Crossing Generational Divides: Experiences of New Faculty in Higher Education

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Abstract

The authors present a synthesis and interpretation of trends visible in data from surveys and faculty commentaries regarding pre-tenure stress factors. The findings suggest that some of the pre-tenure stress new faculty report is related to flux in "what the world needs" and to contradictions between traditionally rewarded behaviors and those required to achieve greater diversity, relevance, and engagement in the academy. Three general areas in which these tensions surface are described, along with suggestions for institutional action.

Current teaching and research models include expectations of greater faculty-student substantive interaction in which "both the nature and frequency of contact matter" (Kuh 2003, 29). Student learning outcomes are "powerfully and positively affected by repeated encounters with faculty who are active scholars" (American Council of Learned Societies 2007). Indeed, the academy has moved from an emphasis on teaching to one of learning (Barr and Tagg 1995)—a move that has improved student retention (Astin 1993), but also has increased the workloads of untenured faculty, who especially feel the strain of increased demands to produce research (Wilson 2001).

The concept of multiple forms of scholarship—discovery, integration, application, and teaching—is not new (Boyer 1997); nor is the idea that all forms of scholarship should be rewarded. Yet even though today's students and new faculty seem poised to collaborate and cross disciplinary boundaries, and even though the academy rhetorically embraces the production of knowledge relevant to our ever more complicated world, these shifting values are not necessarily integrated into the reward structures of academic careers. Despite the push to recognize and reward all of the work that faculty do, many tenure-track faculty perceive a disconnection between more holistic conceptions of faculty work and how their own portfolios will be assessed. New faculty therefore find themselves trying to walk two diverging roads: one toward traditional success in the academy, and the other toward a broadening of the academy that does not necessarily help them to achieve their desired destination of tenure.

Yao and Roesset (2001, 222) contend, for example, that the "present evaluation and reward system at many universities does not seem to encourage faculty dedicating time and effort to teaching at the undergraduate level, and it tends to overemphasize research." In their case for rewarding teaching and faculty-student interaction in the field of engineering, they suggest that future engineers—in addition to having the appropriate educational degrees—must have leadership qualities, be or multilingual, be

capable of working in a team environment, excel at communication, and possess excellent people skills. Because of the demands that will be placed on civil engineers to know "how to do things right" as well as "the right things to do," Yao and Roesset (2001, 223) argue that changes must be made in how faculty work is evaluated. As things stand now, faculty members who generate large amounts of funding and subsequently publish many articles will "naturally be the stars." They ask, "Can we reasonably expect, under these conditions, a bright young faculty member to be willing to spend a large fraction of his/her time teaching undergraduates?" and assert that the vital elements of classroom teaching, research supervision, advising, and mentoring should all be considered along with traditional research if we hope to produce the kind of civil engineers the world needs.

In this paper, we suggest that some of the pre-tenure stress new faculty report is related to flux in "what the world needs" and how faculty members succeed—to contradictions between traditionally rewarded behaviors and those required to achieve greater diversity, relevance, and engagement in the academy. Following a description of quantitative and qualitative data sources, we discuss three general areas in which these tensions surface. We conclude with suggestions for institutions.

Method and Data Sources

Our discussion is grounded in findings from survey data and focus groups (Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education, or COACHE), as well as qualitative interviews of faculty (Skidmore College Study of Faculty Experiences). We did not set out to test hypotheses; rather, the points we offer in this paper were generated by us through inductive analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. In other words, the discussion in this paper represents our synthesis and interpretation of trends visible in survey data and commentaries from individual faculty members.

During the 2002–2005 pilot phase of COACHE, The New Scholars Study, a survey instrument was developed based on focus group data and prior surveys of job satisfaction among academics and other professionals. This Web-based, 30-minute survey was directed at full-time, tenure-track faculty and covered their assessment of the terms and conditions of employment at their institutions as well as their level of satisfaction and fulfillment. It was completed by 1,188 tenure-track faculty members at twelve pilot institutions (six liberal arts colleges and six research universities). These surveys were followed up with interviews of faculty at four of the pilot research universities. Since the pilot study, the COACHE survey has yielded responses from nearly 7,000 tenure-track faculty at 80 colleges and universities.

The Skidmore College Study of Faculty Experiences, a qualitative interview study of a stratified random sample of faculty, was undertaken to follow up on findings related to students' college experiences (see Walzer 2001), as well as to generate narratives about other issues related to academic careers. Forty-two faculty members were interviewed about their experiences (faculty in high-level administrative positions as well as those on full-time leaves were excluded). The semi-structured interviews covered

interviewees' approaches to teaching, scholarship, and service; views about faculty cultures and governance, personnel procedures, and diversity issues on campus; as well as how they negotiated (or did not negotiate) personal and professional commitments. The interviews were conducted in two waves during the summers of 2006 and 2007 and lasted between one and two hours. The first wave began with interviews of a randomly selected member of every academic department, followed by interviews of tenure-track faculty. The second wave balanced the sample across ranks and gender.

The analysis in this paper draws on narratives from COACHE open-ended survey data (unpublished except to institutions participating in COACHE) as well as excerpts from the sample at Skidmore College. Although the Skidmore study was designed to intersect with areas of interest identified by COACHE, the analysis presented here resulted from discussion of our separate readings of our data. In other words, the intensive study of issues identified by new faculty at Skidmore resonated with national findings.

Tensions between Traditional Academic Values and Current Directions

Academic institutions are striving to meet the demands of the 21st century—to offer students educational experiences that are relevant and reflective of our world—and faculty are encouraged to be at the center of these efforts. Yet, institutional policies have not caught up with shifts in priorities, which leads to perceptions of ambiguity or contradiction between espoused values (such as diversity, interdisciplinarity, and community), and activities that actually bring rewards and success in personnel procedures. Many new faculty members respond by trying to achieve tenure and promotion "the old-fashioned way" while adding on activities that have not been integrated into reward structures. The lengths they go to win the stability that successful tenure bids promise can be very destabilizing in the meantime. In this section, we address three thematic oppositions perceived by new faculty.

Solo versus Collaborative Activities

New scholars are often struck by how different from their graduate school experience—and how lonely—the path to tenure can be. While many young faculty were trained in collaborative settings and enjoy interdisciplinary work, this is not what they find once on the job. A young scholar says:

> It's strange here because the work we do is clearly interdisciplinary and requires collaboration across disciplines, but only solely authored articles and books count for tenure and promotion. To my mind, this is counterproductive to our purpose and off-putting to grad students and my fellow junior colleagues. It just doesn't make sense.

Perhaps there is always tension for college professors between the "productive" work of scholarship that results in lines on vitas and "reproductive" work such as teaching and community service. New faculty members feel this tension particularly acutely,

however, in settings in which there is a high demand and value placed on teaching and participation in the community. One person comments:

> I wish the institution was more honest…. They say you need all three things— service, teaching, and research/publications. But it seems to me that if I'm an excellent scholar—that is, my research and publications are great—my teaching is good and my service is minimal, I'll receive tenure, but if I were to switch a few of those things around, I won't receive tenure. For example, if my teaching is outstanding and my service is outstanding, but I don't have any publications, I'm not going to receive tenure.

The perception that scholarship, done alone, is paramount in tenure and promotion decisions can be at odds with calls for more time-consuming and collaborative pedagogies to increase student success. Research on student engagement emphasizes substantive student-faculty contact and pedagogies that involve intensive oversight by professors, such as capstone experiences, undergraduate research, and writing intensive courses (Kinzie and Kuh 2007). A professor contemplating her chances for promotion describes her concern with how her colleagues will evaluate summer research she has conducted with students:

> There've been a couple of times like that, where I've taken the whole summer on a project, which I think has been very good for a student, but has not advanced me professionally and I have to hope that my colleagues accept that … recognize [that] as output.

Until reward structures incorporate mentoring of undergraduate research into evaluations of faculty scholarship, there is a conflict of interest for any new faculty member who engages in best practices for students at the expense of their own research production.

Traditional versus Emerging Approaches to Excellence

Vagueness and rigidity about what "counts" in personnel decisions increases stress for new faculty; "I call it cloak and dagger," one person comments. This problem is exaggerated in contexts in which colleagues are inclined to dismiss vita lines rather than "counting" inclusively. In an article published in the Chronicle of Higher Education, Lynne Murphy (2007) wrote about feedback she received from a colleague who voted for her tenure but against her promotion:

> My first article didn't really count, [the colleague] said, because it came out a year and a half after I arrived on campus. It was obviously based upon previous research, she said. Well, yes, it was a heavily revised dissertation chapter. My other articles didn't count, she said, because they haven't appeared in print yet. Although our dean does not differentiate between articles that have been accepted for publication and ones already in print, my colleague does…. The conversation went on in that vein, making it clear that

in the interpretive framework under which this colleague operates, I have no publications at all. None that "count," anyway.

It is not only with regard to the timing of publications, but also with regard to their content and placement, that new faculty perceive bias:

> There's a pecking order at research universities where certain disciplines are held in higher esteem than others and even within a field, some areas are considered purer. Around here it is apparent that doing basic research is more valued than that which is applied.

We heard a department chair at a conference suggest that scholarship related to teaching should not "count" in evaluating scholarly production. As we mentioned above, this attitude seems at cross purposes with asking faculty to be more reflective and involved in engaging students pedagogically. Similarly, as institutions ask faculty to pursue technology relevant to today's students and/or to work with them across disciplinary lines, it becomes necessary to acknowledge the legitimacy of new publication outlets:

> I've heard it said by some that my research is 'ground-breaking' and 'innovative,' however, some senior faculty call it 'outside of the mainstream' and 'unlikely to count.' So what am I to do?

Questions about how work will be evaluated function to maintain power imbalances between new faculty and their colleagues. When there is ambiguity, new faculty are inclined to ratchet up their activities to cover all bases. One person said, for example, that some of her colleagues only count committee work as service while others perceive other contributions as service:

> The other people who don't recommend it [running for a committee] say that if I do that I have to give up something else, because there's no time to just add something. It's like, well then what can I give up? So I don't know how I'm going to deal with it. I'll probably run for a committee and not give up something else.

Further, lack of clarity about what constitutes success operates against retaining faculty. Social psychological research establishes that ambiguous criteria and limited communication lead people to misgauge their beliefs in relation to others. In other words, unless standards are clear and discussed, new faculty are likely to believe that their values differ from others (Wright 2005).

For faculty hired to improve the diversity of campuses, dismissive "counting" of the work most meaningful to them has implications for their perceptions of mismatch between their own goals and the requirements for success in academic careers:

I feel torn because I want to do research that will have an impact in my community of origin, but I have received messages that this is considered "too applied" and therefore held as substandard. The message is clear—do that after tenure. But this is what I was trained to do; this is why I got my doctorate in the first place.

As work on cultural taxation reveals, there is more acute pressure on "diversity hires" than on other new faculty to engage in sensitive community activities and dialogues (Padilla 1994). Even faculty who want these roles struggle with whether certain forms of service will be validated in personnel decisions:

I'm asked to be the club advisor to a lot of ethnic cultural clubs and to do individual advising with students of color who are not mine. That's not going to count; you know, it's not going to count.

It's difficult for me to say "no" to students who come to me, and aren't my advisees or to say "no" to service on yet another committee. As one of a handful of black male faculty members here, I do ask myself if I am being used and if these activities will work for or against me in my tenure bid. I don't really have anyone to ask because the other junior white guys just scratch their heads—they haven't got a clue; they haven't experienced this. And I worry that if I ask the wrong senior person, well, it could backfire.

The perception that these activities are somehow outside of typical forms of service unmasks the uncomfortable question of whether campuses achieve diversity at the expense of some reified and outmoded standard of "excellence":

Quite simply, there ought to be more than one way over the hurdles they set. But, the reality is that as long as "excellence" is defined in the way it was defined 100 years ago by predominantly white males, anything outside of that norm is going to be seen as less than excellent.

Competition versus Community

In this section, we discuss interpersonal and internal tensions new faculty members describe in navigating their roads to tenure. In some ways, other parts of faculty lives are in competition with their jobs; but in interviews, people also speak to feeling competition within themselves between their career commitments and other parts of their identities. A person who confided having needed support around this issue asks, "Somebody can take this job away from me tomorrow, and then what am I?" Ironically, in seeking the freedom promised by tenure, some tenure-track faculty members silence and constrain themselves along the way. One person suggests that she doesn't perceive faculty members' contributions reciprocated by the institution until after tenure, "so why should I speak if that's going to risk something?"

The idealized image of academics living "the life of the mind" may preclude people from taking care of their hearts and bodies. We heard new faculty describe compromised health, loneliness, and marital stress related to their transitions into tenure-track jobs. One person says of the first couple of years, "It was an extremely difficult time, and it was a lack of communication. [My spouse] didn't understand what I was going through, but I also wasn't expressing it because I was never home."

New faculty describe poignant impacts on their relationships with their children and communities:

> The bar for tenure keeps getting raised higher and higher. And let's face it, family members are not going to meet that bar by playing catch with their kids.

> It's really difficult to manage the long hours required for scholarship and raising a family. In addition, my Latina upbringing means that family should be central in my life. I feel great conflict to do the work that's required and to also take care of my home. As if that is not enough, I am also expected to be involved in my church and to give back to my community, and I very much want to do so. So what sacrifices? My health—some days there's simply no time for sleep, exercise, or even mental breaks.

There is an irony to the trade-offs these academics feel they have to make when, to the outside world, being a college professor looks like a highly creative and flexible occupation: *Money Magazine* ranked it as the second "best" job in 2006 (*Money Magazine* 2006).

Perhaps one of the reasons for post-tenure letdown and disillusionment is that the pressures tenure-track professors feel do not necessarily abate with promotion to the associate rank. Williams and Ceci (2007) report findings in a survey of 961 faculty members that having tenure "was not associated with a greater willingness to speak one's mind or publish controversial findings … associates behaved more like their junior colleagues than like their senior ones." Only once people were promoted to full professors did they get braver with their colleagues. If interactions between colleagues lead to much of the stress, perhaps more energy should be devoted to creating academic environments where all faculty can not only survive but also thrive.

Policy Suggestions and Conclusion

We propose four changes that institutions can make to foster less tension between a new generation's values and faculty work:

1. Orient, train, and reward department chairs and senior faculty to mentor new faculty well and help them identify their strengths and unique contributions (as opposed to emphasizing the possibility of not measuring

up); think nurture, instead of weeding out. If we want new faculty to perform activities that do not help them in the external academic job market—intensive pedagogies and investment in the community—we need to be rooting for them to make it in their entry-level jobs. Although all jobs have probationary periods, spending several years on the tenure-track feeling expendable is counterproductive to engaging tenure-track faculty in the work of the institutions of which they are a part.

2. Make evaluation criteria transparent. Most syllabi clearly lay out the proportional weighting of course assignments and activities; and when we grade student work, we articulate our criteria. We need to extend this clarity to our colleagues on the tenure track. Ambiguity generates isolation, overwork, and spillover of professional into personal life. At small colleges, new faculty members especially need guidance in choosing the forms of their participation in the community and in recognizing when they are doing enough.

3. Provide non-evaluative opportunities, mentoring, and networking for new faculty. Too often, interactions with colleagues (such as teaching observations) generate a feeling of being scrutinized and judged by colleagues who will be weighing in on personnel decisions. Institutions should help new faculty develop through mentorship that is not tied to evaluation.

4. Reward activities that the institution values; make them "count" in personnel decisions. If institutions are serious about enhancing their diversity and the success of their students; if they are serious about engaging students and faculty in collaborative research projects and cross-disciplinary dialogue; if institutions are serious about helping to solve real world problems, then faculty who engage in these enterprises need to experience this work as valued—both in the discourse of the academic environment and in their movement through personnel hoops.

Leaders of academic institutions can address the polarities new faculty experience by enacting policies consistent with the new values, demographics, and needs of our educational communities. If the road toward broadening the academy continues to diverge from the road to success within it, we fear losing this generation of dedicated, diverse, and innovative faculty. But if we are able to bring these roads together, the academy will have positioned itself to be the major resource it should be in this complicated world.

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