

**ORLD 5527- The College Professoriate
(Fall 2002)**

Term Paper: The Professor in Mid-Life Career Change

INTRODUCTION

The *Random House Webster's College Dictionary* (2000) defines a career as "an occupation or profession followed through some or all of one's life" (p. 201). Faculty occupation in academia typically involves teaching, research and the provision of services, and this takes place within recognized academic disciplines i.e. the subject matter of study, and the scholarly community (institutions and professional associations) that engages in knowledge construction in the particular subject. The professor's career thus represents a commitment to a discipline for most or all of his/her working life.

However, at some point in their careers, some professors decide to shift focus of their scholarship either to another aspect within their discipline of study, or to an entirely new discipline altogether - a phenomenon termed "Intellectual Migration" or "Intellectual Mobility" (Becher, 1989). It is understandable if this process takes place in the beginning or early stages of the professor's academic career, as early adulthood is a time of choices and initial commitments. However, it is quite intriguing when intellectual migration occurs at the mid-career stage, a stage where the professor has, according to Becher (1989), "achieved both the goal of professional reputation and the status of a tenured appointment" (p. 172), and his/her influence and productivity is at its maximum. Becher however provides several instances of migration across disciplines - physicists who turned to chemistry and engineering, a historian who had become a sociologist, a chemist turned to philosophy etc, as well as movement across specialisms within the same discipline.

Intellectual migration in mid-career is thus an activity that takes place within academia. But what are the career challenges in mid-career that provoke this phenomenon? And what are the consequences of this migration on the professor in question, the disciplines or sub-disciplines involved, and society at large? Bearing these consequences in mind, should academia encourage this behavior among faculty, discourage it or be indifferent about it? These are the issues that this paper seeks to discuss.

Thus, in this paper I will: 1) discuss the various stages of an academic career with emphasis on the mid-career stage; 2) examine the issue intellectual migration in mid-career; and 3) offer suggestions as to what role academia should play regarding this issue of intellectual migration.

THE ACADEMIC CAREER

The term "career" derives from the French *carrière* which literally means a "racecourse." A career thus has a "starting gate," a "course to be run" and a "finish line." A typical academic career thus begins, in early adulthood, with recruitment into a salaried position in the professoriate of a higher education institution, proceeds through a "course" defined and shaped by the faculty member's institution and discipline of interest, and ends with retirement at late adulthood. The "race" itself consists of a sequence and combination of roles and activities, the performance of which determines one's progress or otherwise, through the "course."

Qualified people enter the professoriate career for a variety of reasons, including the desire to teach and do research, an intrinsic interest in a particular discipline, the influence of other professors, or the simple fact of getting a job, among others (Finkelstein, 1984). In the (United States) academe however, each individual goes through four main processes or stages, identified by Bowen and Schuster (1986, in Alstete, 2000, p. 4) as:

- *The initial appointment as instructor or assistant professor for a limited term;*
- *A probationary period (including the initial appointment) of one to seven or more years;*
- *Promotion to associate professor and advancement to tenure;*
- *Advancement to full professor.*

Thus, the academic career, like all other aspects of adulthood, follows a developmental path, with each stage being characterized by unique attitudes, interests, activities, goals and developmental needs of faculty as they progress through their careers, growing in age and experience. Developmental and occupational theorists therefore apply a general career model to the academic career i.e. the entry or initiation, early-career, mid-career and late-career stages (Baldwin, 1990). These stages broadly correspond to the processes mentioned above. As each career stage poses a distinctive challenge that can have profound influence on faculty morale and productivity, Baldwin & Blackburn (1981) recommend that "colleges and universities as well as individual faculty must pay greater attention to the characteristics and concerns of each stage" (p. 608). I will therefore next examine these stages of the academic career in detail, based on this framework. I must however point out that this model is a broad generalization and thus not wholly applicable to each and every individual faculty member.

The Entry Stage

This stage (which can last from one term or semester to a couple of years), is a period of intense pressure and considerable changes, when the professor learns the technicalities of effective teaching and research, studies the dynamics of academia and begins to experiment with a variety of options so as to fashion out his/her career. The young professor also goes through a process of "socialization and/or acculturation" (Reynolds, 1992), in order to fit into the community. Reynolds introduces the concept of "social interdependence" as a combination of "self," "other" and "relationship to other," and suggests that individuals will most probably have a smooth transition into academia (hence a successful career), if they enter with a view of social interdependence that is in tune with what prevails in community. On the contrary, persons whose conception of social interdependence is at variance with that of the scholarly community are more likely to encounter unpleasant experiences on entry, and this might impact negatively on such a person's entire career. Baldwin (1990) states that "if the early years as a professor are unsatisfying, they can diminish enthusiasm and create a negative attitude that may persist throughout the career" (p. 32). The entry stage is therefore a very crucial factor in determining the success or otherwise of an individual's entire academic career, and thus calls for adequate interventions so as to smoothen out this important transition.

Academic departments and institutions can play a supportive role in new faculty adjustment by carrying out well-planned orientation strategies, minimizing workloads and expectations and also fostering mentoring relationships that meet the unique needs of each individual professor. Baldwin (1990) also indicates that "sensitive guidance" from established disciplinary colleagues can be a very effective way of easing initial career transition. The individual on the other hand might have to re-conceptualize his/her view of "social interdependence" if it happens to be in conflict with that of the institution or disciplinary community.

The Early Career Stage

This is a period between career entry and full membership of the professoriate ranks (i.e. tenure). It is technically still a probationary period since the appointment can be terminated if one is ultimately denied tenure. As Baldwin (1990) points out, "the early-career professor recognizes that denial of tenure could provoke a major transition in his/her life" (p. 33). The early-career professor therefore, has to master principal faculty roles, embark on meaningful research and publish articles (so as to gain visibility and recognition), get

involved in professional associations and editorial boards, and still devote time for family and other personal responsibilities. Whilst the progress one makes depends to a great extent on the individual's institutional and disciplinary affiliation, it is generally recognized that "faculty who publish, who assume administrative responsibilities and who serve on committees are rewarded for their efforts with promotion and salary increments" (Finkelstein, 1984, p. 59). This make-or-break situation undoubtedly places a great deal of stress, strain and anxiety on early-career professors. Boyer (1990) points out that in a faculty survey, 53 percent of those under 40 years reported that their job was a source of considerable strain. Early career faculty are therefore in a situation which needs careful handling if they are to succeed in their academic careers.

Higher education institutions should thus acknowledge the unique burdens early-career faculty encounter, and take steps support them by carefully identifying their needs and taking appropriate actions. Sorcinelli (2000) suggests an improvement of the review and tenure processes, whilst Baldwin (1990) advises institutions to provide sabbatical leaves to non-tenured junior faculty so as to provide them the opportunity to organize their research activities. Creswell and others (1990, in Wheeler, 1992), also advice that department chairpersons should pay "systematic attention" to junior faculty.

The Mid-Career Stage

This is the period (often long) between gaining firm establishment in academia by way of securing a tenured appointment, and a point in the person's life where a career disengagement process begins to set in. Baldwin (1990) indicates that the mid-career stage is often a "very productive and rewarding phase" in the academic career, as the professor at this stage would have gained academic and professional influence and reputation. This stage should therefore mark an end to the demands, dilemmas and anxieties that are characteristic of the earlier periods of one's academic life. Sadly however, the mid-career stage most often "signals the onset of a new set of challenges" (Becher, 1989), as career goals begin to lose their driving quality, and interests and concerns that were suppressed during the early career years may begin to "bubble to the surface" (Baldwin, 1990). The monotonous nature of one's work, burnout, and worries about falling behind in one's field may also signal the onset of a career plateau. The professor at this stage thus goes through a mid-career crisis, as he/she seeks to reexamine and redefine priorities and goals. Baldwin (1990) points out that the mid-career professor faces a psychological dilemma and begins to ask questions such as:

What should I do with the rest of my professional life? Do I want to continue teaching full time? Would I make a good administrator? Is it too late to learn the computer? Could team teaching with a new member in our department help me catch up with new developments in my field?
(p. 35)

Faculty who are unable to stem the storm of mid-career crisis might become disillusioned with their career and consider themselves "stuck" rather than "moving," and this could be detrimental to them as individuals and to academia at large. Kanter (1979, in Clark et al, 1986), asserts that "people who conceive themselves as among the 'moving' rather than the 'stuck' in their careers will be likely to keep their aspirations high, have positive self-esteem, work hard, take appropriate risks, remain engaged in their interests ...," attributes which are healthy for the individual as well as academia. Academia thus has an obligation to keep mid-career faculty "moving."

The Late Career Stage

This is the last stage of the professor's career where gradual disengagement from active work occurs as he/she prepares towards retirement. In addition to simple burnout, several developmental, structural and cognitive reasons have been advanced in attempts to explain this issue of "intellectual menopause" (Becher, 1989). However, this ought to be a gratifying period of the academic career, as the professor is not under any pressure to prove or justify his/her continued existence in academia. Nonetheless, the late-career professor still has a few issues to contend with as he/she tries to leave a legacy, whilst his/her services are still needed in teaching, advising, career guidance as well as in the community at large.

INTELLECTUAL MIGRATION IN MID-CAREER

Causes and Challenges

Mid-career faculty, in attempts to abate the crisis they encounter, sometimes resort to intellectual migration i.e. a shift in focus of scholarship, either to another specialism within a discipline, or to another discipline altogether. Several other factors however contribute in influencing the decision to "migrate". Neapolitan (1980, p. 216), proposes the grouping of these factors into four broad categories:

- 1) *Factors associated with the area of origin (first occupation)*
- 2) *Factors associated with area of destination (second occupation)*

3) *Personal and Institutional Factors.*

4) *Intervening Obstacles*

Though Neapolitan's proposal is based on the attributes of careers in general, it is quite applicable to the academic career. I will therefore take a brief look at each category, but bearing in mind that intellectual migration is a human issue, and as such no single reason or group of reasons will be enough to explain every such activity.

Factors associated with the area (discipline) of origin

Becher (1989) indicates that the way knowledge has progressed in a particular field or discipline is a factor that can influence migration. Thus in subject areas that develop rapidly (e.g. biology, physics etc. where "ten years is about the maximum life-span of a fashionable topic"), one's specialty area easily falls out of fashion, or his/her technical knowledge becomes dated, leaving the researcher "moldering in an intellectual backwater" (p. 173). Under these circumstances, the researcher might be compelled to consider "emigrating" either to new specialty or to a new discipline.

Another view (Neapolitan, 1980) is that a lack of congruence between a person's research orientation and the rewards of the discipline can be a source of dissatisfaction, leading the individual to seek to migrate. Thus, a researcher in biochemistry for example who fails to get his/her work accepted and published in recognized journals might consider channeling his/her energy and resources in another direction, maybe to biophysics.

Factors associated with the area (discipline) of destination

If the characteristics of the entering discipline are such that the academic can simultaneously "keep one foot in the old specialism while dipping toes in the new" (Becher, 1989), then the possibility of migration is greatly enhanced. This is because the academic in mid-career will not wish to "compound his/her problems by choosing an intellectually impenetrable area than the one with which they are already familiar" (p. 173). Migration is thus more common in the sciences where general theories can be applied across disciplines. It is more conceivable for a chemist to move to physics than a historian to do the same.

Mulkay (1974, in Becher, 1998) also argues that intellectual migration is quite feasible if the discipline of destination is of a lower precision in comparison with the discipline of origin. Thus theoretical economists readily move to become economic

historians, and cell biologists become ecologists, whilst movement in the reverse direction is quite rare.

Expectancy theory (i.e. job choice depends on an individual's attraction to the job and his/her belief that efforts to enter the job will be successful) has been shown to be applicable to mid-career change in academia (Snyder et al, 1978). Thus, the so-called "hot" disciplines (where funding is readily available), serve as an attraction to mid-career faculty who believe that with their experience and reputation, they will be able to make inroads into these disciplines, hence migration takes place.

Personal and Institutional Factors

Becher (1989) contends that it is common to see individuals arriving at the conclusion that they have done all what they wanted to do in a particular specialism and it was time to move on, or that they had simply become bored with the discipline and thus needed a change. Such a personal attitude towards one's disciplinary focus is enough motivation to change direction.

Other personal factors such as family obligations and private life experiences might compel mid-career faculty to embark on a change in specialism or discipline. For example, for medical reasons, Robert Benson, a professor of chemistry at KSU, Ohio, was compelled to leave his laboratory and move into research in computing technology (my own sources).

Institutions also contribute to faculty migration. For example, Ruscio (1987) points out that, in liberal arts colleges, "transcending disciplinary boundaries is not only tolerated but is encouraged". And so a political scientist in a liberal arts college declares that "Here, I can follow precisely where my curiosities led without having to answer to anybody or feel that I was professionally imperiling myself" (AHSE Reader Series, p. 447). One's academic institution of affiliation is therefore a factor that can greatly influence one's willingness and ability to migrate.

Intervening Obstacles

Though the above mentioned factors appear to be strongly motivating, intellectual migration is plagued with a lot of disincentives.

In the first place, faculty in mid-career have already invested a considerable amount of time and effort building a reputation as well as networks in their discipline. It will therefore be with considerable difficulty to simply abandon this and start all over in another discipline.

Secondly, Becher (1989) mentions the high linguistic and conceptual barriers that might accompany some disciplinary changes. The researcher might have to learn a new language or mode of discourse, replace one technical concept with another, acquire some background knowledge etc., activities which most mid-career faculty will hesitate to do.

In disciplines such as the sciences where sometimes a large groups of people work on related questions, peer pressure can be a strong force against migration. Becher (1989) indicates that the academic seeking to migrate might continue to receive invitations to disciplinary activities thus reinforcing his/her reputation in the discipline, and subsequently discouraging any intentions to migrate.

Due to all these disincentives, the practice of mid-career intellectual migration might not be a common occurrence in academia, and Snyder et al (1978), provide evidence to indicate that, "the number of people who would prefer a mid-career change far outnumber the ones who actively seek and achieve it" (p. 230). The fact that some academics do "migrate" in mid-career indicates that the factors enumerated above (in addition to many others) cumulatively provide a motive that is strong enough to overcome these disincentives.

Effects

As noted above, mid-career intellectual migration is not a phenomenon that occurs on a large scale in academia, yet the migration of professionals of high repute can have profound effects on sub-disciplines, disciplines and academia at large.

In the first place, the growth and development of most disciplines can be attributed to intellectual mobility. Becher (1989) declares that career mobility can be a source of innovation and rapid development within a discipline because fresh ideas, concepts and technical expertise are introduced. For example, Mullins (1972, in Becher, 1998) shows that 17 out of 41 scientists working on phage research in molecular biology in a particular community, were physicists and chemists by training. Their introduction of physical methods of investigation into phage research would undoubtedly have helped in breaking new grounds in that biology sub-discipline.

Academia also stand to benefit when potential migrants "dip toes in other disciplines" by engaging in interdisciplinary research activities. These cross disciplinary activities can result in the modification of established ideas and concepts, and ultimately enhance knowledge construction in the respective disciplines. Becher's (1989) identification of one Herbert Simon whose "contributions to political science and economics were complemented

by those he made to mathematics and psychology," is an indication that cross disciplinary activities can be beneficial.

Intellectual migration can also create new disciplines altogether. Ben-David (1960, in Becher 1989) used the term "role-hybrids" to describe the process where:

The individual moving from one role to another, such as from one profession or academic field to another...may attempt to fit the methods and techniques of the old role to the materials of the new one, with the deliberate purpose of creating a new role. (p. 175)

It is therefore quite possible that most academic disciplines and sub-disciplines that we know of today, owe their origin and growth to intellectual migration.

Intellectual migration could also bring personal satisfaction to the mid-career academic as it would have contributed in the abatement of a mid-career crisis. Boyer (1990) talks of a senior professor at a research institution who, after having moved to another discipline, declares that "I have, quite frankly, felt a sense of renewed purpose, energy, and usefulness in my work." (p. 51). Certainly this will translate into increased productivity.

It is quite possible that intellectual migration can have a detrimental effect on some disciplines as scholars of repute "emigrate." There is however limited or no evidence in the literature in support of this, probably because "emigration" is balanced by "immigration."

The foregoing discussion indicates that intellectual migration can be beneficial to individuals, sub-disciplines, disciplines and academia in general. It will therefore not be unreasonable for one to suggest that institutions and disciplinary communities have a role to play so that academia can reap the benefits of migration and minimize the setbacks (if any).

THE ROLE OF ACADEMIA

The evidence so far indicate that intellectual mobility by mid-career faculty is a desirable activity and hence need to be encouraged. Several policies, structures and institutions can therefore be put in place by academia to make it reasonably feasible for mid-career faculty who wish to embark on a career change to do so.

In the first place, inter disciplinary rapport among faculty can be encouraged by institutionalizing inter departmental workshops and seminars, since according to Clark (1963, in Becher 1989), faculty in different disciplines have "few things in common [and thus] have less impulse to interact and less ability to do so" (p. 23). Faculty from different disciplines

can therefore meet periodically to share research ideas and experiences, a first step towards intellectual migration.

Secondly, mid-career faculty wishing to embark on intellectual migration will surely need a lot of time to enable them carry out meaningful activities in other subfields or disciplines. Reduced teaching and administrative roles as well as sabbatical leaves and leaves without pay, will therefore be of immense assistance to them.

Academia should also be open to new ideas by allowing mid-career professors the flexibility to transcend disciplinary boundaries, and recognizing their output from activities that are not directly related to their assigned academic duties. As the professor goes through mid-career crisis, he/she is likely to begin trying out new ideas, and institutions should be prepared to shoulder some risks by encouraging them to do so.

Mid-career faculty can also be resourced financially with independent study grants and also technically with training workshops (computer etc) so they can be better equipped to diversify their research activities.

The developmental needs of faculty should also be addressed through the introduction of faculty development programs (in situations where they do not exist), and tailor these programs towards the specific needs and concerns of each individual faculty. Persons who feel "stuck" in their careers can therefore be targeted and advised appropriately.

The following quotation from Boyer (1990) sums up this discussion:

The potential benefit of a flexible career path was revealed in a comment we received from a senior professor at a research institution: "A few years ago, I felt much differently about my work and institution as I do now. I would have answered your questions on morale and career change negatively then. But my school gave me the time, room and encouragement to move in new directions. In my case, I am now directing new writing programs campus wide and introducing new concepts like computer-assisted instruction in writing across curriculum. I have, quite frankly, felt a sense of renewed purpose, energy, and usefulness in my work. I hope that other institutions are as flexible and open to new ideas as mine." (p. 51)

CONCLUSION

The typical career of a college professor evolves through four main stages in consonance with age and experience, with each stage being characterized by its unique

developmental issues and challenges. Having survived the rigorous expectations of academia and securing a professional reputation and permanent appointment, some professors still encounter a crisis so powerful enough to make them consider a career or disciplinary change. This disciplinary change however has been found in most cases, to be quite beneficial to academia as individuals are motivated, disciplinary activities are enhanced and some new disciplines are created. It will therefore be in the interest of academia to put policies and practices in place not only to address the developmental needs of faculty at the various stages of their careers, but also to encourage faculty who seek a disciplinary change to do so.

However, simply putting developmental programs in place might not be enough to give the desired impact. We need to learn more about the complex issue of adult development so we do not oversimplify it, and also how institutional and disciplinary structures and activities affect faculty morale and vitality, particularly those in mid-career. More comprehensive research is therefore necessary in this direction so we can fashion out the appropriate frameworks that will adequately address these issues so academia can play its expected role in society.

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