Faculty Development: The Role of the Chair in Developing Tenure-eligible and Tenured Faculty

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When it comes to faculty development, institutions seem to suffer a personality split. While our work as educators is focused on developing either the young or the uninitiated with whom faculty spend a great deal of time mentoring, leading, encouraging, and counseling, our attitudes toward our colleagues often are grounded in a cult of individualism that can curtail intellectual exchange and even push individuals to seek their professional sustenance outside the home institution.

While a department exerts effort to orient new full-time faculty, that effort may not go beyond an introduction to the mechanics of the department and of the institution. While it is certainly necessary to understand the seasonal rhythms and processes of the workplace, acculturation that does not progress beyond mechanics will not encourage the development of a community of teacher/scholars. Nor does a cursory introduction give much recognition to the evolving developmental needs of mature faculty members or to the idiosyncratic situation of women and minorities.

Faculty development is, in fact, a complex task and a responsibility most effectively led and encouraged by a department’s chair. A good place to start is by mapping the dimensions of the topic.

DEFINITIONS

Career cycle development. Careers, at least for full-time tenurable faculty, have a clear rhythm from teaching assistant (a phase that overlaps with being a student), to assistant professor (the most usual first appointment), through associate professor (the title usually awarded at the time tenure is confirmed), and finally to professor (the highest professional rank).

Professional development. Professional development overlaps with career cycle development, but is sufficiently important to be distinguished here. Academic training is focused on developing intellectual inquiry, usually meaning research in some form. The young scholar moving into his or her first institutional appointment will want to move forward intellectually. While momentum may carry over from the Ph.D. phase, the institution should add new stimulation.
Skill development. As computer usage has exploded, the need for technological development has emerged as a key institutional issue. The need may be especially evident as distance education expands, but it affects on-campus teaching just as potently.

THE ROLE OF THE CHAIR IN FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

If the faculty is an institution’s most significant resource, the department chair, who is most closely in contact with faculty members, can potentially play the key role in faculty development. A first step in deciding how to take on that task is to determine whether the institution will support faculty development as individual career enhancement or whether it will restrict its encouragement to the context of the department.

Pursuing individual development, a chair would be on the lookout for grant opportunities and would work with faculty members to schedule sabbaticals and leave opportunities. Both the individual’s ability to obtain grants and the sabbatical and leave regulations of the faculty manual would channel the developmental path.

If faculty development is to take place within the context of the department and institution, the chair will still be alert to grant opportunities and sabbaticals, but these will be reviewed by the department. Research endeavors, for example, will be linked to the department’s curriculum. Proposals that encourage student participation or colleague collaboration will be encouraged by the chair and department. Any absence from campus will be carefully integrated with curriculum offerings and the plans of colleagues, rather than exclusively by the rules of the faculty manual.

When the department’s philosophical position regarding faculty development is clear, a chair can determine which approach to emphasize when working with individual faculty members. Because human beings do not come in convenient packages that can be divided into smaller portions based on career cycle, professional development, and skill development, it is the chair’s task to meld and balance these appropriately as he or she works with the faculty.

NEW TENURE-TRACK FACULTY

The acculturation of new faculty members should begin during the search process. Remember that as much as a department may be scrutinizing a prospective faculty member, the candidate is making a parallel assessment of the department. Therefore, during the interview process the department should clarify the department’s mission, goals, values, pedagogical approaches, and philosophy. The use of
time needs to be made clear. Does the department regularly offer evening courses? If the institution is serving adult learners, the need for instructors to teach evening classes may be imperative. Is that burden shared by all in the department or is it left largely to the newer faculty members? Before arriving to take up a post, the candidate should have a solid understanding of what is expected.

As the interview process proceeds, you will learn a good deal about the candidate, his or her family situation, and his or her considerations about moving to a new location. Thus, after the hiring formalities are completed, the department should communicate its own values. Does the candidate need information to help his or her spouse or partner find employment? Does the candidate need information on schools for his or her children? Is an older parent who may need care joining the new faculty member? Does he or she want help finding housing? Can someone offer guidance on the community and its resources, ranging from the best sources of specialized foods and recreation to cultural resources?

The temptation is to leave all of that to serendipity when, in fact, some minimal thought and conversation among department members may result in at least a loosely structured and organized introduction to the community. Certainly at the time of arrival it is highly desirable to have someone welcome the newcomer. Nor should the welcome be a one-time affair, after which the new arrival is left to flounder. Depending on circumstances, a department may want to designate a specific person to be the liaison for the moving-in process.

Once the term begins, departments should designate a specific mentor to be available to answer questions and talk to the new faculty member about his or her teaching. Depending on departmental culture, this can be an opportunity for reciprocal visits. The veteran can observe the new instructor’s classes, make observations, and offer suggestions. And the new faculty member can visit the veteran’s classes to see how he or she teaches. If there is an open culture in the department, the newcomer can be invited to visit classes at will in order to acquire an understanding of different styles and to become familiar with the department’s overall curriculum.

At some point during the term, the chair should make time to converse informally with the new faculty member to assess how the new person feels he or she is doing. Such a meeting can also provide a good setting for talking about the review procedures to which the novice will be subject.

Something that should be clarified within the department is how much time is expected of the new faculty member. How many classes should he or she expect to prepare the first year? Should he or she be encouraged or discouraged from taking on committee assignments? Are there institutional or departmental policies in place for such issues as pregnancy leave—these affect both prospective fathers who may wish to have time at home with a new child, as well as prospective mothers who will likely
need time off. Are there institutional policies or department practices that allow people to take time off for religious holidays that may not coincide with those of the regular institutional calendar?

Amidst all these concerns it is important to discuss the pacing of professional development as well. A new Ph.D. usually has plans for writing articles or even a book on the basis of his or her dissertation. What help may the novice faculty member need to bring such projects to fruition? Whatever means the department can bring to bear to lend support should be provided—and it is the chair who is best positioned both to ascertain the need and to identify the means for securing resources.

Technological skill support may or may not be an urgent need for new faculty members. There will be those who, in fact, bring advanced skills to their department, in which case the newcomer can be a source of support and encouragement to established colleagues. Again, it is the chair who is in the position to ascertain the skills (or needs) of the new faculty member, linking him or her to the resources (or needs) of the department.

**MID-CAREER TENURED FACULTY**

Assuming that a successful transition takes place and the new faculty member gains tenure and remains with the department, thought needs to be given to nurturing a maturing career. Doing so promotes an understanding among faculty members and their department colleagues as to the proposed direction of their professional careers. It is crucial at this point that open conversation within the department clearly links the particular interests of a faculty member to the goals of the department. This is a point at which mature faculty members may drift from pursuing interests that connect with the mission of the department. If this occurs, you are probably on the road to creating that disaffected tenured senior professor, about whom a future chair will desperately complain.

If the connection between individual career development and department mission is successfully cemented, the chair can be immensely helpful in supporting the realization of both individual and departmental goals. The chair may need to set a schedule that will permit individuals to complete projects while on sabbatical, an effort that must be coordinated across the department.

Chairs also often receive grant and professional meeting announcements, which need to be passed on in a timely manner to faculty members who may wish to pursue these opportunities. If the institution has research funds or course development funds, the chair is in an excellent position to support a department member’s application. Chairs may also have personal acquaintances in the community who can assist in a faculty member’s mid-career development. If this is the case, the chair should make the appropriate introductions.
In the area of technological skill development, the mid-career faculty member may well need help. The explosion of e-mail, web-based teaching, and distance learning may have occurred after the mid-career faculty member earned tenure. Unless the department has established a culture in which faculty are expected to continue learning, it can be difficult to ask seasoned faculty members to “regress” into the position of being students. A chair can do much to affect that aspect of a department’s culture.

**SENIOR TENURED FACULTY**

There is a temptation to see the senior professors of the department as sages who need no further nurturing, when, in fact, these may be the faculty members most in need of support. Employees need no longer retire at a given age. But, as we have lost that terminal point, we have not revised our thinking about the privileged status of the senior professor. Departments cannot function smoothly if senior professors assume that they may design their schedules to suit their preferences or—in the worst cases—their whims. If that is the existing culture of the department, only the chair can change that status by engaging the entire department in examining what is occurring. If the department has not created that ambience, be sure as a chair that you at least preserve the ability of the department to fulfill its collective needs.

As for the senior faculty members, it is vital that the chair keep them engaged with the department and with their personal professional development. At the individual level, it is important to talk colleague-to-colleague with the senior faculty member about his or her remaining professional goals. It is the chair who can sustain the view that as long as one is a member of the department, the need for professional evolution and skill acquisition remain an expectation. It may also be appropriate to talk about the legacy the senior member wishes to leave with the department.

**WOMEN, MINORITY, AND FOREIGN-BORN FACULTY**

Diversity may have moved more slowly within academic institutions than it has within the population at large. However, all departments have been touched by the demographic trends of the U.S. population. While the same career stages elaborated above affect women and minority faculty members, additional special professional development issues may affect them alone. For instance, a chair can help such faculty maneuver around the “token” trap: Unless a department or institution has a large pool of minority and women faculty members, there is the constant temptation to place available women and
minorities on innumerable committees. Those faculty may need the support (or even the insistence) of their chair to make it possible for them to refuse a stream of these demands.

The chair can also ensure that women and minority faculty members are not constantly asked for the “minority” or “women’s” perspective on issues that arise in the department. Their opinions and views should be sought, but as participating members of the department, not as class representatives.