

FROM THE FRYING PAN INTO THE FIRE (OR NOT): MID-CAREER DECISIONS OF UNIVERSITY FACULTY

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Abstract

This study is an initial enquiry into the motivation of mid-career academic faculty to move away from their research/teaching assignment. What prompts such a decision? Using analysis of 'career stages' in concert with case study and literature review the authors consider the impact of organizational culture and personal drive in such change. What criteria merit a successful transition, and why does there appear to be so little research in this area when it can be so costly to an institution? This study is intended to provoke conversations and illicit deeper enquiry to ascertain if the consequences of such moves are relevant to the management of human capital within the academic institution.

Introduction

Have you ever wondered why some of the nicest faculty colleagues seemingly abandon their careers to go into administrative roles or even leave the university environment altogether to work in industry? Many of these individuals are the best teachers and researchers in the various departments, adding to the mystery of their decisions to abandon something at which they are exceptional to go to sometimes obscure roles and jobs elsewhere. In reference to a marketing faculty member who recently gave up most teaching responsibilities for administrative responsibilities, one student was recently overheard making the comment, "They always take the best ones out of the classroom. Where does that leave us students?"

Research has shown that most faculty development efforts on university campuses concentrate on instructional/pedagogical issues (Gustafson and Bratton 1984; Lee et al. 1992; Riegle 1987), and even those that go further do nothing to understand individual professors (Baldwin and Blackburn 1981). The reality of this profession is that it consists of three categories of activities: teaching, research, and service. Thus, a more comprehensive effort of faculty development would be more effective in keeping faculty motivated and properly trained to accomplish all major responsibilities of this profession (Menges 2014). More than even this consideration of three areas of responsibility for the profession, many other factors contribute to faculty satisfaction.

One approach, rarely considered in the life of an academic, are accounting for the stages of a faculty member's career. Hall (1976) defines career as "the individually perceived sequence of attitudes and behaviors associated with work-related experiences and activities over the span of the person's life" (p. 4). In many institutions of higher learning, a faculty member's career is closely monitored up until he or she receives tenure. After that, professors are often left to their own devices to sculpt their careers and the tracks of any two are rarely similar. As with employees in any organization, supervisors (department chairs, deans and provosts) should recognize these stages – exploration, establishment, maintenance, and disengagement (Cron and Slocum 1986; Hall and Nougaim 1968; Miller and Form 1951; Schein 1971; Super 1957) – and facilitate the development of faculty appropriately throughout their careers.

The tenure system found in many universities in the United States was originally designed to take different stages of a faculty member's career into account, at least to some extent. Achieving this mid-career status of tenure in academia has its merits. Days are no longer governed by a race toward tenure and plans for retirement are somewhere in the future

(Romano et al. 2004). However, in many cases, this system is falling miserably short as many tenured faculty members become disengaged with their university and even their profession at differing rates after receiving tenure. Those who remain engaged often do so because of their own ambitions, even despite cultural and institutional barriers to these endeavors.

More than the generations of professors in the past, people entering the profession today are more likely to alter their work significantly during the years or decades of academic life. Mid-career faculty members comprise the largest component of the academic workforce. But what do we really know about them? What motivates some to leave academia altogether, find other institutional duties more appropriate than faculty responsibilities, or to significantly modify their scholarly specialties, and level of academic endeavors (Menges 2014)? As in other professions, mid-career doubt and reassessment takes place among academics (Baldwin and Blackburn 1981). Academic mid-career is the sometimes lengthy period between tenure and when a faculty member begins to prepare and plan specifically for retirement (Baldwin et al. 2008).

This paper presents a literature review on mid-career motivations, both in general and among university professors. It also chronicles the experiences of four university professors who have forged their own unique career paths after receiving tenure that demonstrated self-ambition to avoid the detachment and disengagement from their institutions and their professions.

Literature Review

A career is a life-long process that includes the preparation for and choice of an occupation. A person's present job is therefore just one part of the sequence of work experiences encompassed by a career (Cron and Slocum 1986). A career is more than simply the sequence of occupational, organizational, and job moves made by an individual. The many aspects of a lifetime of work, such as developing a professional self-identity (Schein 1980), continuing personal growth, meeting personal needs, setting and meeting professional goals, and resolving conflicting demands from the other areas of one's life (family, social needs, health, recreation, etc.), are important (Hall 1976). If faculty members are not offered ways to meet these needs and demands by their institutions, they may lose ambition as they progress through the career stages, they may change institutions or leave academia, or they may exercise their own ambitions and seek administrative positions, leadership positions in professional organizations, or seek other opportunities to keep them engaged, challenged and progressing.

Career Stages and the University Professor

Exploration is a career stage where people are concerned with finding an occupation in which they can succeed and grow as individuals. When the individual is in this stage, he or she has only a vague idea about the skills and abilities needed to become a success on the job. They often spend time floundering as they attempt to find a proper match between their talents and those required by the job and/or organization. During all this instability and turmoil, individuals are also putting some emphasis on establishing their initial professional self-image (Cron and Slocum 1986).

By the time university professors complete a terminal degree program, they are either late into this stage or even out of the stage altogether. In other words, they begin to socialize to the academic career for which they are preparing (Austin 2002). Before beginning a terminal degree with the intent to become a professor, people have come into contact with the profession as students, maybe as college-level instructors, or as research and teaching assistants during their undergraduate or masters' degrees. During all these experiences, potential faculty members are exploring this profession. Then the process of earning the terminal degree is a further exploration of the profession. For example, in many full-time Ph.D. programs, particularly in business, students get the experience of teaching their own classes, conducting

research either on their own or in collaboration with faculty members. Many even get the opportunity to be involved in service at the department, college, university and even professional levels. Upon completion of their terminal degrees and accepting their new tenure-track jobs, then, they are completing the exploration stage.

Establishment is a career stage where a commitment is made by an individual to an occupational field. The individual focuses his or her efforts on stabilizing oneself and establishing a secure place in an organization (Super 1957). During this stage, individuals are attempting to establish roots in the organization and the related industry or community. By this time, most people have learned the fundamental requirements of the job, so their primary developmental emphasis is on using these skills to produce superior results and to achieve financial and personal successes (Cron and Slocum 1986).

The establishment stage for university professors is when they are working hard toward tenure. Many business colleges or schools have similar requirements for tenure, especially those who are accredited by AACSB (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business) or even by ACBSP (Accreditation Council for Business Schools & Programs). These requirements include various emphases in research, teaching quality and innovation, and service. Many new faculty members emerging from full-time and high quality programs have high ambitions of succeeding at a research university. The success rate at such universities is relatively low and many are not able to clear the high barriers at these universities.

Some professors will leave the profession and go into industry at this point, likely starting at the first stage of exploration again, unless they are returning to an industry and job in that industry in which they previously worked. However, many do not give up and their next stop is to try smaller, non-research universities that may emphasize teaching achievement more, while still requiring some research prowess. If this is the career path an individual selects, the establishment stage is extended and continues.

Maintenance is a stage when once established in a career, individuals start reassessing their choices and what they have accomplished. For many people, this stage is a time of holding their own and maintaining what they have already achieved, staying on a plateau with ambition being flat (Slocum et al. 1985). Some people are satisfied with reaching a certain level and maintaining their position there. However, competition from younger individuals, technological innovations, new or additional job assignments, etc., may threaten a person's position and status if he or she remains plateaued (Cron and Slocum 1986).

At many universities that follow the traditional tenure system, achieving tenure often comes with promotion from assistant to associate professor. Once receiving the protections and status of tenure, many of these associate professors seem to be satisfied with this level and do not seek further promotion to full professor. For these professors, maintenance, as this stage suggests, is all they are attempting to do. However, new faculty coming to their departments who may be familiar with new technologies may seem threatening to these plateaued tenured faculty members. In addition, there are often additional service expectations that arise because of their tenured status. For example, many institutions do not encourage and may not even allow non-tenured faculty members to serve on Faculty Senate or other committees, such as promotion and tenure committees. Those individuals who find these factors to be too threatening, intimidating, or otherwise overwhelming, may find themselves going into the next stage almost prematurely. This is where the tenure system sometimes fails or falls short of what really needs to be happening in a university (Cron and Slocum 1986).

Those individuals whose ambition continues to push them toward promotion to full professor will out of systemic necessity continue to maintain, or even increase their levels of achievement as they push toward promotion. If this is the path an individual chooses, he or she likely goes

through the establishment stage again. In some cases, it is at this juncture in a professor's career that the decision to move into another role at the university takes place. A person may decide to be department chair, associate/assistant dean, or take on some other administrative role. If this is the case, it is likely that previous training in a terminal degree program or some other place for this new job did not occur. Thus, the person will likely begin again at the exploration stage.

Disengagement is the final stage of a person's career and represents the final adjustment for most people transitioning from working to retirement. During this stage, the need to reduce the pace of work is important as one plans for retirement. If the organization does not offer a reduced workload during this stage, the individual will find ways to provide that for him- or herself. Though retirement may mean being able to escape a frustrating job in many cases, it may also mean the loss of a person's professional identity.

As a professor nears retirement, and sometimes years before, he or she is able to reduce workload by minimizing committee work and research to the bare minimums. Once a tenured faculty member begins to feel the various frustrations and monotony of their work, he or she may enter this stage, at least in motivation and ambition, years before retirement. This situation is one made possible by the traditional tenure system. Most universities have some sort of post-tenure review in place, but tenure is often honored so highly that performance below standards may still suffice to keep non-motivated professors employed for more than half of their academic careers in some cases.

Burnout

Burnout is a syndrome that is present in many individuals under constant pressure. It can be described as the index of the dislocation between what people are doing vs. what they are expected to do (Maslach and Leiter 1997). Burnout represents a deterioration of values, dignity, spirit, and will. It spreads gradually and continuously over time, sending people into a downward spiral from which it is hard to recover. The symptoms of burnout include emotional exhaustion, cynicism, perceived ineffectiveness, and a sense of depersonalization in relationships with coworkers and students. Burnout has been associated with impaired job performance and poor health, including headaches, sleep disturbances, irritability, marital difficulties, fatigue, hypertension, anxiety, depression, myocardial infarction, and may contribute to alcoholism and drug addiction (Gundersen 2001; O'Connor and Spickard 1997; Valliant et al. 1972).

The seeds of burnout may be planted in graduate school a future professor is going through for a terminal degree. The difficult and stressful process of achieving tenure further contributes to burnout. At many universities, a professor may have to teach four classes per semester, perform prodigious amounts of service, and achieve success in scholarly activities, often resulting at least in the perception of being overworked. The risk of burnout for professors in these situations (all of us at some point) increases (Murray et al 2001). Professor who thus begin to feel burned out begin to find their work unrewarding, experience a breakdown in relationships at work, believe they are treated unfairly, and are confronted with conflicting values (Kmietowicz 2001; Linn et al. 1985; Maslach and Leiter 1997; Williams et al. 2001).

Once tenure is achieved, this profession then lends itself to disengagement and eventual degradation of effectiveness in all three important areas of the profession – teaching, research, and service. This phenomenon, if left unchecked by either the university or the individuals themselves, will eventually lead to weakened relationships with colleagues and students and a general detachment from both the mainstream of the university and of the profession.

Motivating Professors

In universities, as in every organization, it is expensive to lose employees and have to go through the process of searching for and hiring new ones. How do universities most effectively utilize and retain the potential represented by their currently employed faculty, regardless of the stage of their careers? The most common answer to this question is through faculty development activities (Baldwin and Blackburn 1981), which is mostly concentrated on pedagogical issues. However, in many cases, an institution can do nothing about the turnover amongst academics. Some professors will be self-motivated and find their own to keep engaged at a particular university, or at least in the profession. It is possible to motivate the unmotivated (West 2012); thus, other professors may be motivated by opportunities offered by their employing universities, enabling these universities to retain quality professors. Those universities that actively seek to retain their professors throughout their careers are more likely to be able to achieve higher levels of excellence (August and Waltman 2004).

Programs that encourage career planning can assist professors in consciously recognizing and adopting to career advancement. Flexible sabbatical/leave policies and internship opportunities can invigorate mid-career faculty by permitting them to explore other professions while remaining in academia (Baldwin and Blackburn 1981). Offering temporary administrative roles and supporting training for new teaching areas are other options universities may try to keep mid-career faculty engaged (Baldwin and Blackburn 1981).

Research shows that as professors increase in rank, and age, the amount of time spent in class preparation decreases (Baldwin and Blackburn 1981), interests turn from research to teaching (Fulton and Trow 1974), and become more politically conservative (Blackburn and Lindquist 1971).

A necessary step in understanding retention of these professors is to be aware of what contributes to career satisfaction (August and Waltman 2004). Another necessity is recognizing differences between individuals (August and Waltman 2004) and recognizing the different stages in a person's career (Cron and Slocum 1986).

Level of satisfaction is a key component in faculty members' decisions to stay or leave a university (Matier 1990; Smart 1990). Many factors have been identified as enhancing professor satisfaction, including their perceptions of quality of worklife (Johnsrud and Rosser 2002); their work itself, to include research, teaching, and service (Olsen et al. 1995); their perceived control of their career development (Olsen et al. 1995); high degrees of autonomy in their work (Tack and Patitu 1992); and the challenge they take from their work (Manger 1999).

Other research suggests another important component causing job satisfaction for professors is how well faculty members perceive they are valued and recognized both by their peers and at the institutional level (August and Waltman 2004). Making professors feel valued can be accomplished in different ways. The university can be sure salaries are equitable at all levels (Hagedorn 2000). It can also give awards to faculty (Johnsrud and Des Jarlais 1994). Effort can be expended to make sure resources for research support, clerical support, graduate student support and technology are adequately and equitably (Johnsrud and Des Jarlais 1994). Faculty morale and satisfaction is also generally increased when they feel there is truly shared governance and their opinions are important (de Grey 2009; Rice and Austin 1988). Peer recognition is often greatest when there is a sense of community (August and Waltman 2004), and mentoring has also been shown to be an important factor in faculty satisfaction (Cullen and Luna 1993).

Discussion and Conclusions

This preliminary look at academic career changes within one's own institution is fertile ground for future research. Many factors can impact one's decision to upheave a secure faculty position for an adventure into the unknown of administrative duties.

One area rife with possibilities is the personal motives everyone brings to their career endeavors. Simultaneously, organizations try to build relationships with its employees to thwart attrition, achieve higher levels of productivity, and groom candidates from within its own ranks for leadership positions. Whether these efforts are successful speaks to the level of organizational commitment employees have. Organizational commitment, as defined by Lyons et al. (2006), is the level of employees' identification and involvement with their employer. The few studies that have directly compared levels of organizational commitment between public sector employees and private sector employees have consistently shown private sector employees to demonstrate higher levels of organizational commitment than public servants (Lyons et al. 2006). This evidence builds upon Zeffane's (1994) work that found this outcome was based on the private sector's use of a flexible and adaptive management style, as opposed to the public sector's focus on rules and regulations. A rule-following culture can be stifling to the individual characteristics unique to all employees, but especially those who are looking for creative ways to solve problems and be innovative in not only their pursuit of greater productivity, but also their own career aspirations.

Sometimes, regardless of organizational efforts, the antecedent of job choice is primarily based on the values of the individual, rather than collective life stages or structural mechanisms. For instance, parapublic employees – employees working for organizations financially supported by government but not a government agency itself--were found to place less value on workplace advancement (Lyons et al. 2006). This finding could reveal yet another reason why many professors do not attempt to do more at their institutions after achieving tenure and promotion. Faculty members who do not receive tenure leave the institution, so achieving this goal is more a question of survival than any prestige that could be associated with it. Lyons et al. also reasons that "for many parapublic employees, such as...teachers, the opportunities for upward career advancement are relatively limited. It is possible that people who greatly value advancement opt out of parapublic professions. It is also possible that people in parapublic professions rationalize their lack of advancement opportunities by downplaying their importance" (p. 614).

Additionally, the study found that parapublic employees, which included universities, placed significantly less importance on intellectually stimulating work than even their public sector counterparts. While this may seem counterintuitive to the profession of college professor, it can make sense when we consider that the position's primary focus is either to conduct open-domain research of the individual's own choosing or teach knowledge to others. "...It appears that the true reward for employees in the parapublic sector is the altruistic nature of their work rather than the intrinsic benefits of the work itself" (Lyons et al. 2006, p. 614).

In conclusion, a combination of quantitative and qualitative research is needed to better understand why individuals leave their faculty positions to become college administrators, as well as to why some of them ultimately return to their former positions. A survey of current administrators who came from the ranks of faculty would help to better understand the depth or dearth of these transitions across the country. This descriptive study could also delve into the tactics used by universities to develop strong organizational commitment of its employees. Qualitative work should also be conducted through personal interviews with a range of these "transitions" to gain more insight into not only why faculty move into more administrative roles, but also whether this effort should even be fostered. An excellent faculty member does not always translate into that person becoming an excellent administrator.

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