Rethinking the Mid-Career Malaise:
New Lessons from Post-Tenure Liberal Arts Faculty

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Presented at the AAC&U Annual Meeting
January 26, 2017   San Francisco, CA
Sample and Methods

SURVEY: 239 PARTICIPANTS AT 3 SCHOOLS (spring 2015)

INTERVIEWS: 56 ON 3 CAMPUSSES (spring and fall 2016)
What animates our research interests?

- Evidence of post-tenure misdirection, uncertainty, ambivalence, disengagement and even decline
- Our own life stages and experiences
- Most studies focus on large state institutions
  - What are the experiences of our colleagues at small, teaching intensive, liberal arts schools?

GOALS:

- learn from faculty what ignites them and what encumbers them
- identify ways that institutions can help faculty remain engaged, productive, and satisfied throughout the post-tenure decades
A lifespan approach to the mid-career and midlife

- Mid-life coincides with the Eriksonian developmental task of generativity – the desire and capacity to nurture a younger generation, be creative, and remain productive.
- Post-tenure period offers multiple opportunities for re-definition of the professional self.
- Mid-career developmental goal -- to craft a teacher-scholar identity that is personally meaningful and finds a productive fit within the parameters of one’s institution.
Four Post-Tenure Faculty Pathways

- **CAREER SATISFACTION**
  - Growth in channels
  - Stagnation in trenches

- **CONNECTION TO INSTITUTION**
  - STRONG
    - SYNERGISTIC CITIZEN
  - WEARY CITIZEN
  - WEAK
    - INDEPENDENT AGENT
    - DISCOURAGED ISOLATE
Exhibit self-reflectiveness and ability to re-invent self as teacher-scholar:

- “I came here as one kind of writer, and made myself into a different kind of writer after tenure, and required some freedom to fail…. For me, the thing that has been key in the middle and late stages of a career is the capacity and even almost the necessity of doing some kind of self-transformation, to just say ‘I’ve done that, I’m going to try something totally new.’” (male, full)

Have ability to look for and take opportunities that align with interests:

- “I am deciding how much time and where to spend it. From that can I open up time to be able to seize opportunities that are dangling in front of me by the institution.” (female, full)
WEARY CITIZENS
Institutional connection strong; job satisfaction medium to low

- Undertake the service that sustains the institution
  - Much of this work is misaligned with reward and promotion structures, placing such individuals in a service “trench”

- Two types of service work:
  - INVISIBLE LABOR (departmental, individual)
  - DEPLETING SERVICE (institutional)
<table>
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<tr>
<th>DEPLETING SERVICE (INSTITUTIONAL)</th>
<th>INVISIBLE LABOR (DEPARTMENTAL/INDIVIDUAL)</th>
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<td>● Governance or ad hoc committees</td>
<td>● Invisible departmental labor</td>
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“[The provost] got a lot out of me…. He really put me to work, and so that set me up in some ways for a traditional of overcommittedness. It probably took some time for me to be able to effectively scale back my commitments and feel okay about that, because there was an extended period where I felt absolutely drained, just out of steam.” (male, associate)

“My door is always open, and that’s how I define my teaching style, so I spend a lot of time with those add-ons [advising students, writing letters of recommendations, student-faculty research]. I’m very happy to do it, because that’s who I am, but…it’s certainly invisible when you’re starting to think about, ‘How do I present myself for my next review?’” (female, associate)
INDEPENDENT AGENT
Institutional connection weak; job satisfaction high to medium

- Lack of “fit” with institution, often from painful experiences leading to decreased loyalty to institution
- Create their own growth channels, finding ways to carve out meaningful careers somewhat outside the anticipated institutional mechanisms
- Over-representation of “the one and only” -- faculty of color and very senior women

“That’s always been the thing I battled, not fitting in here…. Once you’ve been done dirty like that, yeah, you don’t forget…. When I leave people love me. It’s just something about this place; it’s a strange place” (Asian-American male, associate)

“[The task of tenure was] proving myself while being myself.” (Black male, full)
DISCOURAGED ISOLATE
Institutional connection weak; job satisfaction medium to low

- Long term sense of feeling unappreciated or unrecognized.

“I am convinced, as a scholar, that no one on this campus has ever read anything that I have written.... It’s hard to feel appreciated when that is the case.... It [underappreciation] is not just by the college, it is by each other, too....the administration, you are the enemy, so it is kind of hard to feel appreciated by the enemy.” (female, full)

- Typically very critical of institutional administration (past or current) and/or current institutional climate.

- Withdrawal from active engagement with departmental and institutional service.

“There are probably three members of our department who have checked out. I think that they don’t think that they’ve gotten what they wanted so they’ve stomped their feet and said, ‘I’m not going to participate.’” (female, full)

- Seem stuck where they are – no plan for how to move forward; biding time until retirement.
We can’t make every kind of career possible in small spaces, but can we nurture and recognize multiple pathways for faculty to remain engaged and effective over their careers?

“I think for me the psychology of this stage of life is one where the opportunity for some kind of self-transformation is so important. It’s very easy to get locked in your box ... but it’s also confining. Anything that institutions can do to make it clear to people that they could emerge from their little boxes would be helpful.” (male, full)

“You don’t need to tenure people twice.... There are going to be differences that are not just permissible, but valuable.... Tenure means you’re real, and you’re valued, and we don’t question..... You’re qualified to be here.” (female, full)
MENTORING is critical at stages of an academic career – particularly at transition points.

MOMENTS FOR REFLECTION – Where have I been, where am I going? How can I get there?

FLEXIBILITY – consider creating room for multiple pathways post-tenure.

Never underestimate the importance of a one-on-one, face-to-face CONVERSATION.

“\textit{I see you}”

“\textit{I appreciate the work you do}”

“\textit{I care about you}”
Key References


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