

Making Mid-Career Meaningful

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In most higher education institutions, the tenure system sets achievement milestones that guide an early-career professor's activities and set standards for assessing his or her performance. Post-tenure (especially after promotion to full professor), the path through academic life is less well defined. For this reason, mid-career can be a challenging time both for faculty members and for department chairs. What are appropriate mid-career goals? What is successful performance at mid-career? What forms of support do mid-career faculty need? These are key questions that should concern mid-career faculty and their department chairs.

Unfortunately, the middle years of academic life have been largely neglected by higher education researchers, administrators, and even by professors themselves. While colleges and universities focus much attention (e.g., orientation programs, mentoring) and resources (e.g., reduced teaching loads, targeted grant programs) on early-career faculty to ensure they get a good start in academic life, we pay far less attention to the large segment of faculty members who are past the hurdles of tenure and promotion. Essentially, we leave them to fend for themselves, hoping they will find a route into the latter half of academic life that will keep them on the cutting edge of their fields and maintain their professional enthusiasm and productivity.

Department chairs who work with mid-career faculty know that this unwritten policy of benign neglect is naïve and often counterproductive. Yet we lack a clear picture of mid-career faculty life that could help us to shape useful personnel policies and provide services designed to sustain the professional momentum of faculty who are past the extrinsic hurdles of academic life.

One way to enhance understanding of mid-career is to go directly to the source—by that I mean mid-career professors themselves. I recently interviewed post-tenure, mid-career faculty (12–20 years in their institution's tenure stream) in research and liberal arts institutions. I asked them for metaphors to describe their situation at mid-career. These metaphors fall into five categories that clarify the meaning of mid-career. They also offer insights that can help department chairs understand their mid-career faculty colleagues and support them during this important stage of academic life.

1) METAPHORS OF COMFORT, CONTROL, AND SECURITY

For many academics, mid-career is clearly less frenetic and threatening than the pre-tenure years. As one mentioned, "It's like being able to sit back in an easy chair. . . . I feel comfortable and in control. For the

first time . . . I feel that I can work on my own timetable . . . and focus on things outside of [my] career that I find fulfilling." Another said mid-career is like a game where you have learned how to play, how things work, academically and politically. "You feel wise and are able to make wise choices." A colleague from a different institution observed, "Now instead of whitewater rafting, it's more meandering. Sort of a bayou . . . more of a sense of calm and more of a sense of purpose."

Apparently, mid-career brings a sense of security and control for some faculty members that frees them from the treadmill of the pre-tenure years. This is a time when faculty members may be open to pursuing new interests and to taking on new roles and responsibilities that were not possible, or at least not advisable, before they earned tenure. This increased freedom and flexibility can be beneficial to mid-career faculty and, if channeled effectively, also to their departments and institutions.

2) METAPHORS OF ROLE OVERLOAD OR ROLE CONFLICT

As they move to more senior status, many mid-career faculty assume more managerial, leadership, and mentoring roles. Sometimes these duties compete or become overwhelming. As one professor noted, mid-career is "like having five balls in the air and none of them can hit the ground." Another said, "mid-career is like juggling three balls with one hand." As mid-career professors assume added duties, they can feel pressures to perform on many fronts. In the long run, this competitive pressure can lead to burnout and disengagement if priorities are not ranked and workloads are not managed successfully.

3) METAPHORS OF INERTIA AND COASTING

In contrast, some mid-career faculty can slip into a dull routine if they fail to identify invigorating goals or new growth opportunities. One professor I interviewed told me he felt like he was "treading water. . . . I'm not sinking. I'm not six feet under and looking at the surface." But he clearly was dissatisfied with his current professional situation. "Coasting" was a term a different professor used to describe his mid-career situation. "[I am] moving but not as quickly or energetically as I'd like." In a similar vein, another mid-career professor commented that he was "trying not to run out of gas." Not surprisingly, a science professor used a scientific concept to describe her mid-career situation. It is a "steady state," she observed. "It doesn't mean it's stagnant. The inputs are changing on a constant basis but it feels more stable on a long-term trajectory." Clearly, the forward momentum of early career may slow during mid-career. This is not necessarily bad unless the mid-career professor slips into a monotonous routine that affects both morale and professional performance negatively.

4) METAPHORS OF TRANSITION

Several of the faculty members I interviewed used transition metaphors to describe their mid-career circumstances. Explaining that he is at a crossroads, one professor compared his situation to a long-time baseball player. "The question is, do we stand up and keep swinging or try a different sport?" Another professor noted that he had made it to the top of a hill (presumably tenure and full-professor rank), and now he has to decide how to go back down: "You know you can only go down one way. . . . You can't pick them all. [Hence,] you need to pick carefully." This state of transition comes through especially clearly in the comments of a humanities professor. She observed, "[I am] in the state where a caterpillar spins the cocoon. . . . I'm moving. I'm changing a number of things, but I'm not sure where it's all going to end up." Many mid-career professors reach a crossroads where they must decide how they will spend the remaining years of their career. Will they continue on the same path or make a substantial change in direction? These are not easy questions to answer. Certainly, at times like this an understanding and supportive department chair can be very beneficial.

5) METAPHORS OF POSSIBILITIES, POTENTIAL, AND LIMITS

Contrary to the literature on midlife crisis (e.g., Levinson, 1986) and mid-career plateaus (e.g., Hall, 2002; Super, 1986), numerous professors I interviewed described the exciting possibilities mid-career presents. One professor spoke of "open horizons" that lie ahead and offer "a lot of room." Another participant described mid-career as a "roller coaster ride . . . the excitement, that thrill of not knowing what's ahead." A third compared mid-career to a "flowing river." You have "new ideas but remain in the same river (i.e., the academic profession) flowing toward a destination that is uncertain." Comparing where he is now to his early career, one mid-career professor spoke of roots and productivity. "You have made a decision about where your roots go. . . . [Now] I'm sort of at the fruit bearing stage."

However, along with the rich potential of mid-career, there is often a sense of limits and diminishing time. One participant compared mid-career to half-time of a football game. "[I'm] acutely aware of being right in the middle of it. It's a little surprising how little time there is. There is a sense of finitude." This sense of time pressure and limits also comes through the words of a science professor: "[It is] like Michelangelo trying to create a body of work before he died and driven by that sense of having a limited amount of time to do all the things he felt he was capable of doing. . . . Every year that goes by I have less time remaining to do it."

These conflicting visions of possibilities and constraints are hallmarks of mid-career for many professors. They want to be all that they can be. Concurrently, they recognize that time is running out. For

this reason, it is just as important to plan carefully and to make careful choices during mid-career as it is in early career. Taking the wrong path post-tenure may lead to a dead end that can sap morale and diminish vigor. Department chairs can play a vital role in helping mid-career faculty to identify opportunities, weigh alternatives, and make fulfilling choices that ensure a productive and rewarding mid-career.

Mid-career faculty and department chairs need to understand the challenges and the possibilities of the middle years of academic life. The metaphors faculty employ to describe mid-career reveal a complex and varied period during which individuals have much freedom to explore possibilities and define a career path consistent with their special interests and talents. However, the potential of mid-career may be squandered if professors fail to identify meaningful growth opportunities and energizing goals.

Department chairs can help to make the promise of mid-career a reality by encouraging mid-career faculty to reflect on their work, identify new goals, and plan for the future. Chairs can also identify resources and free up time to help mid-career faculty move forward professionally. Chairs are well positioned to align mid-career faculty talents with department and institutional needs. By coordinating evolving faculty interests and roles with changing organizational objectives, department chairs can create a win-win situation for mid-career faculty and the institutions they serve.

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