Untenured Faculty: issues of transition, adjustment and mentorship

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ABSTRACT  A needs assessment for mentoring between faculty in higher education could highlight the personal and professional needs of junior professors not being met by existing academic structures. Assessments that include the responses of untenured faculty can identify critical issues of socialisation in the effort to develop effective mentoring programmes. This study is based on the personal reflections of 60 untenured faculty working in the United States, Canada, and Australia who revealed salient aspects of their cultural adjustment. The original questionnaire probed issues of faculty socialisation in several key areas. The data are organised into themes involving criteria for gaining tenure, collegiality as collaboration and competition, and politics and the academic power structure. The data also suggest that the pre-tenure years can be analysed as early and advanced phases of adjustment.

It is important to line up with (become friends with) tenured and ‘accepted’ members of your immediate professional community. The tenure decision has enough subjectivity in it that it becomes important not to alienate someone who might be on the final tenure committee. Once you’ve established a core of tenured and accepted colleagues, the process of reaching tenure should be greatly facilitated. (advanced untenured respondent)

A Perspective of New Faculty Socialisation

Testimonials of untenured faculty (Ducharme, 1993; Finley, 1999; Knight & Trowler, 1999; Sorcinelli, 1994; Tierney, 1997; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996) can be mined for knowledge of what Nixon (1996) calls the ‘crisis of professional self-identity’ that ‘highlights the vulnerability of university teachers as an occupational group’ (p. 5). What is called folk wisdom (which can be contrasted with systematic research) has typically informed issues of socialisation (see e.g. Knowles & Cole, 1994; Phillips et al., 1994). Such studies have investigated the socialisation of
untenured faculty (also referred to as new entrants, recruits, and academics as well as junior faculty) from the perspective of a tenured (senior) faculty position.

Working from the testimonials of untenured faculty, this article offers a needs assessment for mentoring between faculty in higher education. We report the salient themes from the reflections of 60 untenured faculty who responded to a questionnaire that explores personal and cultural adjustment to the academy. Collectively, these themes highlight the personal and professional needs of junior professors not being met by existing academic structures.

Within the scope of this study, tenure is defined as a system in HE that socialises faculty to ‘a unified view of organisational culture’ in which individual effectiveness is judged on the basis of performance of research/publication and teaching, even though service is expected. According to Tierney (1997), these indicators of performance are ‘often ill-defined and poorly evaluated’; additionally, ‘an individual’s activity is often devoid of any overriding sense of institutional purpose or identity’ (p. 12). The need for mentoring of new faculty in different countries is evident in the research, even where it is implicit in such criticisms of the tenure process.

**Methods for Eliciting and Analysing Testimonials**

The questionnaire (Table 1) contains eight areas of socialisation that address the transition period for untenured faculty: mentoring assistance, preparation, interactions with other faculty, unexpected connections (both positive and negative), shocking truths (revised idealism), secrets, informal channels of information, and power dynamics (in various scenarios). These areas are later analysed in this article for their thematic value.

Research conducted in the US, UK, Canada and Australia was reviewed to identify salient issues in new faculty socialisation in HE institutions. Within the scope of the literature search, for example, we extracted Knight and Trowler’s (1999) significant finding that new faculty basically induct themselves. Alternatively, they find ‘friendly colleagues’ in their universities who act as mentors to help compensate for the ‘inadequate arrangements for positive professional socialisation’ and ‘mentoring provision’ (pp. 26–27).

As another example, we used Sorcinelli’s (1994) finding that new faculty require more assistance from senior colleagues in their adjustment to the academy, which includes establishing their identity as researchers and teachers. From such findings, we designed the first two survey items. These consider the role of mentoring in the socialisation of new recruits. We asked whether the academy mentored the respondents in their transition from graduate students to faculty members. We also asked about omissions in the preparation they might have received that could have been of assistance. In piloting the questionnaire we elicited feedback from 20 untenured faculty in the US and Canada. Through this methodological process combined with a broader literature search we confirmed the relevance of the eight issues identified in the research. The implications for the generalisability of our findings are to be understood with the caveat that the identified issues of new faculty socialisation were based on the available literature and the responses received.
TABLE 1. Personal response questionnaire: what are untenured faculty really thinking?

1. Has the academy aided in your transition from graduate student to faculty member? Have you experienced any mentoring (formal or informal) in your new environment? If so, describe.
2. In what ways were you NOT prepared to perform as a new faculty member? Please describe.
3. Assuming that politics constitute much of the academy, describe the positive and negative aspects of your own experience as a junior-level faculty member.
4. Considering your interactions with other faculty (both untenured and tenured), highlight the positive and negative aspects of your experiences. You might reflect on instances involving such positive words as joy, synergy, empathy, connection and such negative words as anxiety, frustration, anger, and disillusionment.
5. Have you experienced any unexpected connections or instances that have supported idealistic notions that you may have had about the academy and what it symbolizes (in the way of academic freedom, democracy, collegiality, and more)?
6. Have you experienced any shocking truths or instances that have forced you to revise idealistic notions that you may have had about the academy and what it symbolizes (in the way of academic freedom, democracy, collegiality, and more)?
7. Do you have any secrets (on a possibly taboo subject) about what you have experienced as an untenured faculty member that you could describe in such a way as to protect yourself and your institution?
8. What are the informal channels of information that ‘educate’ you to what is important and/or valued in your context or academy in general?
9. How does the power structure reveal itself in your academy? To assist you in this reflection, we offer the following possible scenarios involving power dynamics:
   - Faculty meetings
   - Research/project meetings
   - Collaborative teamwork
   - Socials
   - Hallways (water cooler) conversations
   - Distribution of work and credit for work done
10. Additional comments.

We define untenured faculty, in the context of the questionnaire, as faculty working in research universities who hold tenure-track and sessional or adjunct posts. Hardigg (1995) refers to those part-timers who must string together different teaching posts in order to survive as ‘gypsy profs’. Sessional faculty who responded to the questionnaire fulfilled the triple roles of researcher, teacher, and service provider, but in a different capacity from the full-time faculty respondents.¹

The questionnaire was distributed to the global community through the venues of conferences and electronic discussion groups of professional academic associations. (As a result of the nature of these venues, the potential number of respondents is undetermined.) Sixty faculty responded who are educators in the areas of leadership and administration, teacher development, technology, psychology, and ethnic studies. A few faculty shared that the questionnaire proved exhausting in its demand on their time, but worthwhile for having helped them to reflect on their experiences of personal adjustment.

The questionnaire data were individually coded and analysed by us in the search for emerging themes. We agreed to each assign units of meaning to ‘chunks’ of
information (e.g. paragraph sections in a questionnaire) in order to note any patterns that could be mapped comprehensively (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The same three themes resulted from our separate reading of the data: criteria for gaining tenure, collegiality as collaboration and competition, and politics and the academic power structure.

In addition to questionnaire responses, this study includes electronic mail as an unexpected secondary source of data. A pleasant surprise occurred when most of the respondents e-mailed additional comments after forwarding their questionnaires. This spontaneous follow-up activity had not been prompted. We came to see it as a statement about the value of personal reflection as a methodology for engaging untenured faculty in their more intimate experiences of the academy and for keeping communication open beyond formal data collection.

We offer the view of insiders whose location as untenured faculty has given us the advantage of being able to solicit very frank comments and revelations. We have noticed a qualitative difference in the type of feedback we received and the responses in similar questionnaires conducted by tenured faculty. Respondents to our questionnaire seemed willing to share more intimate thoughts and experiences.

Testimonials of Untenured Faculty: a thematic analysis

The three major cultural issues that resulted from the questionnaires are each considered in turn. These results, which reflect a sample of the untenured respondents (from beginning to advanced faculty), are presented in Table 2. This display offers insight into what untenured faculty think about the critical issues involved in their socialisation in the academy.

Criteria for Gaining Tenure

All of the respondents equated their progress as new faculty with the requirements of HE institutions that they produce in the areas of teaching, researching/publication, and service. However, they have found that not much formal discussion takes place to clarify what is involved in attaining tenure, credit, and recognition. In fact, they described the tenure-earning process as ambiguous, uncertain, and stressful, as one male respondent explained:

One of the greatest challenges of nontenured track faculty is the mystery that surrounds the tenure and promotion process. Provosts, deans, and department heads will deflect direct questions regarding what is required for tenure (necessary teaching ratings, publications, and service records), leaving the untenured in a position of doubt and anxiety. Even after attending two tenure and promotion seminars given by our Dean, I still don’t know what the criteria will be. I know the format of the document, but not the criteria that will be used to evaluate the document. I hate obsessing over this, but my future depends on it.

Another respondent offered a reflection on the HE climate. She speculated that
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<th>Mentoring assistance</th>
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<th>Secrets (taboo)</th>
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<td><strong>1st year (female)</strong></td>
<td>Did not teach as a graduate student; taught community college and was a paid researcher.</td>
<td>Faculty saw her in an unflattering light. 'Image of being serious' unapproachable. Colleagues were polite but distant; said [her] students complained of overwork. Faculty interrupted her class to complain about noise level. Felt uncomfortable.</td>
<td>Faculty had 'change of heart' due to a unique event she sponsored featuring graduating students. Showed her 'highly synergistic relationships with students'.</td>
<td>'Collaboration in the form of mandatory team teaching. Senior faculty expect adoption of their activities. Required textbook for course had been previously assigned to students.' Selection of another book is kept private—keen sanctions.</td>
<td>'Sexual relations used as commodities by a few students and faculty to 'buy' grades.' Co-author of article added a student as third author without a contribution from the person.</td>
<td>'Lives on e-mail.' Exchanges useful information about conferences, journals, and job openings with colleagues at many universities.' Prefers electronic community over daily interactions with a few colleagues.</td>
<td>'Noticed a lot of attention on who spends time in chair's office.' A few faculty wanted her to procure 'goodies' from the chair after her appointment to a high-powered committee.</td>
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<td><strong>2nd year (female)</strong></td>
<td>Well prepared for teaching; got valuable experience at graduate level; taught 20 years in K-12. Not prepared for heavy teaching load; assigned service tasks; service tasks; writing grants and publications.</td>
<td>Heavy project involvement with untenured female faculty; made solid inroads to schools; faculty sought her out for guidance but her name was omitted on collaborative articles; feels like a 'filler' on faculty search committees.</td>
<td>Delighted when people ask for her materials/works.</td>
<td>People 'steal' ideas from you and confiscate them as their own. Work only with those you really trust.</td>
<td>Administration ignored strong recommendations from search committees and made new hires that had been strongly opposed. Hiring practices are against policy.</td>
<td>Water-cooler talk. Formal channels available in faculty handbook are obscure. Connects with colleagues at other universities and at conferences about meaning of tenure.</td>
<td>'Top-down atmosphere' permeates everything: message is: know your place—'don't make waves or confront the status quo. Don't ask a lot of questions.' Produce!—fate is in hands of superiors.</td>
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<td><strong>3rd year (male)</strong></td>
<td>Greatest shortfall was 'nonacademic side of professionalism'. Not prepared for how to 'read' power structure, ethical situations, and faculty interactions. Crisis in decisions regarding journal outlets, committee selection, and grant writing.</td>
<td>Some senior faculty resist learning from new faculty who model the use of reflective problem-solving in teaching. Some tenured faculty are expository/outdated in their pedagogy. Exceptions exist. Diverse faculty need common vision.</td>
<td>When a junior administrator threatened him with disciplinary action for not violating confidentiality of a student matter, his concern was raised and supported by the college level administration.</td>
<td>Despite expertise and contract, is given courses to teach outside his area. Only able to do adequate teaching, which the administration seems to be fine with.</td>
<td>A romantic relationship with a student in which this new faculty person 'had not been prepared for the ethical issues involved. I've since developed appreciation for why faculty-student intimacy is encouraged.'</td>
<td>Observes behavior of senior colleagues for clues about what brings success/attention. Networks with peers; learns their approach to getting recognition/tenure, grants, publications, and offices that count. Conference networking attracts publishing contacts.</td>
<td>Struggle between educators and technical experts involving, e.g., space allocation. 'Teaching assignments not based on expertise but on hoop-jumping and orchestration of senior colleagues.' Credit for authorship status on articles reasonable so far.</td>
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<td><strong>4th year (female)</strong></td>
<td>Institution in 'high state of transition' — no mentoring for new faculty. Is senior member of department due to changes in faculty. 'Assigned a mentor who had not published in 10 years.' She directs many dissertations without any guidance.</td>
<td>'Unprepared for amount of work involved in mentoring students. They are not responsible for their own learning. Takes away from teaching, research, and family.'</td>
<td>'Greatest political battle with faculty around politics of tenure. Doing more than others poses a threat, producing tension between doing well and not being a star.' Struggles with faculty and students over what makes for quality inquiry.</td>
<td>No ideals but feels joyful when students become inquirers and break through their own low expectations for academic performance.</td>
<td>'Many male faculty in positions of responsibility have not read academic literature or published in many years, yet retire and provide valuable input into policy-making.'</td>
<td>Same idea as previous.</td>
<td>Seeks out new faculty and works with them. Also sustained by rewarding experiences with select students.</td>
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<td><strong>6th year (male)</strong></td>
<td>Two ‘wonderful mentors’ at different universities. Sought out these mentors. 'No established mentoring programs or support mechanisms to facilitate transition from student to faculty.'</td>
<td>'Well prepared for teaching; taught for 7 years in K-12. Not prepared for attaining tenure; no formal discussion of what is involved in attaining tenure.'</td>
<td>'Aligned with tenured faculty in department. Avoids alienating tenured faculty as final decision is quasi-subjective. Networking with untenured faculty results in resources, co-authorships, and connections with gatekeepers to opportunities.'</td>
<td>Support from university for academic exploration. Innovative ideas rewarded through grant money, seminars, and technology. 'If you can think it, my university will support it.'</td>
<td>'Litusm test is research—publish or perish is our motto.' Excellent teaching (evidenced by the highest teacher ratings in the college, which he achieved) is not valued. 'Record for service is also outstanding, but does not count.' Motto should be 'students first.'</td>
<td>Some tenured faculty sleep with students and then 'brag' about it.</td>
<td>Informal education obtained through mentors. Asks them many questions. As friends they share openly.</td>
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<td><strong>9th year (male)</strong></td>
<td>Mentored at first teaching job—played golf with senior faculty member; got advice about politics of academy; 'luck at finding a mentor has not been repeated'.</td>
<td>'Not prepared for personal freedom in the academy; ten years later, still struggling with the prospect of freedom (e.g. selection of course content).’</td>
<td>Positive fellowship and camaraderie. Negative: public humiliation by senior faculty; betrayal of trust.</td>
<td>'Gained perspective from mentor (senior faculty) on alienating experience of being shunned by a clique of junior faculty (and other disturbing situations).’</td>
<td>'Colleagues don't always act in the best interest of untenured faculty even when it involves no additional effort (e.g. public praise).’</td>
<td>'Personal motto: love many, but trust few, and paddle your own canoe.'</td>
<td>Observing peers who are role models; strategy used for educating oneself in the absence of 'mentoring from senior faculty'.</td>
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Uncertainty has permeated the academy, causing a decrease in collegiality and an increase in politics:

Uncertainty, of which there has been plenty in higher education for several years now, depletes collegiality and increases ‘politics’. Scheming and intrigue are more likely where there is lack of clarity about the ‘rules’, procedures, outcomes, and so forth, a state of ambiguity that people perceive and experience as threatening. Unfortunately this creates a climate in which those possessed of the low political skills thrive, often at the expense of those gifted at scholarship, teaching, or research.

Beginning faculty were most vocal about teaching. Those with previous instructional experience appeared to be the most comfortable with their college-level teaching responsibilities. One female respondent commented: ‘Luckily, I think I was best prepared for my teaching. I had lots of great experience teaching college students during graduate school. But some of my new faculty colleagues had never been afforded the opportunity to teach at the college level.’ But even the majority of respondents who had had no formal training in how to teach college students had managed to gain teaching experience in related contexts:

I never taught a class while I was in graduate school. I taught community college on the side but I got the feedback from my employing institution that I needed experience teaching. I consider teaching to be one of my strengths and I really put the time into it.

Advanced untenured faculty held some views that run counter to the idealism implicit in those expressed by the new faculty. The more experienced faculty claim to have not been supported for the ‘amount of work it takes to mentor students in the university research environment in which I teach. The students require extensive support, which takes definite time away from publication, class preparation, and family.’ This group of faculty also underscored what they believe to be deception on the part of the institution about teaching as a major area of evaluation. One male commented:

While I have had the highest teacher ratings for the last two years in our college and an excellent service record, no publications, no job. It’s unfortunate that good teaching is not valued at all institutions. Unfortunately, at my institution the litmus test is research. Publish or perish is definitely our motto.

New faculty did not share with us the topics of their projects, the progress they have made, or the approach they have taken to research and publication. Instead, they wrote openly about the pressure they experience to produce scholarly publications. A third-year respondent discussed how her ability to develop research during the first year went smoothly because her time was ‘protected fairly well that year by the administration’. However, in her second year she was assigned new courses to teach and committees to serve on. These new developments proved confusing to her. They also appeared to have compromised her ability to succeed: ‘What
compounded all of this pressure for me was the push to get those articles in for publication and for the third year review, which started weighing very heavily.’

Untenured faculty were not especially focused on the role of service. They represented it as an additional responsibility that had been imposed on them, one that does not count toward tenure in many institutions. One individual voiced the concern that most respondents expressed about service: ‘In the teacher education professoriate activities such as everyday administrative tasks and practical supervision do not count in tenure and merit or workload decisions.’

_Collegiality as Collaboration and Competition_

In this study, _collegiality_ is used to refer to the bonding relationship that untenured faculty experience with peer mentors and senior faculty and also to their immediate professional environments. We interpret the questionnaire data using the tension suggested in the testimonials that view collegiality as sometimes nurturing and at other times problematic.

Collegiality specifically functions as a tension between collaboration and competition in the lives of the respondents. Collegial relationships with former graduate students and dissertation committee members form the core community for untenured faculty members. The overwhelming majority of first- and second-year recruits are developing themselves without the support of formal mentoring practices and at a distance from their immediate professional contexts and colleagues. These new inductees rely on telementoring or electronic communal practices to meet many of their professional development needs: ‘In my new environment, my major professor has continued to mentor me at a distance (via the Internet) and at conferences we both attend.’ Some new faculty also socialise with members of their former cohort to mentor each other: ‘I spend a lot of time conversing with friends and colleagues at other universities. We go to conferences and talk about what tenure and promotion _really_ means.’

New professors often feel more connected to past institutions and communities than they do to their new academic setting. One female respondent wrote that her collaborations with colleagues from other universities are very meaningful, unlike her current work arrangements:

I live on e-mail. I am somewhat disconnected from my university because I teach at a satellite campus and because I am not ‘one’ with my new faculty-peers. My habits for researching developed while I was independent. I have many meaningful relationships, including collaborations, with faculty who are at other universities. We frequently send each other messages about what’s up in the profession; we share reminders about conferences, calls for papers, and employment openings. I like this kind of exchange better than I do daily interactions with the same several people.

Another female faculty member also indicated that she prefers working electronically with colleagues. She explains how one might actually strive to distance oneself from the current workplace setting in the effort to maximise personal freedom:
One needs to exercise caution where one works as teams and collaborations can limit the academic freedoms of new faculty. I’ve noticed instances when untenured faculty are required to do work that tenured faculty will not, especially with regard to building school alliances and the need for faculty to be in public schools. I’ve also observed that assignments given to research teams limit the possibility that newcomers will engage their own topics of research.

Untenured faculty have found ways to ‘mentor’ themselves as developing professionals who are sustained through previously established relationships with colleagues. However, the sense of detachment from the new institution that their disclosures convey is problematic. This information is useful to the academy. It suggests that junior faculty have a view about their current academic workplaces and period of adjustment that probably differs from the expectations of senior faculty for them. Senior faculty may find it beneficial to know what the expectations of junior faculty are about collegiality. It appears from the data that the two groups have a different definition of collegiality and that neither is aware of the other’s definition.

The respondents discussed collegiality in the context of supportive and destructive professional connections. Neighbours (next-door colleagues and departmental associates) were construed as positive guides as well as exploitative individuals. Some new faculty have found their academic neighbours to be antagonists, liars, and thieves. One individual commented powerfully in this way: ‘I am still not prepared for the fiercely competitive shark-infested waters of the academic culture.’ This person learned quickly that she must retract generous sharing with ‘power hoarding’ faculty whom she assesses as wanting her to do their work. In these instances, one’s neighbour (or potential collaborator) has the status of a predatory shark.

The academy fares no better as a kind of feeding frenzy or power structure in which survival and self-protection are the dominant modes of operation for the new faculty member (Mullen & Dalton, 1996). One person referred to how ‘the power structure of collegiality can be quite subtle’ with an illustration of how people are ‘cordial on the outside but back-stabbing and criticising behind the scenes’. New faculty seem to expect genuine collegiality from co-workers, and some are unprepared for the reality of competition and power-seeking they find in their new institutions.

Other data show that the more advanced untenured faculty actively searched for and often succeeded at establishing beneficial collegial relationships with a few senior colleagues:

I have actively sought out a tenured mentor at each institution where I have worked, and these established individuals have provided me with most of my informal education. Basically, I just keep asking these colleagues with whom I become friends all of my questions. While most of my relationships with faculty are friendly, I would call very few of my colleagues ‘friends’. [male]

However, even with the additional years of experience in the academy and the
positive partnerships they have developed, the advanced faculty members appear to operate within a limited community in their immediate workplaces:

My closest partners are tenured in this university and elsewhere. Other untenured females whom you would think would be my natural allies have socially ostracised me here. I have been told that they feel threatened over my high rate of productivity and publication. Admittedly, I did come here already aligned to do significant work with a few tenured faculty with whom I am engaged in very meaningful work that rescripts traditional norms in education. [female]

The view of collegiality as competitive and damaging serves as a warning that ‘teamwork can be a form of faked collaboration in order to get people to do work and then take credit for what they produce’. Another individual held a compatible view:

I have found collegiality to be whimsical. It certainly is touted as being the way we should operate, but in the same instance the competitive level strangles the viability of collegiality. You have some folks that will take advantage of your abilities for their own purposes. All of these dynamics have led to my self-imposed isolation.

A new faculty member offered powerful insight for us into how mentoring is not the answer but rather quality of mentoring: ‘I know that experienced faculty would love to think that they aided in my transition, but truthfully it is a very lonely experience.’ She has lost faith in institutional programmes for addressing her own ‘circle of one’ or isolation: ‘I got mentored to death when I first got here.’ The formal mentoring that she experienced at her college functioned for her in a ‘weird and confusing’ way:

We would introduce ourselves every single meeting. Now that might be okay in a new faculty group of thousands, but there were only five of us at a time that would show up. The chair of the committee could never remember our names. It would have been almost laughable if the subject matter had not been so serious. Publish, publish, publish. Get grant money. Get more grant money.

This faculty member has established her own brand of viable mentoring—an informal peer mentoring relationship with another new recruit who is involved in the same type of research and who has a similar vision of change for their department and for teacher education.

Like the majority of respondents, this individual’s primary peer group has been ‘the friends I made in graduate school’ that offers her an ‘incredible source of mentorship’. Although this group is spread throughout different universities, it has had the ‘greatest impact and value’ for her. Once again, a major drawback and irony to this beneficial solution is the distancing from her current context that it evokes: ‘This e-mail community among us has not helped with the assimilation to my
particular university, but it has certainly helped with my understanding of the generic academic picture and its peculiarities.’

Another respondent has benefited through informal mentoring processes. She was required to combine forces with her neighbour to teach the same course, an arrangement that has proven to be ‘very helpful to me in learning the ways of the university’. Along these lines, another respondent referred to ‘workshops in my institution on entering academe and how to publish work that are usually offered by caring faculty members who have an interest in helping others understand the culture of academe’. However, this helpful mentoring structure exists in tension with the negative mentoring that is exhibited by ‘the many others in our institution who guard knowledge about the culture’.

A proactive new faculty member, whose adjustment is noteworthy, has been able to thus far bridge the transition from graduate student to faculty. She has developed mentoring relationships with her department head and a senior faculty member who have ‘gone above and beyond to help me with everything possible’. For example, these colleagues have ‘flattered me by their investment of time to read materials (a grant application, an article), their praise, filling me in on the politics of situations, making opportunities for me to meet potentially helpful colleagues’. By reaching out to senior faculty and making her professional needs explicit, she invites others to contribute to her adjustment and eventual success: ‘They have made it very clear that they want me to succeed and to stay with their department’ (see Table 2, first-year faculty portrait).

Politics and the Academic Power Structure

A new faculty member provided us with a highly guarded reflection: ‘I was not prepared for the political undercurrent that existed in the department among faculty members.’ Another respondent, reflecting on her first year, said she needed to become more politically aware but felt disconnected from her colleagues’ values: ‘No one was there to tell me the “inside scoop” on politics. I spent most of the first year with my jaw wide open about the things colleagues really cared about.’ The political nature of new faculty adjustment was the predominant source of discussion in the testimonials we received, one that permeated much of their writing even about seemingly unrelated matters.

Politics is a very tricky term that has different meanings in various contexts. For the purpose of this discussion we define politics as the process of socialisation for new untenured faculty where employment is conditional and where status and power differences with senior faculty (and even junior colleagues) exist and can be made obvious (Tierney & Bensimon, 1996).

The data we received confirmed our thinking that the power structure in the academy is revealed through interpersonal and structural dynamics. The power structure is realised in such contexts as faculty meetings and through research/project meetings, collaborative teamwork arrangements, social gatherings, hallway conversations, and the distribution of work and credit for work. Some untenured faculty claim they have not been included in research or collaborative projects. Others told us that the
previous examples (that are also listed on the questionnaire: Table 1) could easily be extended. As one such instance, a respondent shared that graduate students are attracted to the ‘big guns’—faculty with financial support and an established reputation.

The camaraderie of assistant level professors who exchange valuable information without mentoring from the senior faculty also reveals the power structure of the academy. While some untenured faculty experience many of their peers as untrustworthy, others rely on at least a few of them as a critical support system:

I have received very useful mentoring from a few other assistant level professors that fall into three categories—sharing real stories of concern, offering unsolicited (welcoming) advice, and strategies for learning how to play the academy’s game. I experience more authentic, less constrained mentoring exchanges from my peers—it all feels less guarded and somehow more risk-taking to me than my exchanges with the tenured faculty. [male]

A new faculty member wrote of her disillusionment with academics she called predators. She was not prepared for having to work in isolation and to ‘dress different parts and cover up weakness of any kind because this is quickly sensed in the culture of academe’. She has learned that it is important to ‘always be vigilant to status structures that individuals use to flaunt their power’. This person feels she cannot be herself, especially in faculty meetings. Identity development of an arguably disturbing kind is taking place in the socialisation of this new faculty member. Our evidence indicates that this experience of having to mould oneself to behave in a way that is not comfortable in order to survive is the norm.

Competition was also powerfully associated with the politics of tenure, especially for untenured faculty who are more successful than their colleagues. One individual commented:

My largest concern has been with the politics of tenure. If you do too much (e.g. publish more than they do, get better teaching evaluations, graduate more doctoral students), you’re considered a threat but in fact you’re doing what the tenure document calls for.

Competition means that some may win but that many or most must lose. In this vein, another faculty member wrote:

That it is ‘possible’ to rise means that those who lose are blamed for their ‘failure’. People develop contempt for those ‘beneath’ them who ‘deserve’ their low status, and suspicion of those ‘above’ them, who it is suspected have gotten ahead by foul means. Division is rife, solidarity missing’.

Competition for power through professional status, grants, and resources creates political tension. The experiences of competition for faculty suggest a number of realities of life in the academy that present an alarming picture.

Market structures can be very hard on the individuals who inhabit them. Most respondents explained that they struggle to function without financial support for their research: ‘I was not prepared that as new faculty I would receive no financial
support from my research work, even though I have an active agenda complete with publications.’ Almost as a mentoring response to her, an advanced faculty member shared this politically astute message: ‘It’s important to get to know those professors who hold the power within your department and college. Certain professors are gatekeepers to valuable resources and opportunities.’

Discussion: mentoring as an approach to academic socialisation

Mentoring is a form of academic socialisation that mediates the professional learning of new faculty, facilitating their entry where positive and thus equipping them to adapt effectively both personally and culturally (Knight & Trowler, 1999). Mentoring implies a close personal connection and relationship between two or more individuals (Boice, 1992). Collegiality is an informal mentoring process that has the power to set the conditions for mutual learning that has been called ‘co-mentoring’ (Mullen & Lick, 1999). Like Knight and Trowler (1999) and Tierney (1997), we see mentoring and collegial processes as integral to the quality of experience an individual both encounters and shapes in a new professional community.

All of the respondents hold positions in institutions that generally do not provide effective forms of mentoring socialisation but that nonetheless require excellence in faculty performance. The respondents themselves are divided about whether collegial relationships in the academy can or should be formalised as mentoring arrangements for new faculty members. One position favours informal mentoring dynamics: ‘Mentor relationships cannot be forced; the valuable ones must be forged. They are the only ones that mean a great deal in the scheme of things.’ This judgement has been supported in studies of collegiality and mentoring that examine strategies for enhancing cultural transition and professional development for new faculty (Ducharme, 1993; Knight & Trowler, 1999; Mullen et al., 1997).

The opposite position favours formal mentoring preparation. It advocates not only the mindful socialisation of new faculty but also the engagement of the graduate student body as the initial (and often forgotten) pool of academic inductees:

Realising that not all doctoral students know if they’re going to be faculty members, some mentoring (formal or informal) on how they learned to walk these tightropes—what worked and what did not—would, in my opinion, be one of the most valuable lessons that seasoned senior faculty could pass on to their prospective junior counterparts while they’re still in their ‘preservice preparation’ stage. [male]

The formal mentoring that untenured faculty ‘receive’ appears to be inadequate throughout research universities. However, as many researchers have noted, the informal mentoring aspects of their daily lives definitely hold promise, with the caveat that collegiality can take unhealthy forms. Moreover, untenured individuals learn to move beyond a singular focus on discovering ‘predetermined norms’ that establish criteria for tenure (Tierney, 1997). Untenured faculty who participate in the academic culture as an opportunity for professional growth may stand a much better chance of becoming empowered in their new roles.
With insights derived from the testimonials, we propose that the academy could improve its socialisation processes for new and junior faculty by developing mentoring programmes. One such success was the League of Mentors’ programme at Florida State University in the US that facilitated the process of tenure and promotion for untenured faculty of colour (Groomes, 1999). While mentoring pairs were arranged for this comprehensive affirmative action programme, the League of Mentors was loosely structured so that individuals could design their own personal growth opportunities with input from senior faculty.

Mentoring programmes for new faculty could usefully include a combination of systematic and flexible, formal and informal, elements that take into account the needs of individuals. It seems obvious that untenured faculty should be directly involved in such critical developments. Formal mentoring programmes can range in the kinds of support they would extend to new faculty. Examples include assistance with learning unfamiliar professional tasks, developing a line of research, networking at universities and conferences, and navigating political issues in the workplace (Mullen et al., 1997; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996). From this study we learned that the benefits of informal mentoring—through the pairing of less experienced faculty with more experienced faculty, the continuation of cohorts from graduate school days, and the use of electronic communities—could be usefully mined by departments and universities for their potential value as components to be formalised.

Recommendations from Untenured Faculty

This study has led us to ask: How might untenured faculty develop a sense of belonging in their new workplaces while being prepared to become the next generation of educational leaders? We respond by summarising the key perspectives obtained from this study. Taken together, our findings provide support for the Carnegie Foundation’s position (Glassick et al., 1997) that effective mentoring offers the best preparation for faculty socialisation and evaluation. Yet, it is difficult to formalise or ‘write into the rules’ a mentoring process that responds to the personal needs of individuals.

1. Clarifying conversations are needed with departmental and campus leaders about what the criteria for tenure and promotion mean in the evaluation of the candidate.
2. Ineffective mentoring programmes for new faculty need to be seriously improved or discarded.
3. Mentoring assistance is needed for untenured faculty who lack experience with allocating time to teaching, research, and service and the selection of mentors.
4. Informal collegiality cannot be mandated or easily formalised, but the establishment of positive work conditions can enable healthy collegiality to develop.
5. Senior faculty need to include beginning faculty in research projects and curricular activities that promote advancement toward tenure. However, it is crucial that such collaborative relationships not only accommodate the skills of new faculty but also that they demonstrate the value of fairness in how decisions are made.
6. Financial resources (e.g. grants) and human resources (e.g. graduate students) need to be distributed so that untenured faculty can forward their research and publishing agendas.

7. Professional socialisation (including ethical issues) needs to be built into the academic mentoring of doctoral students who typically do not realise what is required of faculty in order to be successful in the academy.

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Note

[1] Part-time faculty constituted a minority of our pool of respondents; for this reason, we have not pursued a discussion of workers in HE on temporary contracts. As a tentative point, the few sessional faculty we heard from identified issues involving heavy teaching workloads, an inferior institutional status relative to tenure-track faculty, and an absence of mentoring in their careers. We agree with Knight and Trowler (1999) that a thorough enquiry is needed into the experiences of sessional faculty and how these compare with those of tenure-track faculty.

References


