Mapping the Terrain of Mid-Career Faculty at a Research University:

IMPLICATIONS FOR FACULTY AND ACADEMIC LEADERS

By Roger Baldwin, Deborah DeZure, Allyn Shaw and Kristin Moretto

"You've been aiming there for a long time, and you get there, and you look around and say, 'What's next?'"

"Mid-career faculty are off the radar screen. The theory is that the ball will bounce by itself and have momentum."

"The biggest challenge is staying interested, staying alive, staying engaged. It's difficult to do after 20 years."

"To sum it all up, you're pretty much left to your own devices."

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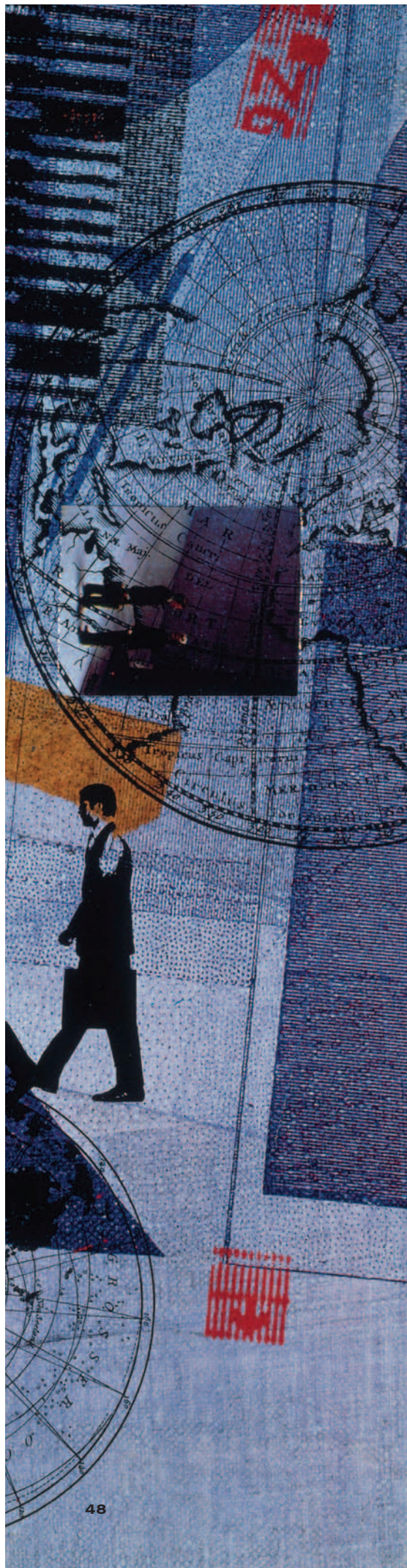
Mid-career faculty comprise the largest component of the academic workforce. But what do we really know about them? What do they experience? What are their needs? What are the needs of the chairs who try to support, motivate, and evaluate them? In contrast to the large and growing body of empirical research on their early-career colleagues, the research on them is far from robust, offering relatively few suggestions for how best to guide them through the rest of their academic careers. This is symptomatic of the lack of attention, and even neglect, that many mid-career faculty experience.

To fill this gap, a group of researchers at Michigan State University conducted a study of mid-career tenured faculty and department chairs to "map the terrain" of the mid-career experience. Our research took place during a time of increased attention to the condition and future prospects of the academic profession. Recent national publications—such as *Rethinking Faculty Work: Higher Education's Strategic Imperative* by Gappa, Austin, and Trice (2007) and *The American Faculty: The Restructuring of Academic Work and Careers* by Schuster and Finkelstein (2006)—show that the demographic composition and work life of faculty are changing substantially. At the same time, policies and practices intended to support professors' work and professional development have not kept pace with these dramatic changes in the profession. We concluded that research focusing on the lengthy mid-career years would help to inform the national conversation on the evolving academic profession as well as enrich personnel policies and practices at individual institutions.

This article describes our efforts and summarizes key themes and contested topics for the sake of faculty, personnel committees, chairs, faculty developers, and other administrators committed to supporting their academic colleagues. Although the study's findings and implications may be most relevant to other research universities, other types of colleges and universities may benefit from the methods, insights, and recommendations we offer and want to replicate or build on the processes and practices described here on their own campuses.

The Study

The context. Michigan State University (MSU) is a large, public, land-grant, research university. The Office of Faculty and Organizational Development provides a comprehensive support program for its 4,000 faculty and academic administrators. Like many similar faculty development programs, the office's primary focus has been to support early career tenure-track faculty, even though its mission explicitly mandates support for "faculty across the career stages" in recognition that faculty may want and need different types of support and opportunities at different stages of their academic lives. In an effort to fulfill that broader mission, we invited a group of MSU mid-career colleagues to share with us their experiences and needs and how we might better support them.

Mid-career challenges. Mid-career is the lengthy period between the end of professors' probationary years and their preparation for retirement. For most faculty members, these are the most productive and influential years of the academic career, the stage in which most of their scholarly achievements occur and they assume important leadership and management roles in their institutions and disciplines (Baldwin and Chang, 2006).

Developmental theories and research suggest that mid-life and mid-career pose distinctive challenges that color the nature of academic life during this period. Levinson (1986) found that people in midlife (which often parallels the mid-career years) pass through significant life transitions, in which they rethink their commitments and paths through life. Similarly, Hall (2002) sees mid-career as a time of reflection and reassessment.

The short faculty ladder also affects the nature of mid-career in academe. With only two potential promotions over the course of a career, professors can reach the top of their professional ladder relatively quickly, and extrinsic motivators such as tenure and promotion may decrease or disappear at that point (Nottis, 2005). Mid-career faculty can easily reach a career plateau where professional goals are less clear, even while an array of attractive personal and professional options may be available.

The absence of motivating professional goals can cause professors to settle into a dull routine or begin to invest their energies in activities outside of their professional lives.

Furthermore, the increasingly diversified faculty appointment types (tenure-eligible vs. term contract, full-time vs. part-time) also creates challenges for mid-career faculty. Veteran tenured professors have a special responsibility to serve their institutions and academic disciplines. However, as colleges and universities hire larger numbers of part- and full-time fixed-term faculty, often with limited duties (e.g., teaching without research or service obligations), many permanent mid-career faculty are required to take on service, administrative, and leadership roles that used to be shared with a larger cohort of tenured and tenure-eligible professors. These added tasks can energize professional growth in mid-career, but they can also limit professors' ability to invest in other important roles.

Goals. Our first goal was to better understand the mid-career faculty experience by identifying:

• What is expected of mid-career faculty,

• What they experience during mid-career,

• What challenges they encounter,

• What professional support they receive and wish to receive, and

• What challenges department chairs and school directors encounter in supporting faculty at mid-career.

Our second goal was to identify promising practices and make recommendations to enhance support for faculty in the middle years of the academic career.

Method. Our study focused on mid-career faculty in two categories: one to five and six to 20 years after receiving tenure. We assumed that the experiences of professors in the years immediately following tenure (one to five) would be qualitatively different from the experiences of professors who were either approaching or had attained the level of full professor (six to 20). We randomly selected participants from the Colleges of Arts and Letters, Communication Arts and Sciences, Natural Science, and Social Science. We omitted professional schools, such as clinical medicine and legal practice, to minimize the influence of confounding variables. Participants included mid-career faculty and department chairs who work with them.

Our sample included 20 mid-career professors (ten one to five years and ten six to 20 years post-tenure) and 20 department chairs and school directors (9 were asked to focus on professors one to five years post-tenure, and 11 focused on professors six to 20 years post-tenure). The demographics of our sample (30 percent women, 10 percent people of color) are consistent with the distribution of mid-career faculty in the composite profile of the four colleges. (Interestingly, the representation of women and faculty of color in the early-career cohort at MSU is considerably larger than in the mid-career cohorts we studied, suggesting further diversification in the pipeline.)

Each participant was interviewed by two members of our research team using semi-structured protocols. We employed standard qualitative data analysis procedures to analyze the transcribed interviews. Our intent was to identify themes and patterns cited by multiple participants. We analyzed transcripts as a team to enhance inter-rater reliability.

CHALLENGES

High expectations: "More work is dumped on you." Mid-career faculty encounter high expectations that grow

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PROMISING PRACTICES FOR THE INSTITUTION

Training and Development
- Workshops for faculty:
  - Orientation to the mid-career experience for newly tenured faculty
  - Leadership development (running meetings/searches, governance, conflict management)
  - Management of large grants
- Workshops for chairs/directors:
  - Managing personnel issues
  - Providing career guidance
  - Motivating faculty
  - Evaluating faculty performance

Funding/Resources
- Discretionary funds for chairs to:
  - Offer bridge funding between external grants
  - Provide second start-up packages to faculty to change research areas
  - Provide funds for retooling
  - Offer ample merit raises to act as an incentive

Criteria for Tenure and Promotion
- Include criteria beyond teaching, research, outreach, and traditional service (e.g., administration, leadership, consulting, interdisciplinary work)

Re-Assess Sabbatical Model
- Eligibility, length, requirements, location, flexibility, funding, oversight, and accountability

Recognition
- Sponsor teaching awards

VP for Research
- Provide pre-award grant-writing and budget support
- Promote inter-institutional grant collaborations

substantially in the post-tenure years. We learned that many department chairs expect mid-career professors to maintain or even enhance their level of performance after tenure, especially in the area of research and grants. As one faculty member noted: "The increased workload is almost bewildering."

At the same time, once they become full-fledged members of the academic community, faculty are expected to assume new roles and duties. In particular, service, leadership, and administrative responsibilities increase in mid-career, when many professors are expected to become department chairs, head major committees, and fill other important leadership and management roles. These added responsibilities can provide exciting new challenges and opportunities for professional growth at mid-career but can also become burdensome if not managed carefully and balanced with other important faculty functions such as teaching, scholarship, and professional renewal. And energy levels vary post-tenure. Some rise as the burden of seeking tenure is lifted. More often, we heard that energy levels decrease in the post-tenure years.

Neglect: "The mid-career faculty get less attention." Despite their increasing responsibilities, mid-career faculty often feel neglected or taken for granted as department chairs and institutions focus their attention and resources on early-career and star faculty. One professor told us, "Everybody is cut loose after the assistant-professor stage," and another said, "To sum it all up, you're pretty much left to your own devices." These sentiments were echoed in comments from department chairs. One observed, "Once you've gotten tenure, you are sort of in charge of your own fate. You've achieved a certain level of professional maturity that indicates that the department doesn't need to oversee or nurture your next promotion. That's kind of up to you."

Relief: "The axe is removed from your back." At the same time, many of the professors one to five years post-tenure told us that receiving tenure was a liberating experience: "I just relaxed. I wasn't going to be fired. I just stopped being so nervous." A longer timeframe for inquiry is another benefit of tenure. Several early post-tenure faculty told us how they could shift their focus from short-range to longer-term projects that, in some cases, enabled them to pursue deeper and more

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PROMISING PRACTICES FOR CHAIRS

Assessment and Planning
- Make annual review process more meaningful and developmental by discussing the following:
  - Where faculty members are headed professionally and how they plan to get there
  - Clear expectations for what it takes to achieve rank of full professor
  - Whether the faculty members are working toward promotion and how they are fulfilling expectations
  - Projects they are working on
- Decide who needs support and interventions
  - Work with faculty members on a case-by-case basis
  - Ask faculty what they need and how chairs can help
  - Encourage them to develop a plan to move forward
  - Encourage faculty to join a new research team or collaboration
  - Encourage networking to connect those who need skills with those who have them
  - Encourage faculty to go to development workshops
  - Encourage mentoring and mutual mentoring
  - Nominate faculty to participate in selected professional development opportunities (e.g., leadership development programs)
  - Explore what they can do to make a difference (in the institution, field, community)
  - Relocate less productive faculty near higher performers
- Keep data on mid-career faculty, track career trajectories, and use data to support decisions about faculty and strategic planning

Retool/Refocus/Restructure
- Support faculty in retooling and recharging
  - Encourage sabbaticals
  - Provide course releases
  - Support new course assignments and the development of new courses
- Enable people to renegotiate their appointments
- Alternate teaching loads (one semester heavier, one lighter) to focus on grant writing/research

Recognition and Encouragement
- Advocate for mid-career faculty; nominate faculty for awards, recognition
- Give bridge funding
- Provide incentives (e.g., clerical support, schedule adjustments, release time, TAs, undergraduate research or peer learning assistants)
- Praise and thank people for service, and recognize their achievements (e.g., via newsletters, faculty meetings)
- Provide departmental leadership opportunities (e.g., associate, assistant chair, program review)
- Reward good teaching

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complex research questions/problems.

What's next?: "Now what do I do? What am I going to be known for?" For many, mid-career signals a period of confusion and reassessment,

where the defining question becomes, "What do I do now?" The uncertainty that may accompany mid-career came through in several of our faculty interviews. One participant told us, "You

PROMISING PRACTICES FOR PERSONNEL AND PROMOTION AND TENURE COMMITTEES

-Conduct peer review of teaching materials to assess currency and relevance
-Meet annually with the department chair or associate chair to ask how the committee can help each faculty member
-Provide a mentoring committee that stays intact until faculty member attains full professor
-Give all pre-tenure faculty full annual reviews, associate professors full reviews every other year, and full professors every three to five years

PROMISING PRACTICES FOR MID-CAREER FACULTY

Teaching
-Teach a graduate course to stay fresh (for those who teach only undergraduates)
-Teach a special-topics course
-Teach a study-abroad course
-Try a new master's class to recruit doctoral students
-Add a new teaching strategy (e.g., service learning, PBL)
-Teach an online course or integrate instructional technology
-Team-teach an interdisciplinary course

Network/Collaborate
-Collaborate on a professional project
-Network with others in new or emerging areas

Research
-Move from a theoretical to an applied area or vice versa
-Review websites of funding agencies for new areas being funded (e.g., NSF, foundations)
-Move from shorter- to longer-term projects
-Be open to new approaches identified by graduate students
-Read literature reviews to keep current in the field
-Add a new component or technique to research

Service/Academic Governance
-Participate on a different departmental, college, or university committee
-Take a leadership role in academic governance

Retool/Refocus/Restructure
-Renegotiate your appointment
-Change departments

reach a certain plateau and you've been aiming there for a long time, and you get there, and you look around and say, 'What's next?'" Another colleague described a similar conundrum: "How do you know what your options are? I don't."

Faculty roles and responsibilities definitely evolve during mid-career. For some it seems to be a gradual process of expansion: "I've grown. I think more about the department ... Before it was about me, and about how many publications I could get. I found myself reflecting more

on issues that affect the larger institution instead of personal ones." Other faculty seek to renegotiate their roles to focus on new interests or to reorder their priorities.

Adapting to change: "The biggest challenge is to remain competitive." The challenges that accompany mid-career can be a function of repetition and age: "Teaching the same course over and over. It can be more difficult." Others noted, "You get further from the students. Anecdotes, humor don't age well." Some challenges come from the outside. Many faculty we interviewed told us it is difficult to keep up with changes in their rapidly evolving disciplines. This seems to be a concern especially among faculty who have been tenured for more than five years.

To some extent, this is a function of the growth of knowledge and shifting disciplinary paradigms. But it may also reflect changing levels of motivation: "The biggest challenge is staying interested, staying alive, staying engaged. It's difficult to do after 20 years." A forward-thinking colleague conveyed a concern that many mid-career professors harbor: "How am I going to do another 20 years of this?"

Unclear goals: "The other big challenge is figuring out my trajectory: What do I do for the next 13 years?" The less well-defined goals of the post-tenure years pose a problem for many mid-career professors. When goals such as tenure and promotion are no longer externally imposed, faculty must develop ones that can motivate and direct their best efforts. This situation is complicated for some mid-career professors by vague performance expectations, including what is required for promotion to full professor. Department chairs' assumptions that mid-career faculty will do more and do it better does not help professors set priorities and concentrate their efforts where they will reap the most benefit.

The absence of concrete, motivating goals can lead to a loss of professional momentum or even disengagement. The observation of one mid-career professor clearly conveys their importance: "I looked around at faculty... and I was really frightened by how many bitter old men there were ... . You've got to figure out how to make people want to come to work when they are 60 years old."

Special challenges related to gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and age: "Anyone who is not
mainstream has higher stresses."** Faculty and chairs/directors of both genders and all races observed that women and faculty of color continue to have special challenges during mid-career. Many noted that these faculty members are apt to have higher service demands than men do, due to student requests for mentoring and participation on committees. As one chair noted, "[The minority faculty] are the hardest to protect." They also noted that women often have less access to information and input, and department decisions may be made during informal discussions in which they are not included.

Challenges related to work-life balance appeared repeatedly: "I am forced to choose a lot and I sacrifice a lot all the time. My family gets the short stick." As one chair and senior faculty member observed: "A lot of them have worked very hard for the first ten years here, and they haven't thought much about balancing their lives. They've been mostly married to being a professor and the pressures of family life are going to catch up with them. I think there is a moment of truth with your family that occurs." But while both men and women in mid-career juggle careers with child-rearing, women have special challenges associated with child-bearing (one to five years post-tenure) and supporting aging parents (six to 20 years).

In science departments with large numbers of international faculty, chairs also noted that some of those faculty may experience stress when they are asked in early mid-career to lead committees that include elders from their countries of origin, which may violate their cultural norms. Some of these special challenges go undetected because it may not feel safe to admit to this type of cultural conflict.

Special challenges for chairs and directors: "Time and money." The most frequently cited challenges for chairs in supporting mid-career faculty were limitations of time and budget. Given these limitations, most chairs felt that pre-tenure assistant professors should be their priority and they allocated their resources accordingly. If they had more time and/or even modest amounts of discretionary funds, many said they would do more to support mid-career faculty.

A second set of challenges related to the limited ability and training of chairs to understand the needs of mid-career

faculty, how to motivate later mid-career faculty, and how to deal with thorny personnel and human-resource issues. Chairs also were unclear about what support was available at the university to assist faculty with career development. Last but not least, some chairs felt that expectations for tenure and promotion left them without flexibility to respond to individual needs and situations.

SUPPORTING
MID-CAREER FACULTY

Aid and encouragement. The good news is that through annual reviews and both formal and informal conversations with faculty, department chairs can ensure that mid-career faculty sustain their productivity and continue to grow and align their efforts with the goals of their unit, their college, and the institution. They can provide interpersonal support, guidance, problem-solving, mentoring, networking, bridge funding, rewards, and motivation for faculty at all stages.

Chairs noted that it is important to individualize and diversify approaches to support, options, and rewards, tailoring them to the needs of each faculty member. Many noted the importance of listening to faculty ("I listen to them. I talk to them") and of interpersonal regard: "Getting him involved and showing him that he was valued. That seemed to make the biggest difference." Other chairs noted that even small amounts of money and small rewards can fuel productivity, reaping significant benefits for stalled faculty. Both faculty and chairs noted that mid-career faculty, like their early-career colleagues, might benefit from mentoring and its newest variant, mutual mentoring.

Although some programs and services to assist mid-career faculty are available, chairs and faculty did not seem to know about them—which may say more about the inadequacy of publicity than the quality of the programs. While sabbaticals are useful for renewal and retooling, they are seen as problematic by many faculty due to high costs, limited availability, and travel limitations for dual-career couples and families with children. Hence they are due for review and revision to better meet the needs of a changing professoriate.

Training and development. One clear theme was the need for more training and development for mid-

career faculty, as well as for chairs in their efforts to support mid-career faculty

Newly tenured faculty want information on what to expect, what is expected of them, how to succeed, pitfalls to avoid, and options to pursue. MSU offers a program for pre-tenure faculty on how to "survive and thrive in the tenure system" and is about to launch a similar one for newly tenured faculty to help them envision the terrain of the mid-career experience and how to maximize their opportunities. Many of the findings from this study will be presented, along with comments by mid-career faculty who have been highly successful but taken very varied career paths.

Newly tenured faculty also want training in the leadership and managerial skills they need to succeed in the new roles and responsibilities they are asked to assume during mid-career. Although MSU offers many types of leadership development for academic administrators, it is about to initiate programming for faculty in more informal leadership roles on personnel and search committees, task forces, research teams, and large labs, as well as for those who wish to explore academic administration as a career option.

Chairs in particular indicate a need for more training in how to handle conflict management, personnel issues, and career development, including how to support the needs of mid-career and seasoned faculty. These will be offered as part of ongoing leadership development for academic administrators.

Disciplinary, departmental and programmatic differences. While many themes crossed college and disciplinary boundaries, a few are particular to certain disciplines and programs.

In the STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering and math), many faculty and chairs discussed the difficulty of changing areas of research due to the high cost of laboratories and equipment and the problem of getting funded in new areas in which the researcher has no track record. As one faculty member noted, "You're chained to your equipment." Several scientists noted the need for secondary start-up packages and bridge funding when areas of research have run their course.

Disciplines and sub-disciplines differ in their expectations for peer collaboration and whether they provide a

social network to keep faculty engaged during mid-career. Faculty as disparate as musicians who play in faculty ensembles and scientists involved in large research labs appear to benefit from expectations for ongoing collaboration, in contrast to those in fields that require faculty to work alone, isolated and disconnected from the work of their peers.

An even more pervasive difficulty is how the experiences of mid-career faculty in different programs within the same department can be very different, often exacerbating the inequities in how we support or fail to support mid-career faculty. Chairs and department members need to acknowledge differences in resources and professional growth opportunities within their units and distribute discretionary resources, particularly those focused on professional development, so that all faculty benefit. This practice can also serve to reinforce the collective identity and well-being of the department as a whole.

Participation in the study. One unanticipated outcome of this study was the gratitude and thanks we received for conducting this study and for shedding light on the needs of mid-career faculty. Many participants observed that the topic is important but too often neglected. Others, particularly from among the chairs, indicated both during and after the study that participation led to changes in their own awareness, attitudes, and practices. Some chairs returned to their departments and began to talk with their faculty individually about their needs. Some began to meet with other chairs about how they might better support mid-career faculty in their colleges. The study itself offers a compelling, if labor-intensive, way to focus attention on mid-career faculty or other groups that live beneath the radar screen of our institutions.

CONTESTED TOPICS

While the prior section identified recurrent themes in the data that reflected high degrees of agreement across faculty and chairs, this one identifies topics about which there was significant disagreement. Indeed, the data were bi-model, with respondents agreeing or disagreeing often strongly about significant issues.

Mid-career faculty need and deserve support. Many respondents indicated that faculty should have support throughout their academic careers as

they evolve and as expectations change. But some said that given the limited time and resources available to chairs, they should focus their attention and efforts on early-career faculty. Others disagreed even more strongly, indicating that having attained tenure, faculty members should be independent scholars and self-starters capable of supporting themselves. As one chair noted, "They get less, and they deserve less."

Expectations for promotion and merit increases should be broadened and differentiated. Some respondents indicated that at a research university, research productivity should be the primary criterion for promotion, with teaching, service, and outreach/engagement as secondary criteria. Others felt that a large research university can accommodate mid-career and senior faculty who make meaningful contributions to the university in varied ways (e.g., through teaching, outreach, administration), and that as faculty age, promotion criteria should be broadened. As one chair noted, we should take "seriously the notion that people's careers or interests in research and publishing might change over a life span, ... not penalizing someone who says 'I don't want to do research anymore. I've done enough of it. I'd rather focus on teaching and outreach or graduate students.'... I don't see why people shouldn't have broader options."

Expectations for tenure and promotion should be very specific. Many faculty and some chairs indicated a preference for very specific criteria for tenure and promotion, while many chairs and some faculty preferred broader, less specific criteria that fit a wide range of faculty profiles, appointments, and situations. Those who preferred specific criteria indicated that they provide clarity of expectations in which there may be less room for subjectivity and bias to creep into the evaluation process.

Chairs should not reveal anything about the deliberations for tenure and promotion. Some respondents felt that the details and reasoning behind the tenure decision should remain private, known only by the personnel committee, the chair, and the dean. Others felt that the chair should make the reasoning and deliberations behind the tenure decision clear. More specifically, some respondents felt that faculty who

barely made tenure should only be told that they made tenure, while others felt that faculty who barely made tenure needed to be informed of that.

All faculty should receive the same type of annual review, regardless of career stage. At MSU all faculty have an annual review. Given the time constraints of chairs, faculty and review committees, some respondents indicated that all pre-tenure assistant professors should have annual reviews but that associate professors and full professors could be reviewed on a cycle of two to five years. Other respondents felt that the annual review serves an important purpose in keeping faculty on track, providing both summative and formative feedback from chairs and enabling chairs to intervene as needed.

It is appropriate for a chair/direc-tor to advise a faculty member to change his/her specialization or field of study. Some respondents felt that faculty should be expected to align, and, if necessary, redirect their research to the needs and direction of their pro-gram, department, college, and univer-sity. These interests are often calibrated to the availability of external funding, the evolution of disciplines and inter-disciplines, and institutional capacity. Other respondents felt that academic freedom enables faculty to pursue their academic interests independent of changes in departmental and college interests and priorities.

CONCLUSION

Faculty at mid-career share com-mon attributes (e.g., their status as veteran professors, middle age) and experience some similar challenges (e.g., keeping up with changing fields, leadership expectations), no matter where they work in higher education. Nevertheless, the nature of mid-career is greatly influenced by the institutional environment in which one works. Is the environment static and predictable or is it dynamic and supportive? Does it lock profes-sors into standard roles and respon-sibilities or provide opportunities for invigorating new projects and con-tinuing professional growth?

Higher-education institutions must look at their mid-career faculty in con-text in order to understand them fully and serve their professional develop-ment needs effectively. It is important to ask, What are the mid-career faculty issues here? Which of the promising practices presented in the four tables accompanying this article would work in this environment and which would not? Where does our institutional com-munity stand on the contested issues regarding faculty in mid-career? How can we support the mid-career faculty who play essential roles in the life of our institution?

Asking mid-career faculty and de-partment chairs what they experience and what support they need may be the most "promising practice" of all. Care-ful study of, and informed institutional dialogue on, mid-career faculty are each essential to give this important and changing segment of the faculty the at-tention and support they deserve. ▣

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