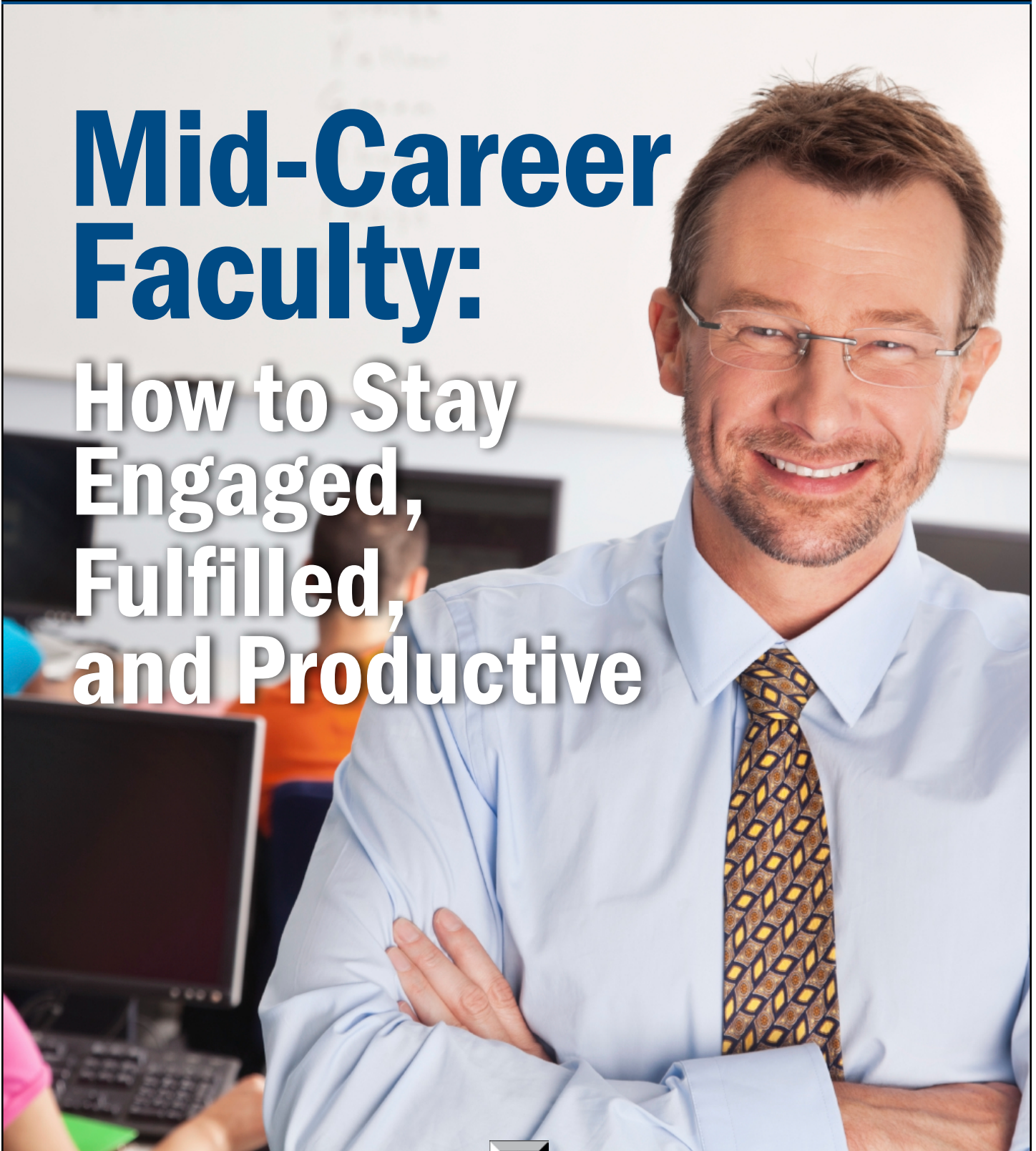


FACULTY FOCUS

SPECIAL REPORT

Mid-Career Faculty:

How to Stay Engaged, Fulfilled, and Productive



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Mid-Career Faculty: **HOW TO STAY ENGAGED, FULFILLED,** **AND PRODUCTIVE**



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Magna Publications, Inc.
2718 Dryden Drive
Madison, Wisconsin 53704
USA

www.magnapubs.com

Introduction

The importance of supporting new faculty is well-researched and understood. Those first classroom experiences are critical, and most institutions have robust programs to help new teachers successfully navigate their early years. There's also been some research and literature on senior faculty, mostly devoted to keeping them engaged and productive as their career winds down. But there is surprising little attention given to mid-career faculty. It seems we expect careers to run a bit like they're on cruise control. Once engaged, it's a steady pace forward. Just stay between the lines and you'll get where you need to go with minimal effort.

But careers don't stay on track without care and attention. To survive and thrive during those long middle years, faculty must be mindful of their instructional health and well-being. There's plenty about teaching that can make a teacher tired—an unending stream of courses to teach, lots and lots of content to deliver, students who are not always well prepared or motivated to handle the material, courses and assignments to design, student work to grade, course evaluations that can feel like personal attacks, colleagues showing signs of cynicism, budget cuts—it's a long list that seems to grow each semester. Feeling exhausted and isolated, mid-career faculty slowly retreat into a dull routine—carrying on, but with a bit less energy and a diminished enthusiasm for teaching and learning.

Mid-Career Faculty: How to Stay Engaged, Fulfilled, and Productive features 13 articles curated from *Faculty Focus*, *The Teaching Professor*, and *Academic Leader*. In addition to identifying many of the challenges mid-career faculty face, the collection offers various approaches for taking care of our teaching selves. It starts with the awareness that teaching careers cannot be powered by intellect alone. Good teaching requires emotional energy as well. We need to feed our emotional energy by taking breaks (even short ones) and making time for those activities that renew us.

We also need to spend more time thinking about the unique opportunities afforded by that long stretch of years in the middle. It's offers time to gain confidence as a teacher, to explore new options, and take risks. There's time to fix things, to get them right, or closer to right. There's time to think, not just about what we're doing, but why. And it's those why questions that lead to assumptions, beliefs, and a deeper understanding of what makes an instructional practice coherent and effective. There's also time to build mentoring relationships with students and colleagues—the opportunity to share what we've learned about success in the academy and in life.

Ultimately, we're hoping this collection generates more interest in the mid-career years and helps faculty retain their vitality and commitment to teaching. And we hope you'll let us know what else we could do that would support you during the mid-career years.

—Maryellen Weimer, PhD

Table of Contents

Waking up to Tired Teaching.....	5
Mid-Career Faculty: 5 Great Things About Those Long Years in the Middle.....	6
Climbing the Stairs: Observations on a Teaching Career	7
When Teaching Grows Tired: A Wake-up Call for Faculty.....	8
Professional Faculty Development: The Necessary Fourth Leg.....	9
Avoiding Burnout: Self-Care Strategies for Faculty	10
Teaching and Everything Else in Those Mid-Career Years.....	11
Those Long Years in the Middle	13
Rejuvenating Experiences	14
Taking Risks in Your Teaching.....	15
Helping Faculty to Be Engaged and Productive	16
Look to Midcareer Faculty for Learning Communities.....	17
Managing the Academic Leadership Pipeline.....	18

Waking up to Tired Teaching

By MARYELLEN WEIMER, PhD

I have been wanting to do a blog post on tired teaching for some time now. Concerns about burnout are what's motivating me. Teachers can reach a place where teaching does nothing for them or their students. They don't just wake up one morning and find themselves burned out; they've moved there gradually, and it's a journey that often starts with tired teaching.

There's nothing on the subject in my big file of articles and resources. I can't remember having read about it, and I'm not sure how much we even talk about it. We do talk about being tired. Teaching is relentless. It happens every day, several times a week—or potentially 24/7 if it's online. And it's demanding. There's so much more than the actual teaching. There's considerable planning involved before each class. Plus, we need to spend time with students—those who want to talk, those needing help, and those with questions or, sometimes, complaints. There are assignments to grade and feedback to provide—all carrying the expectation of a quick turnaround. With multiple courses to teach, we do get tired, but I think we regularly confuse physical fatigue with the more serious emotional tiredness that comes from a heavy workload of always being there, always giving, and always juggling multiple balls in the air.

Sometimes teaching gets tired because we've done what we're doing a hundred times before. Many of us teach the same courses year after year. If they are those bedrock, foundational courses, the content typically doesn't change all that much. We march through the material along well-worn paths. We know the way; we've seen all the sights before. Every student is a unique individual, but collectively they're all novices who ask the same questions we've heard before, who get stuck in the same places, and who repeatedly make the same poor decisions about learning.

In the beginning, tired teaching comes and goes. We may feel ourselves falling into a rut, but it's usually temporary and we're soon back on track. But later, the tiredness returns. At some point, a kind of paralyzing inertia can settle over us. We no longer have the energy or motivation to change the syllabus, alter course readings, or update the assignments or activities. Add new content? No way, the course is already too full with essential material. Offer online quizzes? Who has time to figure how that works? Besides, the students will cheat.

That's why and how tired teaching happens. The more important question is: What can we do about it? I think we have to start by recognizing that some form of tired teaching happens to all of us at one time or another during our careers. It's an occupational hazard when you work in environments that prize always being rational and objective. A quiet assumption prevails that it's the intellect that powers teaching. Content carries the day. We deny or diminish the importance of teaching's affective demands. We may be physically tired, but we may also be emotionally drained and running on empty. The two can happen simultaneously, but they aren't the same.

We can start by facing the reality of tired teaching, no longer pretending everything will be OK if we just get to bed earlier. We can follow that acknowledgement with purposeful efforts to take care of our instructional health and well-being. As many of us have learned, it's not enough to know we need to eat well and exercise regularly. Both depend on consistent action and, like poor health, tired teaching is more easily prevented than cured. Let me start a list of ways we can respond to the possibility and reality of tired teaching. Please add to the list by sharing the preventive steps that work for you.

- Purposefully make changes—not always big ones, not always a lot, but always some.
- Regularly infuse teaching with ideas and information (not just techniques) sourced externally.
- Engage in collegial collaboration—positive, constructive talk about teaching and learning with colleagues (occasional complaining permitted).
- Take time for the pause that refreshes: regular reminders to yourself that this is work that matters and that what happens to many students in college changes their lives. You are a central part of students' experiences in higher education.
- Be in the moment—in that time you and students share, be present! Listen, observe, and be alert, alive, and focused on what's occurring in that moment.
- Celebrate successes—even small ones. The question that generated good discussion, those three papers showing significant improvement, that student who finally mastered a specific skill—all are moments to be savored.

Reprinted from Faculty Focus, March 1, 2017.

Mid-Career Faculty: 5 Great Things About Those Long Years in the Middle

BY MARYELLEN WEIMER, PhD

I've been thinking here lately about that long mid-career stretch where there is no clearly defined beginning or ending. You're no longer a new faculty member, but aren't yet an old one. From a pedagogical perspective, what makes that time window unique? In a recent post on tired teaching I identified what I think is the major challenge of those years—keeping your teaching fresh and keeping yourself engaged, enthusiastic, and instructionally moving forward. On the other hand, some special opportunities are afforded by that long stretch in the middle. The question is whether we're taking full advantage of them.

- 1. More student mentoring and coaching**—At the front end of a career, especially if you're young, there's a need to keep a certain amount of distance between you and the students. But as the years roll on and teachers become more established, there's room for student relationships that focus on issues beyond their performance in a course. Yes, indeed, they must always be professionally appropriate relationships, but it becomes easier to talk with students about the knowledge and skills needed in the workplace, and about those life lessons inherently a part of growing up. Coaches provide feedback on all aspects of an athlete's performance that need improvement and then work one-on-one to remediate deficient skills. Experience working with lots of students positions mid-career teachers to do the same.
- 2. Substantive teaching improvement**—Early on, as you begin finding your way as a teacher, it's about keeping the ratings moving in the right direction. With confidence and some job security, mid-career teachers can ask those difficult questions about how well their teaching is promoting learning. Also, by that point in their career, most teachers have received a range of negative student comments and experienced the various emotions that emanate from them. The response continues to be visceral, but most of us have learned how to build some perspective around those comments that hurt more than help. We can accept that we aren't perfect teachers and never will be. This

provides the freedom to explore all aspects of how we teach. We can learn to work with what we don't do well, and use strengths to compensate for weaknesses.

- 3. Collegial collaboration**—For many of us, the first collegial involvement in our teaching is the ubiquitous promotion and tenure peer review. Although important, this kind of peer review is a poor representation of what colleagues can do for each other's teaching. During the mid-career years, colleagues can be pedagogical collaborators. The relationships with the greatest potential are ones hallmarked by trust. Then colleagues can be in each other's courses with feedback that goes way beyond whether the PowerPoint slides look good. Colleagues can challenge the assumptions on which teaching practices rest. They can assess the effectiveness of new approaches, interview students about their learning experiences in the course, and parse student feedback from a more objective perspective. Collegial collaboration holds great promise—we need to take the leap of faith and start using it in ways that realize its potential.
- 4. Time for long-range planning**—Beginning teachers are often in survival mode, and every day presents a new challenge. Assembling collections of course materials, settling into a teaching style that feels comfortable and works for students, figuring out how to deal with student excuses and grade grubbing—there's so much work to be done. Mid-career faculty have done all that and would be well-served to redirect some their newfound time and energy to figuring out where they want to go instructionally and mapping out how they're going to get there. I don't think a lot of mid-career faculty do this. For most of us our instructional growth is pretty haphazard—it happens as it happens, but it could be planned and would be better if it was.
- 5. The chance to take risks**—Teaching benefits when teachers step outside their comfort zone—when they try an instructional approach markedly different from how they normally teach, when they teach content

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they are learning along with the students, when they collaborate with a colleague to produce some pedagogical scholarship, or when they take a course or learn a new skill. Possibilities abound, but most of them require an adventurous attitude and the willingness to fail or do something not very well. The value of taking risks is less about the outcome and more about the

process—that wave of feelings; excitement, frustration, anxiety, accomplishment, and burst of energy that comes when we find ourselves exploring a new place in the teaching-learning universe.

Reprinted from Faculty Focus, March 15, 2017.

Climbing the Stairs: Observations on a Teaching Career

By PATTY H. PHELPS, EdD

My office is on the first floor of the education building. I have spent 27 years in this building. Unless I have a meeting in another department, I rarely go upstairs. Recently, however, I started a daily routine of climbing the four sets of staircases in the building. Trying to slow the progression of osteoporosis in my right hip, I go up one set and down another three times as I make my way around the building. This physical activity has given me a chance to engage in some mental reflection. Here I will briefly share five observations on a career spent teaching in higher education with an eye toward encouraging newer faculty to achieve longevity in the profession.

1. Adaptability is key.

On the first day of stair climbing, I passed by the classroom where I taught my very first class as a newly “hooded” faculty member. As I looked in the room, a smile came across my face as I thought of those thirty graduate students—most of whom were older than I was. While I remained at the university, they went on to become school principals, district superintendents, and curriculum coordinators. Seeing this classroom now made me think about the changes in my teaching. The large chalkboard once mounted on the wall is long gone. Even though I always liked using chalk (and had a special stainless steel holder for it), other tools have definitely replaced the infamous dust producer. Technology has been the greatest change in my delivery of instruction. Yet no matter what the innovation or new requirement (e.g., reporting assessment data, using iPads in the classroom, etc.), maintaining flexibility and being open to alternative

approaches will serve faculty well over time.

2. Become resourceful.

As I walked the hallways, I noticed the office directories at the main entrance to each department. So familiar, these are easily ignored. Actually looking at them each day reminded me that people are the most valuable resource available to us as faculty. Whose expertise complements ours? Whose interests are similar to ours? With whom can we bounce off ideas for teaching a new class preparation?

Furthermore, a large part of being successful in any professional endeavor is knowledge of whom to call for which dilemma. Aging in the profession reinforces that knowing where to get help surpasses knowing all the answers. Sometimes teaching faculty must let pride subside and not hesitate to find out where to get assistance. As we seek out and use the multitudinous resources that surround us on a college campus, we can become more effective faculty members.

3. Connect across departments.

On my fifth day of stair climbing, I saw two colleagues from another department on the second floor. I had last seen them on campus the previous semester. From the brief hallway encounter, they asked me to help with a research project. Had I not been upstairs, this opportunity may have not been extended. My simple exercise strategy prompted me to realize (again) how isolation within one’s own department may stifle growth and develop-

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ment. This incident also reminded me of the need for faculty to be visible and available. On several other recent self-guided building tours, I have seen past and present students in the halls or on the stairs. This too strengthens our connections and enhances efficacy.

4. Be observant.

On each stairwell there are bulletin boards. Opportunities abound for campus involvement. In the deluge of email messages, it is easy to overlook some of these options that are available to us on campus. Even if not personally interested, sharing posted information with students is a possibility. Additionally, the content of stairwell bulletin boards contains significant clues about what is currently relevant to students. Flyers with information on upcoming comedy acts and anxiety support groups serve to remind us of the lives outside the classroom that our students lead. We can then incorporate this information into lesson planning and perhaps better reach students.

5. Take regular breaks.

The whole stair-climbing experience has reminded me of the importance of building in short breaks during the workday. After each stair climbing endeavor, I have returned to my office and computer in a more refreshed state of mind. I gained a new perspective on my work. As faculty, we must try not to spend all our time in our office. Leave the building at lunch or mid-afternoon. Breaks offer a chance to recharge.

I believe that longevity for teaching faculty boils down to risk-taking and resilience. Be willing to try new things, say “yes” to opportunities, and aim to bounce back after disappointments. Taking these factors to heart, perhaps I could step it up a notch by enrolling in a tap dance class as a way to combat my deteriorating hip!

Patty H. Phelps is a professor at the University of Central Arkansas.

Reprinted from Faculty Focus, November 10, 2014.

When Teaching Grows Tired: A Wake-up Call for Faculty

BY MARYELLEN WEIMER, PhD

Bea Easton, the adjunct English teacher in Glen Chamberlain’s short story, “Conjugations of the Verb ‘To Be,’” is doing a crossword puzzle instead of grading English essays. She hasn’t touched the stack of papers since she read the first page of Staci Cook’s composition in which definitely is spelled defiantly and points are emphasized by using really twice.

Bright and articulate, Bea attaches Staci’s inarticulate phrases to her complex and nuanced feelings about teaching, her marriage and life in general. She doesn’t relate to Staci as an individual with life experiences that may be relevant to her inability to write and you don’t get the sense that Bea thinks Staci can learn to write better. Her role as an adjunct is a source of embarrassment. Her institution supports a student success mission. “Bea understood this to mean that Staci better not flunk the class; the administration, ubiquitous and growing by 10 percent over the course of five years, did not like

students (could it be a verb?) attriting. Failing. Dropping out. Transferring. ‘Things like that,’ as Staci might say, ‘defiantly makes them really, really unhappy.’” (p.134)

It’s not a bright happy story about teaching, but instead an uncannily accurate portrait of a burned out teacher. How do teachers reach this point?

Teacher burnout is a gradual process. It doesn’t happen overnight, in one course or one semester. It starts with getting tired—teaching too many courses, too many students, for too many semesters, and sometimes in environments not supportive of teaching or otherwise organizationally dysfunctional. But this kind of tiredness is easily ignored. Most of us do work too hard. We lead complicated lives and being tired comes with the territory. We confuse physical tiredness with emotional exhaustion and think we’d be fine if we could just get to

CONTINUED ON PAGE 9 ►

bed earlier.

Emotional exhaustion isn't something that jives with the objective, rational academic culture where the focus is on teaching powered by the intellect—how well we have mastered the material. In reality, teaching most of today's college students requires a great deal of emotional energy. We need to genuinely care about and connect with students, especially those who don't write well, can't calculate and seem unable to think critically. We need to believe that students can learn and that our teaching promotes their acquisition of knowledge and development of skills.

How do you know if your tiredness is emotional exhaustion and should be of concern? Are you too tired to make changes? Are you teaching courses the same way because doing things differently seems like too much work? How long has it been since you tried some new instructional strategy? Since you changed books? Since you taught a course you haven't taught previously? Since you had lunch with a group of students?

Some of the solutions to tired teaching are easy. They start with recognizing that it's a problem—that teachers get tired gradually, that burnout results from

a smoldering fire rather than a blazing conflagration. Like physical health and well-being, others can't take the actions that will make and keep us instructionally healthy. It's something we do for ourselves and it may involve making behavior changes. Some of us need to learn how to say no. All of us need to know what keeps us fresh, what sustains and strengthens our commitments to teaching and to students. All of us need to recognize the importance of emotional rejuvenation and make emotional sustenance a priority.

Other solutions aren't so easy. Many of us teach a lot of courses out of financial necessity. We don't decide who gets admitted to our institution and we might not be able to move to a place that better fits our priorities. Those kinds of external factors are not easily altered. We have to do what we can to work around them for the time being and start planning for change in the future.

How many teachers are as burned out as Bea Easton? Not many, but I do worry that a lot of us do get emotionally tired. We run on empty and don't take care of our instructional health with mindful purpose.

Reprinted from Faculty Focus, October 3, 2012.

Professional Faculty Development: The Necessary Fourth Leg

BY ALAN ALTANY, PhD

The well-known three-legged stool of academic life—teaching, research, and service—has been assumed to cover the main responsibilities of faculty in academic communities. But is there a missing leg that would add strength and stability to the stool? I propose there is. It's professional faculty development, and I would also propose that faculty committed to teaching should be its most articulate advocates. Here's a list of the reasons why professional development plays a critical role in the ongoing growth of teachers. Professional development does support all aspects of academic careers, but understanding its importance to teaching is my emphasis here.

- Professional development promotes faculty responsibility for continuous, career-long growth based upon not only the trial and error of experience, but also

theory, research, and professional collaboration with colleagues.

- The understanding of instructional concepts and teaching processes can be expanded and deepened via professional development.
- Good teaching is not just a “you have it or you don't” skill, nor is it an automatic companion of terminal, disciplinary degrees. It is an action, process, and way of thinking and as such it constitutes serious, complex intellectual work. It requires regular reflection and exposure to new ideas and information that are inherently a part of good professional development activities.
- Professional faculty development connects faculty

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across disciplines and career stages, serving to create a pedagogical community within the college or university.

- Professional development is not remedial or something only for those having problems, but should be an integral part of every faculty member's efforts to become more effective in the classroom.
- Although professional development has often been viewed as supplementary within the academy, it actually plays a central role in faculty motivation and vitality across their careers.
- Without professional development opportunities, faculty are often isolated and unaware of beneficial, innovative pedagogical approaches.
- "One who dares to teach must never cease to learn" (Dana): Professional development provides opportunities for faculty to learn about learning, about teaching, about students, and about themselves.
- Professional development should not be an optional or occasional activity. Regular participation in professional development activities should be an expectation for all

teachers.

- Professional development is the conscience of the professional academic. It makes teachers aware of what they do, asks them why, and challenges them to continually do it better.
- Professional development strengthens the affective, intellectual, and social aspects of academic life. It improves the academic experience at institutions for teachers and students.

During these times of very tight budgets, activities central to the success of teachers may be targeted for cuts. Professional development opportunities should not fall into that category, and those committed to teaching should be prepared with a set of reasons why.

Alan Altany is the director of the Center for Teaching, Learning and Scholarship at Georgia Southern University.

Reprinted from The Teaching Professor, 25.6 (2011): 6.

Avoiding Burnout: Self-Care Strategies for Faculty

BY CAMILLE FREEMAN AND BEVIN CLARE

Now that you've finished assessing your students, it's time to turn the assessment process around by looking in the mirror. If you limped across the finish line last semester, it may be time to identify some new strategies for self-care. In our "Tending the Teacher" session at the recent Teaching Professor Conference in Washington, D.C., we presented a menu of ideas to help faculty design a balanced and productive work life. Here are our top tips:

1. Examine how you spend your time and energy:

Which work-related tasks or activities leave you feeling energized or excited? Which feel like unnecessary chores rather than positive contributions? Next year, prioritize the aspects of your job that build you up or represent an important contribution to the field. Minimize tasks that drain or deplete your energy without commensurate benefit. Cultivate the art of saying "no" in order to focus on what's important to you.

2. Check your rhythm: Circadian rhythms allow us to anticipate and respond efficiently to environmental changes. Creating a degree of predictability in your schedule can help align your internal clock. While it's rare for an academic to have a "normal" day, you can control some aspects of your schedule. Waking up and going to bed at about the same time each day will help to synchronize your body clock. Similarly, eating and exercising at predictable times both support this process. Many people feel more energetic and productive when they follow these basic guidelines.

3. Rethink course design: While we all strive to have engaging and interactive courses, doing so can be quite time consuming. Use creative course design strategies and tools to provide engaging experiences for students without taking up a disproportionate amount of your time. For example, use a simple audio recording tool to provide feedback instead of typing your comments. If your school's LMS doesn't provide

an audio feedback tool, Vocaroo and VoiceThread make great options. Students appreciate the personal approach, and providing verbal feedback takes far less time than generating written comments. Also, consider using peer-to-peer review with select activities to allow students to get supplemental feedback without adding to your workload.

4. Refine your daily workflow: Are you getting bogged down with e-mails? Watching deadlines zoom by? Putting your own health on the back burner? The start of a new semester is the perfect time to change your default pattern. We suggest making one or more of the following small changes next semester. Consider using a service that delivers e-mails a few times per day rather than trying to work through the persistent interruptions of new emails arriving in your inbox. Some apps will also turn off notifications on weekends or after hours. Use an electronic “to do” list like Todoist or Wunderlist to organize reminders and deadlines. Many of our nutrition clients find that using Google or Outlook calendar scheduling and reminders is a good way to prioritize a daily walk, meditation, or a quick stretch.

5. Evaluate your food and fuel: Food can drag you down or prop you up. Step away from your desk periodically for a snack, and be sure to choose one that is nourishing as well as invigorating. Good choices

include a piece of dark chocolate; nuts and seeds (especially walnuts); berries; or foods with spicy, sour, or tangy flavors. Preliminary evidence even suggests that chocolate may be associated with cognitive enhancement (Scholey & Owen, 2013). (You can thank us later.) As nutritionists, one of the most common things we see is unhealthy or mindless snacking. Avoid snacking at your desk while you’re doing other things. Use your snack break to get outdoors or connect with your colleagues while you nourish yourself.

Self-care isn’t an all-or-nothing approach. Starting small is ideal. Pick one or two practices to implement tomorrow, and you’ll be on the road to a more sustainable work-life balance.

Reference: Scholey, A., & Owen, L. (2013). Effects of chocolate on cognitive function and mood: a systematic review. *Nutrition Reviews*, 71(10), 665–681. <http://doi.org/10.1111/nure.12065>

Camille Freeman and Bevin Clare are licensed nutritionists and associate professors at the Maryland University of Integrative Health.

Reprinted from Faculty Focus, July 20, 2016.

Teaching and Everything Else in Those Mid-Career Years

By MARYELLEN WEIMER, PhD

Like much else, faculty careers are often divided into three phases: the beginning, the middle, and the end. New faculty have been studied in some detail—probably because of the great influx of them—and likewise, so have senior faculty, although they have been studied less than new faculty. But what about that expanse in the middle? Researchers Baldwin, Lunceford, and Vanderlinden (reference below) quote sources describing this career stage as “perhaps the least studied and most ill-defined period in life.”

It may be that analysis of the mid-career has been ignored because it is that time when faculty have

“learned the ropes.” They have acquired tenure and may now carry on quietly teaching and doing scholarship. Perhaps the mid-career does not present issues that merit study. But the researchers who undertook this preliminary analysis of the middle years would disagree. They believe this career segment ought to be studied for several reasons. It is the longest time segment of the career. It contains the largest cohort of faculty. And then there is the extensive research on midlife in general, which suggests that this is a dynamic and complex period of life. And finally, mid-career academics “are living through

CONTINUED ON PAGE 12 ▶

a period of unprecedented change in higher education.” (p. 99) These changes include increasing diversity of student populations, the infusion of new educational technologies, a much more competitive higher-education marketplace, and the growing presence of faculty cohorts working part-time or on fixed-term contracts.

It was these justifications that motivated this research team to look at mid-career faculty and compare them with junior and senior faculty across three categories: work effort, productivity, and satisfaction. They used data collected in the 1999 National Study of Postsecondary Faculty, narrowing the data so that they looked only at full-time faculty at four-year institutions—still a sizeable cohort of 10,315 faculty.

Some define midlife as those years from the age of 40 to 59; others use a window of 45 to 65 years old to define the group. And some break the midlife category into subcategories—early midlife (40–49) and late midlife (50–59). These researchers used these subcategories, but they also considered the number of years teaching in higher education and career stages passed through while at a single institution.

The findings were not terribly surprising. In terms of faculty work effort, “at each successive stage, faculty spent fewer hours on their work.” (p.112) Early-life faculty reported spending 48.02 hours per week on paid activities at their institutions. By late life the average reported was 44.93 hours.

Particularly relevant to readers of a newsletter on teaching was the fact that midlife faculty reported spending the largest percentage of their time on

teaching—50.6 percent. Late-life faculty reported spending 53.5 percent of their time on teaching. Teaching was the most time-consuming activity for faculty at all career stages. As for productivity, faculty produced more articles in the middle stages of their careers. They produced more books and book chapters in the last stages of their careers.

Researchers looked at levels of dissatisfaction for such factors as time available to advise students, time available to keep current in the field, workload, and overall job satisfaction. More than 50 percent of faculty at the early midlife and late midlife stages were dissatisfied with the amount of time available to keep current in the field. Between 36 percent and 40 percent registered dissatisfaction with their workload, and almost 27 percent were not satisfied with the time available to advise students.

This preliminary analysis of mid-career faculty did differentiate this career stage from others. Its broad overview hints at some intriguing factors relevant to teaching, but further analysis is needed to identify those specifics that contribute to the instructional health and well-being of faculty during that long mid-career period.

Reference: Baldwin, R. G., Lunceford, C. J., & Vanderlinden, K. E. (2005). Faculty in the middle years: Illuminating an overlooked phase of academic life. *The Review of Higher Education*, 29(1), 97–118.

Reprinted from The Teaching Professor, 19.9 (2005): 4-6.

Those Long Years in the Middle

BY MARYELLEN WEIMER, PhD

“Mid-career faculty can easily reach a plateau where professional goals are less clear, even while an array of attractive personal and professional options may be available. The absence of motivating professional goals can cause professors to settle into a dull routine or begin to invest their energies in activities outside of their professional lives.” (p. 49) So conclude the authors of a recent interview study that looked for answers to a number of questions that pertain to faculty in their mid-career years. The authors wondered about expectations for mid-career faculty and what they experienced, especially in the way of challenges. They asked about professional support—what mid-career faculty received as well as what they might wish to receive.

Very little attention has been paid to this particular career span, even though it's the longest, which means it contains the largest cohort in the academic workforce. There's expansive (and still-growing) literature on new faculty and some on seniors, but almost nothing on the middle years. One of the challenges frequently cited by interviewees in this study (all faculty at a research university) was this lack of attention. One interviewee said, “Once you've gotten tenure, you are sort of in charge of your own fate. You've achieved a certain level of professional maturity that indicates the department doesn't need to oversee or nurture your next promotion. That's kind of up to you.” (p. 50) Those sentiments were reflected in some comments by department chairs who were also interviewed and asked about the challenges they encountered in supporting mid-career faculty. Although not all department chairs interviewed agreed, some were of the opinion that mid-career faculty got less because they deserved less.

This particular study looked at all aspects of academic careers during the middle years, not just teaching. However, a lot of what came out of the interviews related to teaching or emerged from it. There is much about teaching that can contribute to “dull routines.” The same courses are taught with the same foundational content semester after semester. Every class is different, but students still ask the same questions, many use the same poor study routines, and too many accomplish way less than they could. Yes, every semester and every course is

different, but after a few years of teaching, they're not all that different. It's easy for teachers to find their way into comfortable routines that, before long, become deep ruts.

Those interviewed for the study also regularly reported that more work was added to an already-full workload. Mid-career faculty teach the same number of courses and are expected (if they want to be promoted) to maintain the same level of scholarly output. In addition to that, during the mid-career period, they are often asked to assume administrative tasks, be it chairing the department or accepting some major committee assignment. This additional work can be a source of renewal, but the faculty interviewed often described it as something else to be done, something additional that required energy from already-depleted reserves.

Once teachers get more comfortable with the content, develop structures that guide their way through courses, and come up with activities and assignments that work reasonably well, teaching becomes an easy target for cutting corners. Students new to the course for a certain semester don't know what's missing from last semester. Colleagues who see each other's teaching only on rare occasions have no reason to suspect any changes. And for the faculty member who has stopped doing one thing and is cutting back on another, a host of reasons can be summoned to justify what, taken separately, are small changes.

It doesn't help that, in addition to being left to their own devices during mid-career, teachers encounter few mechanisms that mandate accountability. Annual performance reviews happen in most departments, but will the evidence submitted show any signs of change? Teaching grows tiring gradually, not all at once, even though everybody's pretty well used up by the end of the semester. That tiredness is transitory, cured by a brief break. The kind of tired teaching that really erodes classroom experiences for students (and teachers) happens when the content stays the same course after course and when the teacher cuts corners here and there, gradually decreasing the time and energy devoted to the course. Pretty soon, the magic is gone. All that teaching has the potential to be vanishes. What's left is

CONTINUED ON PAGE 14 ▶

a job, a steady paycheck, and a retirement plan (that will hopefully have enough time to recover).

Most faculty find the autonomy of academic positions highly attractive. But being left alone also means that faculty assume the responsibility of taking care of their instructional health and well-being. As with other health issues, prevention and early detection are the best remedies. The time to make instructional health a priority is during those mid-career years. If you're a regular reader, you know that we work hard to fill the newsletter

with lots of "healthy" ideas. The challenge is to make sure they get acted on.

Reference: Baldwin, R., DeZure, D., Shaw, A., and Moretto, K. (2008). Mapping the terrain of mid-career faculty at a research university: Implications for faculty and academic leaders. *Change* (September/October), 46-55.

Reprinted from The Teaching Professor, 23.2 (2009): 3.

Rejuvenating Experiences

By MARYELLEN WEIMER, PhD

The end of a long academic year is probably the time when we are most open to the idea of a rejuvenating instructional experience. In a recent workshop, I heard two teachers describe just such an experience. They team-taught an introductory English lit course with content that explored veteran experiences. Before the workshop started, it was clear they were an unlikely team. She was the rather typical English prof, a tad disorganized, fussing with the technology, comfortably relaxed before the group. He was a former Marine, standing off to the side, trying to look relaxed but actually more at attention than at ease.

She had gotten interested in veteran literature, reporting being amazed at the diversity of books, essays, short stories, poems, blogs, and websites. She shot him an email. As he was director of Veteran Affairs at the college and with their growing veteran population, she wondered if he might be interested in doing a course that focused on this literature. He shot back an answer, yes. And so their collaboration began. They spent the summer reading potential material and talking about experiences they might include in the course. Planning the course was fun and so was teaching it.

As they described teaching it, the differences in their styles were hard to miss. She ambled along, talking about what they had the students read, how they wrote about it, the discussions they had in class. He chimed in, keeping the details straight and briefly describing how things looked from his perspective. They'd had some wonderful experiences, including a field trip to an exhibit of combat photographs from World War I on. She happened to attend a reading by Sparta author Roxanna Robinson, and

in her low-key, comfortable manner she asked the author if she might like to come to class and speak with the students. To her surprise, Robinson agreed, and the class had a wonderful session with her.

They shared feedback from students who reported on how meaningful the course had been to them, how much their thinking about veterans and their service had changed, how they'd come to a different understanding of the warrior-hero dichotomy. Clearly it had been an unusual learning experience for the students. They also commented on how effectively the two teachers had worked together—how their perspectives complemented and balanced each other's.

But what was most compelling about the workshop was how valuable this experience was for these two teachers. Their excitement about what they'd accomplished, the pleasure that accompanied it, what they had gained personally and professionally, and their plans for continuing—it had been a rejuvenating experience that had given them renewed appreciation for how truly extraordinary teaching experiences can be, and how unlikely collaborations with new content can create synergistic learning experiences for teachers and students.

Of course, this all more or less happened by accident. The English teacher got the idea. She got a willing collaborator, who, by the way, was not paid, but volunteered his time. They did get some money from a Title III grant, but the rest all happened pretty serendipitously.

Can you plan a rejuvenating teaching experience, if you need or want one? Probably not, but there are some

CONTINUED ON PAGE 15 ▶

actions and mind-sets that seem to be conducive to their happening. Teachers need to be open to new learning. There is still much more content for all of us to learn. Teachers also need to be open to new experiences, willing to take risks, and able to engage in projects that probably mean more work (at least at the outset). Part of what made this project successful was the interest in what was happening on campus, seeing some changes

in the student population and wanting to respond with relevant, meaningful learning experiences. That goal was accomplished, and along with it two teachers had an experience that inspired them, their students, and all of us who listened. I can't think of anybody's teaching that wouldn't benefit from a rejuvenating experience like this.

Reprinted from The Teaching Professor, 28.6 (2014): 8.

Taking Risks in Your Teaching

BY MARYELLEN WEIMER, PhD

Often in workshops when I'm speaking about the process of implementing change—deciding what to change and how to change it or considering whether to add a new instructional strategy—the question of risk lurks in the choices being considered. When attending a workshop or program that offers a range of instructional possibilities, teachers typically respond to some favorably. I see it—they write down the idea, nod, or maybe ask a follow-up question to be sure they understand the details. Not all the ideas presented get this favorable response. Occasionally, the response is overtly negative. But more often there is no response. The idea doesn't resonate.

When I ask participants to look over their notes (I love teaching faculty because they do take notes) and share what criteria they used to select the new ideas they're considering implementing, the responses are pretty nonspecific: "I liked it." "It's something I think I can do." "I can use it when I'm teaching X." I think they are really saying, "This approach fits comfortably with who I am and how I teach." We first gravitate toward instructional changes that mesh with current practices and the content we teach. We choose them because we can see ourselves doing them.

And I think that's a legitimate criterion, especially for less-experienced teachers. You need to construct a solid base of instructional practices that work for you, given your content and the students you teach. But when you're an experienced teacher, sometimes you want to move beyond the comfortable, easy to implement, I know-I-can-make-it-work alternatives. Instructional risk-taking has merit. Anytime we do things outside our comfort zone, we do so with a heightened sense of awareness, greater mental acuity, and, yes, more fear. The possibility of

failure is a reality when we're doing something that we haven't done before. But the possibility for new insights and new levels of understanding is also a reality.

Any instructional practice that is new to you, such as group testing, giving students a role in creating a classroom policy, or getting students involved in assessment, is not just a new activity that requires attention to a new set of implementation details; it's a practice that shines light on fundamental beliefs about teaching and learning. It raises questions, challenges what we believe, and enables us to consider how aspects of teaching and learning look when viewed from a different perspective. Maybe our beliefs can't change, or maybe the practice doesn't fit with a particular educational philosophy, but isn't it better to have at least considered it or tried so we can say with authority that it's at odds with what we believe?

What worries me is that those new strategies that we don't write down or consider are initially rejected, not because they don't fit with our educational philosophies, but because they feel risky. We haven't done them and can't see ourselves doing them, or we hide behind our suppositions that students won't like the new approach. ("I don't use group work because students tell me they hate it.")

Are some instructional approaches just too risky? Can teachers take on something they really shouldn't be trying? Of course. I do worry that teachers sometimes try to implement too many changes at once; although, as my good colleague Larry Spence regularly points out, some teachers need to throw out the syllabus and reconstruct the course from the ground up. There are

CONTINUED ON PAGE 16 ▶

times and circumstances that merit much change. There are also times that merit making a change that feels risky. Teachers committed to career-long growth and development need every now and then to throw caution to the wind and sail into class with an instructional approach

that takes them into new, uncharted waters. Chances are the prevailing winds will lead them and their students to a place of rich learning.

Reprinted from The Teaching Professor, 28.3 (2014): 7.

Helping Faculty to Be Engaged and Productive

BY ROB KELLY

Academic leaders can have a tremendous effect on faculty satisfaction and productivity. Part of the responsibility of being an academic leader is to provide appropriate guidelines and support to foster faculty productivity throughout their careers, says Susan Robison, a psychology professor at the College of Notre Dame of Maryland. In an interview with *Academic Leader*, she offered the following advice on how to support faculty:

- **Clearly articulate what it means to be a productive faculty member.** Administrators have to solve the “productivity paradox,” embracing the need for clear guidelines without being too rigid. “Rigid criteria can get an institution into trouble because it’s hard to apply the same criteria across the curriculum. What operates in the field of English may not work very well in bioengineering, for example,” Robison says.
- **Remind faculty that they are the institution’s most valuable resource.** “Emphasize in whatever kind of PR materials they put out regarding faculty that the faculty are the greatest resource for the educational goals of the institution. ... Faculty need to be honored and respected for being that resource. Sometimes administrators might presume that and not say it. It needs to be said, and the behaviors need to be matched to the words,” she says.
- **Match faculty to the institution.** “Job candidates are evaluated based on publications and letters of recommendation. Of course, these are worthy devices to evaluate them, but no one ever asks the candidate, ‘Do you match our culture?’ I think this is an important question in getting new faculty on board who are satisfied and engaged, and to prevent pre-tenured faculty from being denied tenure, prevent midcareer faculty from burning out, and prevent late-career faculty from becoming stale,” Robison says.

- **Talk to faculty members about their shifting interests/career priorities.** “As we grow in our positions, sometimes our interests change. I would put the responsibility on the chair to create an atmosphere where those kinds of conversations might be comfortable. Usually there’s some sort of annual performance evaluation at most places, either leading up to tenure or to a contract renewal at institutions that don’t have the tenure system. Oftentimes it’s the chair’s responsibility to have those conversations, and I think a good question would be, ‘To what degree are your strengths being utilized by our department, and is there any way we can make better use of your strengths?’ That might be an open-ended way to begin that conversation. It’s going to depend on the communication skills of the chair to be able to field that sort of conversation,” she says.
- **Support professional and faculty development.** “Depending on the mission and goals of the institution, [professional development] is going to be interpreted differently. A four-year college that emphasizes teaching may fund and support, emotionally as well as fiscally, faculty development to improve teaching, whereas a research institution might support grant-writing workshops and things like that, that fit those institutional priorities,” Robison says.

Reprinted from Academic Leader, 25.5 (2009): 2.

Look to Midcareer Faculty for Learning Communities

BY ROB KELLY

Studies on faculty careers show that faculty research publication productivity plateaus or drops at midcareer. However, this one measure of faculty productivity should not be mistaken as stagnation, says Shari Ellertson, an assessment consultant at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, who conducted research on faculty “vitality,” or the intensity of engagement with their work.

“What I was reading about midcareer faculty in the literature did not match what I was seeing, which was [midcareer] faculty members who were very excited, very enthused, and very energized by being involved,” she says. “I thought it was too simplified to say all midcareer faculty have this plateau. It’s not representative of how complex a role faculty have.”

What she found through her research is that midcareer faculty tend to have professional interests and needs that learning communities can fulfill. (A learning community as defined by Evergreen State College, one of the leading institutions in the learning community movement, is “a purposeful restructuring of curriculum to link together courses or coursework so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning and greater interaction with faculty and peers.) “Indeed, learning community experts Barbara Leigh Smith and Jean McGregor say that midcareer faculty are at the perfect stage in their careers to get involved with learning communities,” Ellertson says.

While new faculty are often engaged in research that will help them earn tenure, and while senior faculty are often interested in mentoring new faculty and leaving legacies, midcareer faculty are often interested in

- finding new creative outlets,
- networking and collaborating,
- developing solutions to institutional problems,
- engaging in interdisciplinary work, and
- engaging more deeply in teaching and mentoring students.

One of the things Ellertson found in her research was that faculty who participated in learning communities

were already engaged in teaching-intensive activities at the institutions. As a result, when recruiting faculty, the institution should not only ask, “What could we have them do that’s appealing to them?” but also ask, “Where do we find them?”

“I think we find them through our teaching and learning centers on our campuses,” Ellertson says. If a campus has no formal center, there’s still an epicenter of people who focus on teaching and learning through conferences and informal groups. Institutions can also invite faculty who have won teaching awards. “It seems a little bit obvious, but we aren’t always doing those things,” Ellertson says. “Those are opportunities to tap into the folks who are really interested in undergraduate education. It happens because of relationships.”

Because of the traditional relationships between faculty and students, interaction outside of class can be difficult for some faculty and students, Ellertson says. “Simply having a pizza party and expecting magical interaction to occur between faculty and students is somewhat unrealistic, because most [students and faculty] are unaccustomed to interacting with each other in that informal sense. Yet faculty in my study said that that was one of the unique things about learning communities—that there are these opportunities [for interacting with students] that just don’t occur otherwise.”

Student affairs staff sometimes believe that student development is their exclusive domain, Ellertson says. However, faculty have some student development experience, and their interest in deepening that experience can be a motivator for participating in learning communities. “Faculty know this stuff from their experiences. They might not be able to name the theory, but they know the cycles of their students, and they’ve seen it,” Ellertson says.

The motivation for most faculty members who participate in learning communities is intrinsic, Ellertson says.

Learning community work often isn’t recognized at the institutional or departmental levels, Ellertson says. It isn’t

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built into many institutions' faculty reward structures. In addition, the faculty she interviewed cited departmental indifference—or even departmental resistance—as a drawback of participating.

“Some [respondents] said that their departments were oblivious to the fact that they were doing it,” she says.

On the other hand, faculty cited the pride and satisfac-

tion they get from helping students as the main motivator for participating in learning communities. Faculty also said they liked helping build students' citizenship by engaging them in civic-minded, service-learning projects.

Reprinted from Academic Leader, 22.4 (2006): 3.

Managing the Academic Leadership Pipeline

BY ROB KELLY

When few faculty members are willing to serve as department chair, two questions come to mind: why, and what can we do about it?

These are the questions that Deborah DeZure, assistant provost for faculty and organizational development at Michigan State University, and her colleagues sought to answer as preparing the next generation of leaders becomes a growing concern with the inevitable departure of the large cohort of leaders from the baby boom generation.

“I was hearing from department chairs that they were really struggling to get faculty who would be willing to step into the role of department chair, and I was pretty surprised by that,” DeZure says. “I thought, where are all these aspiring leaders? I needed to understand what was happening here.”

To understand the issue and to identify effective ways to cultivate new leaders, DeZure and colleagues Allyn Shaw and Julie Rojeweski interviewed 19 unit administrators identified by associate provosts and deans as “academic leaders who are highly effective in identifying, cultivating, and nurturing faculty to pursue academic leadership” and 16 faculty members identified by deans as “tenure-system midcareer faculty who have indicated an interest in academic leadership and/or have agreed to take on informal leadership roles.” (The findings of the study are highlighted in the January/February issue of *Change* magazine.)

In an interview with *Academic Leader*, DeZure talked about factors that keep faculty from pursuing leadership roles and offered recommendations based on this research.

Obstacles

There were several factors that faculty cited for their reluctance to become leaders, including the perceived difficulty of leadership positions, the negative effects it might have on their careers, and a lack of understanding of what leaders, such as department chairs, do.

DeZure says that leadership roles are getting more difficult due to increased regulation and financial cutbacks. “People are being asked to do a lot more varieties of administrative and regulatory tasks, so there's less time for ‘intellectual leadership.’ ... The financial piece we heard loud and clear: in a period in which there are more funds and you can hire more faculty and grow a program, it's very exciting to take on leadership roles. But in the past five years, which was when this study took place, it was the opposite. You could hire, but only minimally. In times of cutbacks, you might need to downsize or even eliminate some programs. People don't want their legacy to be that under their leadership the program got smaller.”

Tighter finances also make being a leader more difficult. “When people have to reorganize in order to accommodate cutbacks or get smaller where there are fewer resources to share, there's inevitable tension, and you have to be a really skilled leader to deal with the tension and conflict that inevitably go with cutting resources. It does require more refined skill sets to deal in a time of constraint rather than a time of plenty.

“When people think about going into leadership, it's rarely a one-year commitment. It may be the rest of one's

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career, so people have to be very careful and thoughtful about whether they want to deal with those things,” DeZure says.

Another top concern among faculty in the study was that serving in a leadership position may distract them from activities that they need to do in order to advance their careers. The issue is not whether early-career faculty should serve in leadership positions—most would agree that early-career faculty should develop their teaching and research skills so that they will be successful in their tenure bids. But what about midcareer faculty? Is it productive to “protect” them from leadership activities that may serve them and the institution well?

One respondent wrote the following.

“I don’t think that protecting junior faculty is doing any good, and it certainly isn’t helping the university. Part of being a faculty member is more than doing research. People who were brought up in a culture where research is most important, if they get thrown on a committee, they don’t do it well, don’t take it seriously.”

Lack of understanding about what leaders do also contributes to this reluctance that some faculty feel about becoming a leader. In addition, this lack of understanding can lead to negative feelings that some faculty have about leaders. And this was evident in this study. Asked whether they had heard of the phrase “going into administration is going to the dark side” and if so, what it means, faculty respondents indicated that it referred to the adversarial relationship between faculty and administrators as well as questionable motives for their actions. The leaders who responded in the study painted a very different picture of their roles. People in leadership positions see their roles as trying to make things better and helping and empowering others. “It’s not about them; it’s about the people they serve and support,” DeZure says.

Solutions

Stepping-stone roles

The primary motivation for this research was to find practical solutions to the leadership pipeline issue. And the one theme that seemed to come up frequently in this study was to create opportunities for midcareer faculty to serve in “stepping stone” leadership roles—offering low-stakes experiences that can help them explore leadership roles, identify their strengths, determine whether they wish to pursue leadership roles, and develop their skills.

One respondent in the study said that the steepest learning curve is going from faculty member to one’s first

leadership position, and the move into subsequent leader roles is easier. “If you’ve had more opportunities for these stepping-stone roles, it’s much easier,” DeZure says.

Stepping-stone roles can include modest positions such as serving on or leading a search committee or service in academic governance. These roles enable faculty members to develop their leadership skills in areas such as consensus building, communication, and running effective meetings.

“There were people who said, ‘I discovered some things about myself. I’m very good at getting people to reach consensus, but I’m not organized.’ Or ‘If I took a leadership role, I would need an administrative assistant who is super organized.’ It helps future leaders identify their strengths, areas to develop, and strengths they will need from colleagues when they build their leadership team,” DeZure says.

One of DeZure’s favorite suggestions from the study was to rotate the associate chair position among many faculty so that each faculty member gets a chance to see how the department runs while preparing many people in the department for possible leadership positions in the future.

Talk to faculty about leadership

One of the suggestions to encourage faculty to consider low-stakes leadership roles that came out of this study was to ask them during their annual performance reviews, “Are you interested in leadership or leadership development?” Asking this simple question “legitimizes the discussion” about leadership, making faculty members more willing to consider taking on leadership roles. “Historically, particularly at a research university, most faculty would not express their interest in leadership to their chairs, assuming that the chair just wants them to do research and teach. But if a chair invites it, [faculty members] think, ‘I guess it’s safe and OK for me to express my interest in leadership.’”

As a follow-up to this question, DeZure recommends adding, “What kinds of committee work and service work could you do that would develop some of the skills that you’re interested in developing?”

Offer timely leadership development

Leadership development programming has become quite common throughout higher education; however, these opportunities are often for people who already have been selected for leadership positions. One of the most important findings for us in our work was that we need to

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offer leadership development for faculty who are not yet in leadership roles,” DeZure says.

To this end, Michigan State University offers a leadership development series called Workshops for Faculty on Leadership in Academic Life “to enable faculty to hone a whole variety of skills and to envision what a leadership role is. We try to take the veil away to help them understand what leaders do. For example, we run panels with department chairs who talk about why they went into leadership, what skills they needed, what they wish they had learned before becoming chair, and what they negotiated for to enable them to continue to do research and/or teaching,” DeZure says.

Support faculty as they take on leadership roles

Midcareer faculty have legitimate concerns about how a leadership position could affect their ability to perform their other duties, so it’s important to provide adequate

support to prevent them from getting sidetracked. This might include providing extra support staff, post docs, or research or teaching assistants or taking other measures to reduce obstacles to taking on leadership roles. “We need to rethink how we can enable people to take on leadership and administrative roles, while continuing to be productive in other ways. If we don’t, then I think it’s unfair to ask midcareer associate professors to take on these roles, because they may not attain their goal of reaching the rank of full professor,” DeZure says.

Reference: DeZure, Deborah; Shaw, Allyn; and Rojewski, Julie. 2014. “Cultivating the Next Generation of Academic Leaders: Implications for Administrators and Faculty.” *Change*. January/February, pp. 6-12.

Reprinted from Academic Leader, 30.3 (2014): 3,8.