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Essay on how faculty members can chart a meaningful post-tenure career

Submitted by Kerry Ann Rockquemore on June 25, 2012 - 3:00am

Recent news documenting [the unhappy state of associate professors](#) [1] was unsurprising to me. I travel to different campuses every week and one of the most frequent requests I receive is to help “stuck” associate professors find their mid-career mojo. And there’s nothing quite like walking into a room full of frustrated associate professors who have been invited to a workshop on moving forward at mid-career. The level of misery, rage, frustration and exhaustion is so close to the surface that it’s palpable.

It’s clear that mid-career presents its own set of unique challenges. Having worked with many mid-career faculty members, I’m offering this column series for those of you who are afraid you may get stuck, know you’re stuck right now, or have been stuck so long you no longer remember what unstuck looks like. While professors get stuck for a whole lot of different reasons, it’s clear that name-calling, shaming, and labeling are not helpful in getting anyone unstuck. So let’s lift the judgment and instead acknowledge that it’s normal to get stuck at different points in our career.

The trick is to figure out why and start moving toward a better place. Over the next six weeks, I would like to walk through a process

whereby those who are stuck can identify how you got there, where exactly you are stuck, map out some strategies to get unstuck, build a support network for moving forward, and consider an exit strategy (if applicable).

So let's get started with the obvious question: Why are people at mid-career miserable? According to the COACHE survey, associate professors are dissatisfied with support for interdisciplinary scholarship, mentoring, travel funding, and time available for research. I also think that there's a deeper shift that occurs for faculty members once they get tenure that many either don't realize, or fail to respond to in proactive ways. Specifically, when faculty members are on the tenure track, there is a clear and time-limited goal: get promoted with tenure. That goal has externally imposed criteria that constrain and drive individual behavior.

But once that goal is met, the situation flips upside down from one of maximum external constraint to one of unprecedented choice. I'm not suggesting tenured professors have absolute freedom, but relative to other professions, they have unparalleled autonomy and choices about their future direction. I've observed a broad array of post-tenure pathways, including institutional change agent, public intellectual, administration, disciplinary star, master teacher, and investing energy elsewhere. Some of these paths lead expeditiously to full professor while others can take a faculty member astray from the activities that are rewarded with promotion.

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The problem for many post-tenure faculty is that they have grown so accustomed to being in a position of external constraint from the tenure track that when they pass into the next stage of their careers (one in which the primary benefit is the ability to choose), they struggle in choosing a path.

Why? Because they: a) don't know what they want, b) have been working so hard for so long they forgot what they love, or c) are genuinely interested in so many different things that they don't know what to do first. No matter what the reason is, the outcome is the same: if you don't choose a clear a path and focus your best energy in that direction, you get pulled in many different directions at once in support of other people's agendas. And whenever your energy is spread out in lots of different directions, it's difficult to achieve excellence in any one area. What I often hear mid-career faculty describe is a situation of working many hours over many years, but when they pause to reflect, it's difficult to say what has actually been accomplished.

The first step in moving forward at mid-career is understanding and acknowledging that the game has changed from the time you were pre-tenure in all the external ways described by respondents in the

COACHE survey AND at a much deeper level. In other words, the internal dynamics have become fully inverted. So much so that the challenge is no longer meeting externally imposed standards, but instead clarifying who you are as a professor, what you want from your work, and where you want to be five years from today. Let me suggest a few questions that may help you as a starting point:

Who Are Your Role Models?

I define role models as people who are working in the academy in a way that you aspire to work. That means different things to different people, but what matters is that you can pinpoint specific people who have (or are doing) something you want to emulate. Maybe you can name them immediately, or maybe it will take you a while to think it through. Either way, identifying role models forces you to flesh out criteria and an image of what it would look like to thrive in the academy. This is particularly helpful for people are interested in so many things that they struggle to choose. Connecting with your role models will likely clarify what choices they made at your career stage and how they made those critically important decisions.

What Do You Love?

For those of you who are stuck because you're so numb, exhausted, or used to putting everyone else's needs above your own, try taking some time to reflect on (and remember) what you love. Sometimes people talk about trying to find their "purpose" as if it's some lofty mystical quest that you are put on earth to complete. But I tend to believe that purpose is really just about finding the most efficient way to deliver what you are best designed to do. And the surest way of figuring that out is to focus on what you love as an indicator.

What Is Your Body Telling You?

If you want to go to a quick source of information, I recommend listening to your body! Our bodies are amazingly accurate barometers that constantly provide us with data about how near (or far) we are to meaningful work. For example, every time I attend a meeting I feel sleepy, cranky, and like I want to escape as soon as possible. As you can imagine, when I held an administrative position in my department, I felt sleepy, cranky and restless a lot because I spent most of my time in meetings. In contrast, when I'm teaching, I'm energized and fully engaged, and I often lose track of time. Guess what? My body is pointing me toward the path that will lead me to work at my highest potential. It doesn't mean I never have to sit in meetings (I do), but I've chosen to pursue a post-tenure path that maximizes the time I spend doing energy-generating activities and minimizes the time I spend doing energy-draining activities.

What if You Had a Magic Wand?

If you're having difficulty choosing a path because you're yearning for change, but feel overwhelmed by the vast array of things needing to be fixed in your midst, this question may be particularly helpful. Instead of making a list of everything that is broken in your world, and all of the complex, structural reasons these things are seemingly unfixable, imagine for a moment that you had a magic wand. If you could wave that magic wand and make one change in the world, what would occur? The answer to that simple question will often point you in the direction of the change you truly want to work toward.

These questions are a first step towards getting unstuck. I hope it's clear that each of these questions is designed to help you change the conversation from what you don't want to what you DO want. And

more importantly, each of them will give you some measure of clarity about which post-tenure pathway you want to pursue in over the next five years.

This week's challenge:

1) If you're stuck, release yourself from any negative emotions, judgment and/or shame about it. None of that will change what's in the past and none of it is helpful in moving forward.

2) Start a journal or create a file and label it "mid-career mojo." Let it be a place where you give yourself permission to explore different paths, write about the questions posed here, entertain new possibilities, and/or collect items that inspire and direct you.

3) Spend 15 minutes journaling about where you want to be 5 years from today. Write about it in the present tense and write about it in as much detail as you can imagine. Remember, this is about what you actually want, not what you don't want.

4) If you're drawing a blank, just observe the data that your body is providing when you're in different work situations. Notice when you feel energized and lose track of time, and when you feel drained and like time is standing still.

I hope this week brings you freedom from any judgment about being "stuck," clarity about what you want in the next five years, and the courage to imagine yourself truly thriving.

Peace and productivity,

Kerry Ann Rockquemore

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