Multi-institutional Perspectives on Senior Faculty Engagement and Vitality
Submitted to the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education for the Robert J. Menges Award for Outstanding Research in Educational Development

July 30, 2010

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Scope
The purpose of this project was to increase our understanding of the changing role of senior faculty at U.S. four-year colleges and universities. As the first phase of a multi-phase project, this qualitative study sought to answer two research questions:

• What constitutes an engaged, vital senior faculty?
• What are the sources of workplace satisfaction and dissatisfaction for senior faculty?

Significance
Senior faculty members play an important role in facilitating intellectual exchange and building collegiality both within their respective departments and across the institution. Students rely on their breadth of knowledge and professional contacts; junior faculty benefit from their mentoring and research collaborations; and senior administrators depend on their institutional memory, leadership ability, and capacity to affect change. Senior faculty members are integral to the progress and success of the academy.

Literature review
Understanding senior faculty has never been more relevant given today’s demographic shift among the ranks of faculty on college campuses (Doyle, 2008; Fogg, 2005). According to the National Survey of Postsecondary Faculty, the distribution of faculty between the ages of 55-64 increased from 20% in 1988 to 29% in 2004. With economic uncertainties, no mandatory retirement age, increased life expectancy, and guaranteed lifetime employment for tenured faculty, there is speculation that many professors will work longer and delay retirement.

Many predict that this ‘graying and staying’ of faculty on college campuses will have a profound impact on the ability of institutions to attract top-notch students, maintain a relevant curriculum, recruit a diverse faculty, and preserve a stable balance of faculty governance (Doyle, 2008; Seldin, 2008). Influenced by popular media, many policy makers and university administrators have become convinced that “an aging, immobile, discipline-bound professoriate will not be able to provide state-of-the-art teaching and research necessary for the United States to remain competitive” (Baldwin, 1990, p. 160). Yet, as demand for access increases and funding for higher education declines, senior faculty are expected to spend more time with students in the classroom, remain current with technology, and produce scholarly output at pre-tenure levels (Jacobs & Winslow, 2004).

1 Senior faculty hold the titles of Associate Professor and Full Professor.
Evidence does suggest that more experienced faculty are not necessarily more productive or engaged employees (Huston, Norman, & Ambrose, 2007). Whether referred to as tired, stagnant, stuck, or disengaged, many mid-to-late career faculty are, in fact, dissatisfied with their work, with adverse consequences including low morale, disengagement from decision making, withdrawal from social activity, and lack of collaboration (Huston et al., 2007). Further, negative attitudes toward students, lack of motivation for refreshing course materials, and inability to integrate new technology and pedagogy, have a direct impact on student learning (Wilson, 2008). Dissatisfied senior faculty members also influence the success and satisfaction of their colleagues.

What explains why some senior faculty experience frustration, burnout, and general job dissatisfaction, while others remain active, productive and engaged? In 1997, Oshagbemi tested Herzberg’s (1996) two-factor theory using content analysis and found that both “hygienes” and “motivators” can contribute to job satisfaction or dissatisfaction. While Herzberg concluded that factors leading to job satisfaction are separate and distinct from those leading to dissatisfaction, Oshagbemi’s research supported situational occurrences theory, which postulates that any given factor, such as salary or the work itself, can result in either job satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

Studies show that as faculty move through the lock-step progression of tenure, promotion, and retirement, certain ‘triggers’ determine or undermine job satisfaction (Hagedorn, 2000) and faculty vitality. According to a survey by The Chronicle of Higher Education, faculty in their late forties or who had been in their position over eight years were less satisfied than their younger and older counterparts; mid-career faculty (i.e., 15-20 years from retirement) were less satisfied overall and with career development and fairness than any other group (Selingo, 2008). Baldwin (1979) found a positive relationship between job satisfaction and compensation for mid-career faculty. For faculty within five years of retirement, job satisfaction was positively related to relationships with administrators and compensation (Hagedorn, 1994). Oshagbemi (2000) added that older academics enjoy greater satisfaction with respect to teaching, administration, and management, but less satisfaction with respect to research. With each life stage, there appears to be a shift in focus and concern from professional achievement to personal life balance.

Administrators are left to identify and promote in their faculty the positive attitudes and behaviors that sustain and advance the academic workplace. To aid this search, Baldwin (1990) offered a description of the “vital professor:”

…Vital professors grow personally and professionally throughout their academic career, continually pursuing expanded interests and acquiring new skills and knowledge…Vital professors may be campus leaders, inspiring teachers, prolific scholars, excellent advisors, but they do not necessarily perform all faculty roles with equal zest or skills. (p. 180)

A community of scholars that includes both these vital faculty and engaged students is requisite for institutional quality. However, while administrators may view post tenure review and faculty growth plans as means of renewing academic careers, and legislators may see them as a way to “get rid of deadwood” (Wood & Johnsrud, 2005), such policies are perceived by frustrated senior faculty as attacks on tenure. Any attempt at academic transformation, it seems, can only occur in
concert with supportive institutional practices, engaged students, and a vital faculty (Baldwin, 1990; “Muddling Through,” 2004). Thus, campus administrators must answer: “What constitutes senior faculty vitality at my institution?” and “What policies and programs will ensure that the growing cohort of senior faculty remain satisfied and vital throughout their careers?” Professional renewal requires more than just offering sophisticated faculty development programs; authentic renewal means helping faculty create a fresh point of view about their work (Simpson, 1990).

Research Design
Eight focus group discussions, each two hours in duration, were conducted with 73 randomly selected, tenured professors (associate and full) at six public institutions.² A professional moderator facilitated the focus groups while members of the research team observed.

The focus groups were semi-structured and included these questions, among others:

- What two or three characteristics immediately come to mind when you think about a senior faculty member who is really vital to your institution?
- What motivates you to remain engaged and productive at your institution?
- Do you feel valued at your institution?
- What are your primary sources of satisfaction? Of dissatisfaction?

The focus group sessions were audio-recorded, with permission from participants; recordings were transcribed and analyzed for emergent themes. The qualitative, semi-structured format of this study allowed participants to offer subjective, explanatory comments that helped to answer why they feel the way they do about their work.

Results
According to participants, “vital” faculty members have strong reputations (internationally, nationally, within the discipline, and on campus); are high producers of scholarly or creative work; are excellent teachers; oversee the work of graduate students; are successful grant earners; provide mentoring to junior faculty members; and are engaged in service to the discipline and university.

Analysis reveals details of the complexity of senior faculty workplace satisfaction and dissatisfaction predicted by Oshagbemi’s research. Academic leaders—especially the provost, dean, and department head/chair—play significant roles in shaping senior faculty satisfaction or dissatisfaction. From the administration, senior faculty desire: 1) a clearly articulated mission and vision for the institution that doesn’t change frequently in ways that affect faculty work (e.g., focus on research over teaching or vice versa; importance of generating outside grants); 2) clear expectations for the mix of research, teaching, and service or outreach that remain consistent over time; 3) a sense that their work is valued; and 4) support for research (pre- and post-award) and teaching. Senior faculty members relish autonomy and academic freedom, but sometimes feel that the senior administration has a “What have you done for me lately?” mentality.

² Texas Woman’s University, the University of Maryland at College Park, the University of North Texas, the University of Texas at Arlington, the University of Texas at Dallas, and the University of Virginia.
In general, colleagues and collaboration were sources of satisfaction for senior faculty members. However, associate professors worry that engaging in interdisciplinary research and co-authoring papers will not be valued toward promotion in rank. Also, caught between unproductive or absent full professors and junior colleagues who are protected from teaching and service, some associate professors expressed dissatisfaction with pressure to do “all the work.”

Equity and fairness were addressed, especially with regard to gender, salaries, service, resource allocation, and the pecking order of the disciplines. The promotion process was often seen as ambiguous by associate professors and in need of reform by full professors. Associate professors long for better mentoring; many feel abandoned after achieving tenure. Finally, while their workload can be burdensome, some senior faculty members were able to achieve work-life balance by consciously drawing a hard line between their personal and professional lives. The need for family-friendly workplace policies (e.g., dual career, childcare, eldercare) and support (e.g., leaves, professional development) was, naturally, dependent upon each professor’s personal circumstances.

Discussion

While Baldwin, Dezure, Shaw, and Moretto (2008) have recently provided excellent insight into mid-career faculty, their findings are the result of interviews at but one institution. By utilizing focus groups and expanding the faculty population to encompass a broader swath of four-year institutions, we have developed a different and more complete understanding of tenured faculty. Nevertheless, the focus groups sites were chosen based largely on convenience and limited universities; these findings cannot necessarily be generalized to all populations of senior faculty, for example, at liberal arts or community colleges.

While focus group participants did not agree on every issue, they converged on many topics and provided nuanced explanations that expanded our knowledge. Common themes of senior faculty workplace satisfaction emerged that are both consistent with and contributory to the literature.

We have learned that climates and cultures of satisfaction are critical to faculty retention and success; and those very climates and cultures are defined and defended by senior faculty in their roles as colleagues, collaborators, mentors and chairs. To sustain any effort at organizational improvement, it is critical to understand the motivations and frustrations of the tenured ranks who, along with administrators, set the standards, tone, and direction of our institutions. Next, we must identify and publicize the institutional levers that can influence their satisfaction and vitality.

To that end, these findings are currently being used to develop a pilot survey instrument to measure senior faculty workplace satisfaction; results will suggest which institutions, divisions, and departments exhibit the characteristics (e.g., the policies, culture, leadership) that correlate with high levels of senior faculty satisfaction so that institutions will be able to address the particular needs of their senior faculty by developing more effective policies and practices. Institutions will be able to determine how to maintain a vibrant senior faculty and to respond to early signals suggestive of a loss of vitality.
Of particular interest will be the concerns particular to each rank (assistant, associate, full) that can be addressed by policymakers seeking tailored initiatives. Some examples show promise toward sustaining a vibrant faculty. One university instituted a “research-intensive semester,” a break from teaching but with the expectation of remaining on campus, to give associate professors time to advance their work toward promotion in rank (Martin, 2010). Many universities are offering faculty workshops—on mentoring, “getting to full,” chairing departments—designed to allay senior faculty anxieties. Still, given the “constant restraint of time,” any attempts to support senior faculty will fail if deemed yet another burden or obligation (Finley, 2010; Gardial, 2010; Wharton, 2010).

Many avenues for further research remain. For example, what influence do disciplinary norms and cultures have on the job satisfaction of senior faculty? Are the sources of satisfaction and concern different for the sizeable proportion of tenured faculty who are foreign-born? What is the measurable impact, if any, of new programs designed to reengage senior faculty with their institutions and their careers? The answers to these and other inquiries may lead to new paradigms for the academy to ensure an engaged and vital senior faculty.

References


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