and so forth of about \$40,000, in addition to their salaries. Reputedly, Rutgers' average signing bonus is \$80,000 worth of goodies. And the story is the same for institutions in California, Arizona, and probably for schools in your own state. Faculty will be valued by our institutions in a way most of us have not witnessed.

So where does that leave us, the faculty champions whose respect for faculty never waned? It also leaves us with more respect. We may find campuses turning to us more frequently and earnestly. What do the faculty want? What do they need? How can the administration help out? It may be a dream come true. We may be in a position to play a big league role in the new era of faculty hardball.

In trying to help our campuses retain these highly valued faculty mem-

bers, we may be able to propose a new concept of faculty development which offers both faculty and institutional vitality.

I remember debates within POD many years ago about the relative merits of approaching the personal, professional, or organizational aspects of the teaching profession. It went something like this: You have to deal with a faculty member's values and feelings before you can get into techniques of teaching style . . . no, no, figure out the mathematics freshmen need to learn and then you can systematically build the right course . . . no, no, just watch any course and you can help faculty members adopt successful teaching practices for that group of students. Those looking at the personal, organizational, or professional aspects of faculty development held fast to their separate beliefs, not unlike the wise men describing the elephant.

Since then, my impression from afar is that the professional development approach has claimed victory. But in the last five years, bringing with them such uncertainty about faculty supply, student enrollment, and resources, I have sensed a renewal of interest in the personal and organizational approaches under the new name "faculty and institutional vitality" (Bland & Schmitz, 1988, p. 190).

Actually, as Schuster and Wheeler (1990) point out, the times seem to call for an "enhanced faculty development" concept that integrates the "various aspects of professional development with the *individual* career, thereby bridging more successfully the personal, professional, and organizational elements of development. . ." (p. 279). Today, I would like to suggest two aspects of an enhanced faculty development approach: faculty wellness and institutional quality of life.

Faculty Wellness

Faculty wellness refers to organized institutional efforts to promote and maintain the health and overall well being of faculty. Although some approaches to wellness concentrate only on the physical aspect, a full wellness program will address other aspects of a person's life, such as career issues; work situation; family, social, and spiritual or meaning, issues.

We are all familiar with the general public's interest in promoting better health. We tell a story in Stevens Point about a couple who die in their 80's and go to heaven where they have wonderful golf courses, great entertainment, and good weather. The husband doesn't seem too happy about the luxury and mopes around. So his wife asks him what's bothering him. He snaps at her, "If you hadn't made us eat all that damn oat bran, we could have enjoyed this ten years ago!"

But people are skeptical. Perhaps some of you are, too. Is the wellness

movement a fad? All I can say is that people used to ask the same question about faculty development. Actually, few people raise the fad issue about either one anymore. Both seem to have become part of organizational life in their respective sectors. And the two movements actually have much in common. Let me elaborate.

1) Although the wellness movement is about 15 years old, and I guess faculty development to be about 30, both have moved from fairly simple orientations to complex, holistic views. If the new focus for faculty development is faculty and institutional vitality, the new focus for wellness moves beyond fitness to personal self esteem and organizational self responsibility (Powell, 1990).

2) Both began as fringe, do-good operations within organizations and then established themselves as vital to organizational success.

3) Both deal with the interdependency between the personal and professional.

4) There is a natural connection between faculty health and faculty vitality. In fact, a recent Gallup Poll reported that when asked the question "What is health?" the number one, most frequent, response was "living a vital life" (Metcalf, 1990).

Today, all over the country, campuses are starting employee wellness programs in the hopes that faculty and staff will feel better and do their jobs better. In a survey I did a few years ago, I identified over 200 campuses with formal wellness programs (North & Munson, 1990). Although some programs were primarily interested in reducing health care costs, all recognized the interrelationships among body, health, emotions, and one's performance at work. All see the closeness between the human *being* and the human *doing*.

Faculty members who are exhausted by stress cannot be lively and vital: they probably snap at students, avoid any new ideas which would take up more of their time, and can't think clearly. Furthermore, medical research now tells us that these people will become disabled or die before their time, perhaps vacating a key faculty spot.

New faculty members who do not establish good social networks may suffer from loneliness and depression and will consider leaving your institution. As an aside, I might mention that in Stevens Point I helped to found an organization for single professionals who are new to town—the Central Wisconsin Network. It now has over 200 members and sponsors dozens of activities each month. I consider that one of my finest contributions to faculty wellness.

Furthermore, many faculty groups, like employees in other sectors, now feel that organized wellness activities are an employment perk that makes

working at one location better than working at others. Some of our highly paid new faculty may come to expect a wellness program along with the computer on the desk.

From my survey I determined that few wellness programs operate under or in conjunction with faculty development programs: University of Georgia, University of Louisville, and the University of St. Thomas are notable exceptions. These campuses use a comprehensive model of wellness that addresses not only the physical aspects of faculty members, but also other dimensions such as the intellectual, occupational, social, emotional, and spiritual. When one examines all these dimensions of wellness, it seems quite possible that faculty wellness could be a vital part of the “enhanced faculty development” commitment of a campus.

Institutional Quality of Life

The second aspect of an enhanced faculty-development I would like to propose is institutional quality of life, which for me means those structures, norms, or processes which lead to faculty and institutional vitality. I would like to suggest some of my own. There are three quality of life issues I would bring to your attention: continuous improvement versus assessment process, social structures, and work stressors.

Continuous Improvement Versus Assessment Processes

The mystery is gone, and with the assessment movement blossoming no profession or campus seems immune from having to prove it is doing a good job. I know of a few campuses where assessment has been a real stimulus to faculty and campus vitality. I think of Alverno College in Wisconsin, for instance.

But I also have fears that the assessment movement in higher education could become one of the major sources of faculty and institutional routinization and dullness—the opposites of vitality. William Glasser argues in a seminal *Kappan* article that we should focus our educational ventures on quality, not control, that efforts to standardize education so that students do well on assessment tests produce more fragmentation of information (because it’s more testable), and less satisfaction and creativity for faculty and students alike (Glasser, 1990). He recommends that we focus on producing quality with a formalized approach to continuous improvement of our work, much like Deming’s recommendations to Japanese industry decades ago. While much work still needs to be done to adapt the continuous improvement

model to higher education, it seems to me that this type of accountability model could satisfy our doubting publics and foster vitality at the same time.

The thought of working with my colleagues on continuous improvement of our ventures sounds refreshing and it sounds a lot like faculty development.

Social Structures

The second quality of life issue I want to suggest refers to social structures. We have read a great deal recently about the power of cooperative learning, learning in teams; we have also read that this approach promises significant intellectual as well as social gains (Millis, 1990). Why not conceptualize cooperative learning for faculty as well? Imagine how helpful an organized group of colleagues could be for new faculty, for faculty beginning research projects, or for faculty teaching a different size class. Working in pairs or a team could provide added motivation and support. We know that creativity is enhanced by group interaction and yet so much of our academic life remains solitary.

One of the lessons of stress management is that individuals need social supports both at home and in the professional setting. Faculty vitality and social supports go together. Although faculty governance provides some of this social interaction, the major missions of our campuses—teaching and research—seem to remain solitary activities. Are there ways to promote increased interaction among faculty in their teaching or research roles?

POD has long been an advocate of social supports and support networks, notably at its conferences. I remember, as many of you do, mixers, buddy systems, and so forth. One year the Core Committee was told that their primary job during the annual conference was to help make people feel at home.

Work Stressors

The final quality of life dimension I would like to address deals with work stressors. In the stress management class I teach to undergraduates every semester, I advocate that each student identify his or her environmental stressors, those things in one's life which always seem to lead to frustration, worry, fear, or disappointment. It seems to me that if we want to make our work environment as desirable as possible and if we want to reduce as many barriers as possible to vitality, we would want to know which things in our campus environment cause faculty the most distress.

An annual "distress survey" could reveal those areas which most significantly impair faculty vitality. Similar surveys at my campus, in tandem with our strategic plan, have identified clear goals for the administration. Common

faculty problems may include role ambiguity (not knowing what exactly you are getting evaluated on), lack of rewards, not having enough time and needing to give up or phase down less important tasks, isolation, and managing family and work responsibilities.

The University of Wisconsin-Madison's School of Agriculture and Life Sciences developed a three-tape series called *Coping with Academic Stress* which may be helpful in pinpointing sources of academic stressors.

Your Own Wellness and Vitality

At this point I would like to shift the focus and get more personal. Let's talk about you. I would like to have you look at your own vitality, your own personal level of wellness. At wellness meetings there are always special sessions for people in care-giving professions like yours, because many professionals in this field tend to others while neglecting themselves. Let me give you my personal prescription for wellness, a prescription which addresses stressors in your environment and your tendencies to react to them in certain ways. Finally, I'd like to suggest some ways of keeping your body in an anti-stress mode.

1. Stressors

Stressors are those events, people, and environmental conditions (such as smoke or noise or cold), that have a tendency to trigger the stress response. Stressors can be negative or positive events, and even when positive can still cause you physical problems. A wedding, for instance, is a joyous occasion, but also frequently associated with stress.

Take a minute to jot down stressors in your life, personal or professional. See if there are any you can avoid, and scratch them off. See if there are any you can fiddle with or rearrange so that they are not so potent. Make a few notes by one that you could try to change.

Work hard toward reducing the number of stressors in your life. For those you can't get rid of, think of some ways to minimize their effect.

2. Improving Your Reactions to Stressors

One of the things we learn from Albert Ellis or from Viktor Frankl is that we have tremendous power over our own reactions, even though we may react so automatically that we forget about our control (Ellis & Harper, 1979; Frankl, 1984). A major part of easing stress in your life, if you are like most people, is learning how much we create our own stress—in our heads. For instance, some people get impatient and angry when they are delayed and

others find alternative ways to use their time. Most physical stress occurs because we have interpreted circumstances in a way to produce stress or because the mind has created negative messages or worries. The mind is capable of creating the thought "I have exciting challenges today," as well as the thought "Oh, God, I have a hard day ahead."

For this exercise, work with a friend or colleague. You will need a watch with a second hand. In one minute, tell your partner the factual events of your day yesterday—just the facts, no emotions or interpretations. Now go back and retell the same facts, only this time, "awfulize"; tell the story as if you'd been cursed from birth, the story according to Excedrin. Now, go back and retell the story again, only this time from the point of view that your whole life is a wonderful opportunity; you see good in everything (Tubesing & Tubesing, 1984).

Notice how easily we awfulize; it's our national pastime, our heritage. The soaps specialize in it. We choose and reject our friends by their awfulizing abilities. Who wants a friend who's always optimistic? And yet awfulizing causes the predisposition to stress. Most of us have awful enough lives without awfulizing the neutral things. I have heard the suggestion that people in "hopeful professions," professions whose very structure assumes that positive change is possible, such as faculty development, may have fewer proficient awfulizers. Is that true for you?

So here is my list of suggestions for improving your vitality and health through improving your reactions to and predispositions toward stress:

a. Don't awfulize neutral events. Don't awfulize awful events, because that makes them worse.

b. Find the little critic in the back of your head, the one that specializes in your weaknesses and limitations. Don't let this be an unconscious process; listen to what it has to say and write the script. Whenever you hear one of these messages, imagine someone yelling loudly, "STOP!"

c. Monthly, identify or reaffirm four or five good qualities you have and keep reminding yourself about them, preferably in a relaxed state.

d. Make sure you have one or two true friends. True friends are people whose faces light up when you enter the room and who have no plans for your improvement.

e. Watch for little victories and concentrate on your successes. Most people don't take time to give you credit or much thanks, so you may have to ask for it or give it to yourself.

3. Reversing the Stress Response in the Body

The body is stuck with all the harmful physiological effects of stress if you have too much of it or if you don't exercise it out: muscle tension, heart difficulties, immune system problems, digestion difficulties, kidney problems, diabetes, not to mention body odor or clammy hands. The things I will recommend are not necessarily geared to eliminating the stressor or improving your reaction, but are directed to fooling Mother Nature into thinking that the alarm has passed and the body can return to normal. We try to find ways to relax the muscles (making breathing slow and deep) and warm the extremities.

Let's practice. Work with a partner who is sitting straight in a chair. You should be standing behind your partner. Now rub your partner's shoulders and upper back. Begin by alternating each of your thumbs, rubbing down the muscles on each side of the spine. Do that six times on each side. Then make thumb circles down each shoulder. While these three massage steps are only a small portion of a thorough massage, they can give you an idea of how tense most of us actually are. Rubbing physically relaxes the muscles so that the rest of the body says, "Hey the alarm must have passed, the muscles are relaxing. I guess we can all go home."

Stress dots or cards are readily available and can be used to monitor your body's stress response. The dots change color with your temperature. One of the physiological signs of stress is the re-direction of blood flow from the extremities to the heart and major muscles, so one measure of stress, or lack thereof, is the temperature of your hands. Put the dot on the back of your hand and try to relax to the point where it moves from black (89 degrees), to yellow (90.6), to green (91.6), to turquoise (92.6), to blue (93.6), to violet (94.6).

Here are some of my suggestions to keep your body relaxing. In general, do the following things a lot:

- 1) Relax: take deep breaths, especially when you feel tense, angry, or frustrated.

- 2) Listen to soothing music.

- 3) Close your eyes every once in a while and imagine a wonderful beach scene.

- 4) Exercise and eat well. Exercise disposes of the waste products from stress and builds your stamina for handling more stress. Good nutrition also builds up your stamina. Too much stress depletes the body of vitamins, especially the B complex vitamins. Also, some substances act as pseudo-stressors, so watch for them: e.g., caffeine in chocolate, coffee, and tea; as well as nicotine, and sugars.

- 5) Touch and get touched.

6) Make a list of your joys and pleasures and then put a check by those that you do not do often enough.

Finally, for your health and vitality, as well as mine, be nice to deans.

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