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Abstract

Success in higher education is often measured by one's ability to conduct research, effectively disseminate findings, and competently teach in a collegiate setting. These measures are not entirely developed during doctoral school, let alone as a classroom teacher. In order to increase the likelihood of success at the higher education level, several newly hired faculty members at a four-year university created *the new faculty guild* by which they would share scholarly progress, insight into effective teaching strategies, thoughts/ideas of possible research investigations, and solace for one another. Their progressive actions led towards better understandings of the multifaceted tasks related to success in higher education, including mentorship, critical reflection, and collaboration. This article will enlighten prospective and newly hired faculty/faculty about maximizing the benefits and minimizing the limitations of teaching, researching, and fulfilling other service-related duties within higher education.

Keywords

collaboration, critical reflection, higher education, research, success, teaching

A unilateral trend

Publish, publish, and publish unless you want to perish! The pressures instilled within academics are second to none. For those new to the field of higher education, it can be especially overwhelming if one is not prepared. Even preparedness does not guarantee success at this level, so what is one to do? As in all facets of education, it is critical for support staff to foster newly hired individuals towards success. Yet, instead of scaffolding and mentoring new recruits, the approach of throwing them in the water and letting them sink or swim is utilized in many institutions.

New faculty members have been educated as critical thinkers, not necessarily with the goal of being successful faculty members who have an array of duties and responsibilities. Faced with preparing for a new academic year, including new course curriculums and advisees, several newly hired university faculty members made the executive decision to use teamwork as a silver bullet to pierce the armor of higher education. Instead of competing against one another or keeping useful information and materials for self-attainment, a shared environment was created in which resources, suggestions, information,

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and friendship thrived. Naysayers may question this approach as jeopardizing the success of every participant because of the notion of being measured against one's peers. We maintain that working together within research and practical aspects of the profession can and will have a cumulative effect in which greater success is attained for those participants to not only reach milestones like higher ranks and tenure, but also flourish as a community of learners that breeds future generations of a similar kind.

Collaboration and collegiality

In a conversation with another tenured faculty member, the emphasis on producing publications was very clear – ‘You should get those articles written and submitted for publication as soon as possible. Your third year review is just around the corner.’ She was correct. The half-way mark or third-year review serves as a litmus test to determine if one's professional accomplishments are below, at, or above expectations. These requirements are often viewed as overwhelming to newly hired faculty, in large part because newly hired faculty have not been given ample tools to reach those goals. Instead, they are expected to learn on the job and make adjustments accordingly. Through collegiality, growth and advancement are made possible. Collegiality or ‘the bonding relationship that untenured faculty experience with peer mentors . . . functions as a tension between collaboration and competition in the lives of the faculty members’ (Mullen and Forbes, 2000: 38). During these initial years of development, new faculty members often still align themselves with past institutions and communities rather than form relationships with those at their university or within their academic field of study. This sense of detachment can be problematic because expectations are not universal and may vary greatly from one school to another. As a result newly hired faculty may act in accordance with the focus of self-protection and survival.

Collaboration has the potential to be a valuable apparatus for extending opportunities for success; however, it also has the capacity to be problematic when it is forced into a structure and culture that supports individual work (Kezar, 2005). Thus, it is gravely important that relationships and networks be cultivated before trying to participate in collaborative endeavors. Establishing arenas to socialize among newly hired faculty allows novice teachers to build lasting relationships that could prompt collaborative projects in the future (Meyer, 2002). Through mutual understanding and similar circumstance, new faculty can expand their network of individuals with whom they can confide and seek assistance. It seems only natural for those possessing a doctorate of philosophy to seek out, develop, and expand their network of fellow educators.

Critical reflection for faculty development

New and junior faculty face significant pressures during the first few years on the job. In a comprehensive review of the literature, Sorcinelli (1994) reported time constraints, lack of collegial relations, inadequate feedback, recognition, and reward, unrealistic expectations, and finding a work/personal balance as significant barriers to professional development and socialization. This review served as a theoretical basis for many subsequent studies in which researchers have uncovered similar findings (Hendel and Horn, 2008), even when controlling for gender, tenure status, and minority status (Hill, 2009). While many successful faculty development initiatives involved some form of departmental funding (that is, release time, funding, additional training, technology), no- or low-cost orientation programs focusing on collegial relations (that is, mentoring programs, orientation activities, workshops, etc.) were found to be equally successful (Hill, 2009; Sorcinelli, 1994). Both Hill and Sorcinelli reported that new and junior faculty were reluctant to seek out colleagues for support, especially for mentoring. Hill reported that this is because new and junior

faculty tended to perceive the academic environment as isolating, especially given the often solitary expectations of teaching, research, and, to a lesser degree, service, coupled with a general feeling of ambiguity about expectations with regard to each activity (Price and Cotten, 2006).

Transformative learning is a constructivist theory that views learning as a process of continual interpretation, grounded in human communication (Mezirow, 2000), accomplished through constructing and appropriating new and revised interpretations of experiences to make meaning (Taylor, 2007). Growth requires that learners examine specific beliefs, attitudes, and emotional reactions to ultimately engage in critical reflection on experiences, which in turn leads to a perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991). Critical reflection, or becoming aware of how and why our assumptions affect the way we perceive and understand our world, serves as the linchpin in the transformative learning process (Baumgartner, 2002). Critical reflections paired with peer dialog expose learners to shared versions of events, allowing experiences to reflect in such a way that, like a mirror, learners are able to see alternative ways of understanding them (Brookfield, 1998). Seeing how events are viewed, handled, and perceived by others, potentially opens up the invisible assumptions that shape and guide reactions as well as those forces that influence the work environment (Brookfield, 1998; Mezirow, 1991, 2000). This practice addresses the aforementioned recommendations of promoting collegiality among new and junior faculty for development.

As researchers working with Harvard University's Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education, Trower and Gallagher (2008) recommended that institutions work to create more opportunities for colleagues to connect both professionally and informally, but emphasized the importance for junior faculty to form relations between each other. Such recommendations for learning through collegiality parallel two basic tenets of transformative learning – critical reflection and discourse. New and junior faculty who connect with peers for support are more likely to experience less stress and a greater degree of satisfaction (Hendel and Horn, 2008; Hill, 2009; Sorcinelli, 1994). Writing about experiences, then sharing in peer groups, fosters transformative learning, suggesting that critical reflection and dialog, key tenets of the theory, support faculty development. Research on peer writing and teaching support groups among new and junior faculty consistently shows positive results (Chism et al., 2002). During these sessions Peel (2005) found it critical to engage in both reflection and communication with others to promote professional growth and to reduce anxiety.

Methods

The study draws on these findings to operationalize critical reflection. A variety of ways are used to evaluate learning by means of critical reflection, though the most common design involves qualitative methodologies (Taylor, 1998, 2007). This study is autobiographical in nature, using both personal critical reflections and notes from peer dialogs as primary data. It was partially structured using van Maanen and Barley's (1984) notion of a learning community – one which is centered on the participants' collaborative endeavors and shared norms, values, and practices. What follows are three accounts from participants within a group called *the new faculty guild*. Participants met regularly to hold informal gatherings regarding a host of issues such as research inquiries, pedagogical practices, job-related stresses, student behaviors, and teacher education.

Account #1

The collegiality within our group of new faculty has been more than a support system; it has been a survival tool that I can rely on when things get confusing, overwhelming, and difficult.

Challenges. Clearly the most difficult transition has been advising students. When I was hired as a new faculty member, I was under the impression that I was going to be slowly brought into the ebb and flow of the position. Yes, there is collegiality among the faculty, but the harsh reality of being self-reliant did not set in until I was handed a list of 30-or-so names of students who were to become my new advisees. I quickly realized that the department did not have time to nurture and cultivate me into this position because they needed immediate assistance with advising copious students who were registered in early childhood education. Not having an apprenticeship or transition time to learn from a mentor is a frequent concern among new higher education faculty (Di Fabio and Bernaud, 2008; Rochlen et al., 1999). Our group frequently consulted one another, sharing ideas about advising and scaffolding one another to levels of understanding otherwise not attainable. Rather than suffer separately, we bonded together to tread through the rough waters and survive our first semester of higher education.

Another challenge I experienced was the immense pressure to publish. Having received my doctoral degree from an institution that places primary emphasis on research and publication, I was familiar with treating teaching and service as secondary. While in doctoral school, I acknowledged that rigorous research agendas create a highly intensive, do-or-die workplace. As a result, I quickly realized that I did not want to work in that environment, but instead in one that prioritizes teaching excellence over a rigorous research agenda. Research is important, but I love to teach. I was hopeful that, upon accepting my current position, my teaching would be more highly regarded than my research contributions, but I quickly began to feel the surge of research and publication pressure. Indeed, teaching is highly regarded at the institution but, without publications, there is no promotion, no tenure, no security, no more teaching, and ultimately no more job. I call that *pressure*. Through my informal conversations with the members of the new faculty group, we have shared ideas and opportunities, perspectives, and support for our research investigations. The newly formed group has helped me to establish a research agenda and has motivated me to allocate time for writing.

Support. With any new job comes a period of inevitable transition and change, and that is definitely what I experienced in beginning my career. Being the ‘new kid on the block’ brought with it many challenges and anxieties including the threat of looking incompetent or ignorant in this new position. This job was more than just teaching and I had a great deal to learn, but first I had to be willing to ask for help. Thankfully, with every question there was someone there who shared knowledge, resources, and support when I needed it. I continually experienced collegiality at its finest. Specifically, I received guidance from veteran faculty and more-experienced faculty regarding course preparation, advising, technology, field observations, and professional development – a critical support system that contributed to my first-year success in higher education (Barnett, 2008). I was also encouraged to choose a mentor who could give me more one-on-one advice regarding a myriad of issues ranging from syllabus construction to refining my teaching practices. Even the department’s senior secretary graciously answered my various questions, or redirected my inquiries to the proper authorities. Without this sense of collegiality that is so prevalent throughout the department, my transition into academia would have been much more difficult.

I also found solace in other new hires at the university. We were new faculty members and were experiencing many of the same challenges simultaneously. Because of our similar circumstances, we have developed a relationship that goes beyond collegiality. We developed a camaraderie and created our new faculty group. Within our guild there is trust; there is a sense of peace; there is a powerful allegiance; we have had the opportunity to share knowledge, resources, and support, but we have also shared our frustrations, interests, ideas, feelings, and trust. It is not easy being the rookie, but it is a little easier when there are others with whom I could confide and relate in regard to what I was experiencing. Although we came from very different backgrounds, we chose not to

live in isolation or take a competitive stance with each other; we have adopted a teamwork stance. The faculty at the university is highly educated and very involved in creating and maintaining an effective teacher education program, but I frequently heard the phrase ‘because that is the way we have always done it’. Being new faculty has had its advantages: (1) our collaborative discussions quickly brought the realization that we bring fresh lenses, not already jaded by the quandary of past bureaucratic issues; (2) we had the desire to improve the curricular program; and (3) we felt that our new ideas would potentially benefit the university and larger community.

Account #2

Like many new graduates, I arrived at my first faculty job with a mix of nerves, excitement, and confusion. It is no secret that many graduate programs fail to provide adequate teaching experiences or help soon-to-be graduates establish a sustainable research line, and I became intimately familiar with both of these challenges. Couple that with being a new young faculty member (there are only two non-tenured in my department) and looking like an undergraduate student, I was not sure that I would get out from behind Sisyphus’s rock.

Challenges. I was hired to teach in two departments – my primary discipline and in research methods, the latter to no doubt capitalize on my recent experiences as a student. One early challenge was discovering the meetings and events that were ‘mandatory’ versus those that were ‘suggested’. This may be a trivial issue, but it speaks to a deeper level of culture within an organization. Faculty, like all members of the institutional community (faculty, staff, and students), are overwhelmed by messages, especially at the beginning of a semester. Recall your freshman year of college – sign up for this, join that, come to this, eat here, and go there. This was similar to the experience I had as a new faculty member. How was I to balance the details of prepping my courses with so many messages? I wanted to be part of my new institutional community, but I needed to know what events I ‘had’ to attend versus what I had more choice in attending. My mentor suggested that I rephrase my question – instead of ‘what is mandatory?’ he suggested I ask ‘where should a new faculty member be seen?’ Taking the cautious road, I attended nearly everything that first month – including some events in which I clearly needed to participate, and others I felt awkward attending (faculty senate for example, where I got a sense of ‘you just started, why are you here and not working on your classes?’).

Another challenge was establishing a research agenda. Like many shiny new graduates, I was sure that my dissertation work would get me through the adjustment period of a new job. In more direct terms, I could conference and publish off of this work until things slowed down. The fallacy in this approach is its limited outlook. Agenda is the keyword here. Sure, I had a research line (which I have since learned must be malleable), but I did not have a plan for disseminating my work. I generally knew which journals and conferences I wanted to target, but most of my experiences as a graduate student were second author or second presenter roles. I was unprepared for quick turn-arounds, deadlines, and other speed bumps in the scholarly work of faculty. Unfortunately, there was not an active culture of research activity for me to emulate in my departments – no ‘writing days’ set aside for publication, no travel plans to major national conferences to present work, in short, no commitment to a research agenda. This is not a criticism, but more of a view of what I faced.

Support. I have detailed the most significant challenges I faced as a new assistant faculty. Early frustration notwithstanding, I discovered several support opportunities that helped me to settle into more of a faculty lifestyle: a mentor, the new faculty group, and a professional development opportunity.

First, I cannot emphasize enough the importance of my mentor. The recurring theme in my narrative is institutional culture. As much advisor as sounding board, my mentor helped (and continues to

help) me navigate my new professional life – this relationship allowed success to be attainable (Boyle and Boice, 1998; Brennan, 2000; Jackson and Simpson, 1994; Smith et al., 2000). Interestingly, he and I sought out each other – me for his sagely advice, him for my energy and enthusiasm. I brought my early fears and challenges to our meetings and have been comforted by his willingness to listen and offer perspective. Certainly, there was a period of adjustment as we became accustomed to one another. We have different ways of looking at the world, different life experiences that shaped our journeys to the profession, and are at different stages in our careers – he is closer to retirement, while I am closer to my hooding ceremony. I found that having someone to discuss the intangible aspects of faculty and institutional life was vital to my sanity. Further, he has acted to ‘protect’ me from even more work than I had already been assigned. He was my guide in this newly charted territory, helping me to understand why I should participate more fully in this opportunity, get to know this person, or avoid certain types of situations. I was able to adjust more quickly, and with fewer bruises, into my new career with his guidance – invaluable to my cultural ‘fit’.

The second support opportunity I am grateful for is the new faculty group. Regretfully, this assembly did not form until my second year. Certainly, the institution tried to set up opportunities for new faculty across campus to meet. However, like many of the messages and events I mentioned earlier (what to attend, what might be missed), I saw new faces at every experience I attended. Further complicating involvement was the nature of being a new faculty member – the conflicting, varied, and overwhelming duties received. So, despite the best efforts of the institution, new faculty opportunities failed rather miserably when sponsored by existing faculty – largely because there was some agenda attached (learn to do this and here is how to find that). What I (and my peers) needed was a space just for us. We needed to vent. Sure, we talked about our research interests and teaching strategies and the other discussion topics the institution created for us in sponsored programs, but we needed a space of our own. It took this personal touch to ensure that we prioritized our meetings. If possible, I would love to have coffee or happy hour breaks each week (and probably need them) with my peers, if for nothing else but companionship on our shared journey. Among our agenda items are own views and experiences navigating institutional culture, discovering research support, and maintaining personal lives. Time and opportunity limit us to once a month, and I cannot stress enough how important those meetings have been.

The final opportunity I discovered was more recent. I mentioned that research was important to me but, unfortunately, I suffer from the lack of a supportive culture, as well as being the only person in my field in my department. I needed a professional support opportunity and was referred to an AERA[American Educational Research Association]-sponsored workshop that gave me the boost I needed. I was able to interact with peers, discuss my research agenda with the top scholars and journal editors in my field, and get advice from faculty mentors with a shared research interest. A notable, though perhaps often overlooked, benefit of this type of opportunity was that I was able to map out, with help, what my research agenda (weekly writing, journal and paper submission targets, varied research interests) would look like for a year. This was invaluable and something I needed either during my last year of graduate school or my first year on the job. I quickly realized that many fields have such opportunities, generally available at inter/national conferences. Therefore, I cannot stress enough that new faculty should seek out a professional networking workshop as early as possible.

Account #3

Challenges. Coming into my first, full-time faculty position was exciting, as I revel in the opportunity to succeed at the highest levels. Presumably, there would be ample experts in my distinct

field with whom I could learn; however, soon after I arrived I realized that they had their own ideas on how to be successful. Developing close relationships with faculty who were already overburdened with duties and responsibilities was difficult. According to Johnson (2007), 'perhaps the most consistent problem with advising relationships in higher education is the failure of many to become genuine mentorships' (p. 204). When I did receive advice, some tenured faculty suggested that I use syllabi, texts, and curriculums that had already been established 'as is', and then adjust accordingly in future semesters. Others said that I should put my own twist on courses because they were currently in need of revision. Yet I was hardly an expert of the state standards and curricular structure of the entire program. Lacking this knowledge caused me to act timidly in the initial months of the position. These feelings, however, quickly faded when I learned my first valuable lesson in higher education – being the status quo and just teaching curriculum at the collegiate level fails to bring individual experiences and expertise to one's instruction.

Through working extra hours and weekends, I somehow stayed on track. But how did others manage to leave work early sometimes and even not come in on other days? Were they that much more efficient than me? It was likely that they were indeed proficient in doing their jobs; however, it was also clear that they had already learned what they had to do and what they did not have to do. As a newly hired faculty, it was unclear just how far and how much must be done versus what could be dismissed or intentionally not done. I developed the mindset 'I can take on anything' early in my collegiate education; as a result, I transferred this outlook to my position as a faculty member – taking on additional responsibilities for my colleagues, students, and administrators. Needless to say, learning what not to do was my second lesson and will never be forgotten.

There are certain aspects of the job in which I enjoy going above and beyond the call of duty, like writing letters of recognition, mentoring, and assisting in research projects. Yet it becomes excessively time consuming when hundreds of students need assistance and close mentorship. It even feels like few others are there for them in the manner in which they need. Moreover, mentors of the same generation often share common experiences, so as to better relate to students (Angelique et al., 2002; Roszkowski and Ceraso, 2008). These students need discussions about the possibility of graduate school, job location guidance, and even personal counseling. Establishing rapport with students is both the most rewarding and most draining aspect of life in higher education. In part, this is due to the fact that these acts have little or no value and recognition from the university; if actions do not fit within the areas of teaching, research, and publicly acknowledged service to the community, they are not important towards promotion.

Support. Putting students' needs first has always been part of my educational philosophy, but what if it takes away from one's academic success? Finding this balance was and still is an ongoing development. Through speaking with my fellow members of the new faculty guild, I have gained a pluralistic perspective on how to mentor, advise, and teach collegiate students. Ideas on how to extend my research agenda also assisted in my advancement. Hearing about various scenarios that the others had already experienced allowed me to envision how I would have reacted. These rich discussions and interactive debates gave me experience far beyond my first year on the job.

Discussion and conclusion

The initial years of maturation as a faculty member are crucial towards having longevity and success in the field; they are also critical towards developing a positive frame of mind that 'I can do it!' Creating groups of newly hired faculty members allows for success to be shared and mutual guidance to ensue, extending the possibilities previously developed in regard to mentorships. Through self-created groups, there are no restrictions of participants who do not want to belong or those not

willing to contribute. The group is completely inclusive of anyone untenured who is interested in co-development, collaboration, reflection, and co-creation. It is their belief in teaching and learning that allows their symbiotic relationship to flourish as university faculty members. Unified new faculty members create an environment filled with opportunism through joint research projects and cooperative pursuits. The sharing of perspectives and advice from other untenured faculty as far as what has worked and what has failed allows for deeper reflection within faculty development. Moreover, information shared from others' mentors can then be shared with new faculty, so as to create a pool of worthwhile knowledge pertinent to success in higher education. Instead of assigned mentorships where gains are made in a piecemeal fashion at best, new faculty groups foster active learning and clearer understandings of how to successfully navigate that particular institution. Joint research endeavors add to the productivity of all participants, demonstrating that mutual development is not only possible but advisable to subsequent newly hired faculty.

Although there were numerous hardships we faced as newly hired faculty, there were just as many positive experiences that we created for each other. The higher education system in which we were hired did not always scaffold us towards understanding the functions of our positions at the university; however, combining the abilities of the group allowed solutions to be discovered through collaboration. Friendships flourished; one year into our careers, our comfort level and confidence are higher in pursuits at the local, state, national, and international levels. The following are suggestions that might help promote new faculty communities at any higher education institution:

- 1 Schedule faculty socials near the beginning of each academic year to foster positive relationships.
- 2 Encourage joint research and publication ventures.
- 3 Encourage new faculty to seek out a network of others with similar interests, including senior faculty, newly hired faculty, and professionals from the field of study.
- 4 Offer monthly discussions over lunch where faculty can present their current research so as to offer direction, guidance, and opportunities for collaboration.
- 5 Prompt new faculty to critically reflect and adjust accordingly to bridge the transition from student to faculty member.

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