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## Expanding the Discussion of Faculty Vitality to Include Productive but Disengaged Senior Faculty

### *Faculty Member #1*

I came to the university excited about the prospect of working with a cohort of young colleagues who had impressed me when I interviewed. I liked the department head very much. He not only recruited me enthusiastically, but he was incredibly supportive. He was fair in distributing resources and made sure that junior faculty got high-quality graduate students. He provided a clear assessment of my progress each year prior to tenure and set a tone indicating that it was normal for junior faculty to seek help and mentoring. But the year I was granted tenure a new head entered the picture and life changed drastically. He rapidly alienated several senior colleagues I admired as well as some of my junior colleagues, many of whom ended up leaving the department. The new head played favorites, ignored established processes, and didn't support the promotion of several outstanding young faculty hired under the former head. He also reneged on several promises that the former head had made to me. It's been years since he became the department head, but I am still disillusioned and disappointed. I find myself advising newly hired colleagues to build their CVs and keep an eye open for other jobs; I tell them "outstanding work does not assure success in this department."

### *Faculty Member #2*

When I first came to the university, one of the things that gave me the most satisfaction was working closely with two of my senior colleagues: Ed and Jon. I truly valued their collaboration on grants, research, and publications, and had always believed that we

The authors are indebted to Dr. Denise Rousseau, who introduced us to her work on psychological contracts. They are also grateful to Dr. Indira Nair, Dr. Sara Majetich, and the late Dr. Barbara Lazarus, who served as the steering committee for the larger study. They are appreciative of Lisa Ritter's efficient and meticulous editing. This project would not have been possible without the generous financial support of The Alcoa Foundation.

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*The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 78, No. 5 (September/October 2007)  
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worked well together and respected one another. That's why I was so taken aback, on the eve of my tenure decision, to learn from others in the department that Ed and Jon had voiced concerns to the tenure committee about my performance. Neither Ed nor Jon had ever shared these concerns with me, and I felt disconcerted and hurt. Although I eventually did receive tenure, the experience left a bad taste in my mouth. Now, when I hear Ed and Jon speak in faculty meetings, I wonder what their words are hiding. I see the glances they exchange when I'm speaking, and I resent their implication. Because I find it uncomfortable to be with these two colleagues, I avoid them whenever possible. I have extricated myself from joint research ventures and purposely avoid Ed and Jon in other venues of departmental life.

### *Introduction: What Our Research Revealed*

What do the two stories above have in common? First, they portray senior (defined in this study as tenured) faculty members who are dissatisfied with their respective experiences at their institution. Second, in both cases, negative or disillusioning experiences at key times in their professional lives have colored the lens through which these individuals view their colleagues and experience life in their departments. They have responded to these events in ways that are counter to fostering collegiality and a sense of community—two primary sources of satisfaction in academic life (Barnes, Agago, & Coombs, 1998; Manger & Eikeland, 1990; Matier, 1990; Weiler, 1985).

Although dissatisfied senior faculty members are hardly rare in academia (Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002; Boice, 1993; Hamrick, 2003; Karpiak, 1997; Mills, 2000), what is interesting about these particular stories is that they describe faculty who are not stagnant professionally but who continue to be remarkably productive: They publish extensively, secure prestigious grants, and succeed in a variety of other areas, as described below. In other words, these senior faculty members are at the top of their game. Nevertheless, they remain withdrawn in important ways at their own university, a problem we believe is not unique to this institution.

What characterizes the experiences of faculty such as these, and what is the impact on their institutions? To what extent does the literature help us to understand the sources of their dissatisfaction and their responses to it? Finally, what can institutions do to re-engage them? These are the questions we set out to answer in this article.

This study grew out of a larger research project we conducted from 2001 to 2003 at a mid-sized private research university. (A full discussion of research methodology and results can be found in Ambrose, Huston, & Norman, 2005.) The purpose of the larger study was to identify factors that positively or negatively affected faculty satisfaction and retention. Toward this end, we designed a matched cohort study and inter-

viewed 124 faculty members (8.9% of the total faculty), half of whom had left the institution between 1991 and 2000 and half of whom had stayed. Seventy-seven former faculty members were asked to participate, selected to form a representative sample of colleges and departments within the university. Seventy-three of these 77 agreed to be interviewed. Of them, 62 were available for interviews during the necessary period, and one of the participants withdrew later in the study, leaving 61 former faculty members, 17 of whom were tenured before leaving the university.<sup>1</sup> Current faculty were then matched with former faculty by rank, tenure status, year of appointment, department, and, when possible, gender and race (although this was not always possible in small departments or for years with fewer new hires).<sup>2</sup> Seventy current faculty members were asked to participate and 62 agreed. Of them, 42 were tenured. These 42 senior, tenured faculty members who have remained at the university are the focus of this article.

We used a semistructured interview protocol (Chilcott, 1987; Fetterman, 1990; Maxwell, 1996; Merriam, 1998) in which respondents were asked to describe their experience at the institution and any significant factors or critical incidents that affected their experience.<sup>3</sup> They were encouraged to tell their own "stories" in their own style. We chose this method because we wanted detailed, context-rich data to clarify the subtleties and complexities of faculty members' experiences, thus capitalizing on what Maxwell has identified as the principle benefits of qualitative research (Lecompte & Preissle, 2003; Maxwell, 1996; Merriam & Associates, 2002). These benefits include its capacity to clarify (a) the meaning for participants (in this case, faculty members) of the events, situations, and actions in which they are involved; (b) the particular context within which participants act and the influence this context has on their actions; (c) unanticipated phenomena and influences, which emerge spontaneously in open-ended interviews in ways that cannot in structured surveys; (d) the process by which events and actions take place; and (e) complex causal relationships, in this case the varying and interacting causes of faculty satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Maxwell, 1996, pp.17–20).

This nondirective, qualitative approach yielded data that we believe accurately reflect the priorities and concerns of the faculty themselves. However, there were limitations to this approach as well. Because faculty participants told their own stories, they did not necessarily all raise the same issues, and thus some comparability across interviews was lost. Furthermore, because interviews were conducted with faculty members only, we cannot provide the department or university perspective. In fact, it would have been impossible to get triangulation by talking with

In a small institution, and particularly in small departments, even a small number of disengaged senior faculty can have a disproportionately harmful effect, especially for junior faculty whose status in the institution is most tenuous and whose need for mentoring and collegiality is greatest. As we analyzed the narratives from dissatisfied senior faculty, two themes emerged. First, several respondents discussed an “ideal” situation into which they were hired that, for a number of different reasons, changed over time (illustrated in the first vignette). Second, a number of respondents described one particularly painful incident, often taking place during a key transition, that negatively colored their subsequent experiences in their department (illustrated in the second vignette).

We found that the literature on faculty vitality was only marginally helpful in explaining these patterns and determined that new models were needed. In this essay, we begin by examining and challenging the way in which faculty vitality has been operationalized in the past, arguing for the value of institution-specific analysis of the faculty vitality issue. We then propose alternative models for understanding previously unexplored aspects of faculty vitality, drawing on research in organizational behavior and adult development. Finally, we discuss the institutional implications of vital but disengaged senior faculty members and suggest steps to prevent or address this problem. We end with a call for future research that broadens the definition of faculty vitality and that addresses the distinctive cultures of particular institutions.

The group we have identified as disengaged senior faculty represents almost 30% of the total number of current senior faculty interviewed, and their disengagement, as we will argue below, has ripple effects throughout the university community. However, this group does not in itself constitute a large enough sample for a systematic empirical exploration of the issue. Thus, this study should be understood as exploratory and speculative as opposed to definitive. Following Talburt, our general intention is to open “new paths of thought” (2004, p. 81) rather than verify a particular phenomenon through the use of hard data. Our specific intention is to propose alternative models for understanding previously neglected aspects of faculty vitality and to launch further investigation into this unexplored terrain.

#### *Faculty Vitality Reexamined*

Research on faculty vitality was sparked by concerns about what Kanter (1979) dubbed “stuck” professors—that is, faculty members whose productivity or teaching performance falls off in mid- to late career. The faculty vitality literature draws on theories in organizational behavior and developmental psychology to chart academic career stages and

identify how the needs of senior faculty differ from those of their junior colleagues (Baldwin & Blackburn, 1981); it attempts to distinguish characteristics of vital faculty members from those of their “stagnant” colleagues (Baldwin, 1990); and it offers strategies for fostering professional development and renewal at all career stages (Bland & Bergquist, 1997; Bland & Schmitz, 1988).

The literature on senior faculty vitality has provided a number of important insights, among them the need to examine the interaction of individual and institutional factors that contribute to professional stagnation or vitality (Bland & Bergquist, 1997; Bland, Risbey, Berberet, & Brown, 2004; Clark, Corcoran & Lewis, 1986). However, there are two shortcomings in the literature on faculty vitality. First, while the existing literature has examined vitality in the settings of both research universities (Clark et al., 1986) and teaching colleges (Baldwin, 1990; Baldwin & Blackburn, 1981; Palmer, 1998), it often makes generalizations based on national data sets that do not help individual institutions assess the complex interplay of local factors that enhance or detract from faculty vitality. Second, the existing literature defines faculty vitality broadly but operationalizes the concept narrowly in ways that may conceal important phenomena. We explore these two issues below.

#### *The Value of Institution-Specific Analysis*

A number of scholars have questioned the usefulness of national-level research for illuminating the local conditions that shape faculty and student experiences at particular institutions (Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman, & Vallejo, 2004; Johnsrud & Rosser, 2002). As Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman and Vallejo point out:

Colleges and universities cannot be treated as if they were all identical. They differ in mission, structures, student bodies, funding sources, resources, etc. They also change over time so that what was true of an institution in the past may not necessarily be so in the present. Neither are generalizations about institutions and interventions always applicable. (2004, p. 124)

By focusing on patterns common to all institutions (or to all institutions of a certain type, e.g., research universities or teaching-oriented colleges), the faculty vitality literature often overlooks the unique attributes of individual institutions that impact faculty lives in key ways (Clark et al., 1986). Such local factors are particularly influential for midcareer or senior faculty who have been at the institution longer than junior faculty and have enjoyed (or regrettably endured) the prevailing culture for many years (Wood & Johnsrud, 2005). Fortunately, there is a growing emphasis on assessing the local factors that enhance or detract from

faculty vitality (Bland, Seaquist, Pacala, Center, & Finstad, 2002), as reflected by the fact that recipients of certain National Science Foundation and National Institutes of Health grants have administered “climate” surveys that assess local factors affecting women faculty (e.g., Malley, Rainwater, & Stewart, 2005).

Given the importance of local factors, we will first describe the university that is the subject of this research. Located in a mid-Atlantic state, the university sits centrally in a city of approximately 335,000 (2.4 million in the metropolitan area), with a low cost of living and yet many “big city amenities.” It is a private institution with approximately 5,400 undergraduates, 4,000 graduate students, and 1,400 faculty members. The university has a strong research emphasis, with \$280 million in sponsored research in 2004. It also has these characteristics: (a) an institutional emphasis on collaborative and interdisciplinary research and innovation; (b) an exceptionally “nimble” bureaucratic structure that allows faculty to pursue new research trajectories with relatively few bureaucratic obstacles and delays; (c) an extraordinarily high-visibility faculty, deeply engaged in applied research and consulting work with government agencies and industry in the United States and abroad; (d) a decentralized administrative structure in which department heads possess considerable power and authority; (e) a particular combination of financial realities, including a small endowment, an exceptionally strong track record in attracting soft money, and high graduate student costs; (f) a 9-year tenure clock; (g) a scientific/technological orientation; and (h) relatively small departments (in comparison to the kinds of institutions with which the university competes for students and funding).

Each of these features has particular implications for senior faculty satisfaction and, by extension, vitality. For example, because there is an emphasis on collaboration and innovation—two behaviors characteristic of vital faculty, according to Baldwin (1990)—the university might appear to provide its senior faculty with opportunities to expand their research into new areas, thus preventing stagnation and promoting vitality. But is that the whole story?

Here we must look more closely at institutional characteristics. Interdisciplinarity, for instance, can involve faculty from different, yet still traditionally defined, disciplines working together to solve a common problem, *or* it can involve the creation of new research areas that do not fit comfortably within disciplinary boundaries and thus do not lend themselves easily to traditional performance criteria. While the university in question subscribes to the first definition of “interdisciplinary,” its hiring often implies a commitment to the second. Some faculty members in our study, however, felt that this commitment was not met.

Several had been actively recruited for their work at the intersection between or among disciplines. However, they found that their work was misunderstood or underrecognized within departments that continued to assess the quality of research according to traditional disciplinary criteria (a common problem in interdisciplinary research; e.g., Campbell, 2005). In such cases, the institutional emphasis on collaboration, innovation, and interdisciplinarity did not lead to greater faculty vitality and engagement, as might be expected, but rather to a sense of isolation and bitterness.

Thus, we must look closely not only at the features of particular institutions but also at how these features operate on the ground. Furthermore, their implications for faculty cannot be assumed *a priori*. A quick review of some of the other institutional characteristics in the list above illustrates this point. On one hand, the university's decentralized and "nimble" bureaucratic structure allows faculty to respond quickly to political, economic, and disciplinary shifts, but it also means that departments change rapidly, shifting focus and reprioritizing in ways that might leave previously supported senior faculty feeling unsupported and isolated. Moreover, the high visibility of the faculty at this particular institution can create incongruities between the recognition that highly regarded researchers receive outside their institution, and the recognition they receive (or do not receive) on their home campus. Because of the university's scientific and technological focus, moreover, teamwork among colleagues is critical for research productivity. Thus, interpersonal issues may have a greater impact on faculty success and satisfaction than at some other institutions. Additionally, the 9-year tenure clock, although intended to relieve pressure by giving new faculty more time before they face a tenure decision, also prolongs the anxiety for junior faculty, which has implications as well for satisfaction and retention. Finally, the small size of many departments (relative to those of other competing research institutions) means that the satisfaction of a single senior faculty member can have a profound impact on the rest of the department. This last point underscores why institution-specific analysis is so critically important: Since even small numbers of disengaged senior faculty members can have a disproportionately damaging effect, administrators cannot afford to rely solely on the faculty vitality research done at other institutions but must find ways to identify the particular issues faculty members encounter at their own institutions.

#### *Reconsidering How Vitality Is Operationalized*

If lack of institutional specificity is one shortcoming in the faculty vitality literature, another limitation is how vitality itself is operationalized. Bland and Bergquist acknowledge that vitality is an elusive, if

