Meeting New Faculty at the Intersection

Personal and Professional Support Points the Way

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Faculty developers can play a significant role in increasing the retention of new faculty. This chapter presents a study conducted at a public research university that reveals that first-year faculty need personal, relational, and professional support. However, the importance of each type of support shifts during this first year, suggesting that faculty development efforts aimed toward new faculty should adjust accordingly. This study uses a sequential mixed-method design and is grounded in adult development theory, which views new faculty as adult learners in a career-life transition and faculty developers as adult educators.

Stakes for the development and retention of new faculty are high. A costly investment of both money and time is required to acclimate these new employees to their roles, and the impact they have on both curriculum and student learning can be profound. Faculty developers have a responsibility to understand new faculty's early adjustment needs and to establish a productive helping relationship. By focusing on their personal and professional needs for support, faculty development practice broadens to encompass the *intrapersonal* and *interpersonal* needs of these faculty as adult learners as they go through a major career

adjustment. Programming should address their career development with a holistic approach to their adult learning needs. This chapter presents an empirical study that suggests a model for such practice.

Over twenty-five years ago, Baldwin and Blackburn (1981) urged higher education leaders to “broaden their focus to include the professional, organizational, and personal development of faculty” (p. 608). Although the primary aim of most faculty development programs has been to provide faculty with instructional skills and knowledge about teaching and learning (Eble & McKeachie, 1985; Gaff, 1976), some scholars have called for more comprehensive, holistic programming (Schuster, 1989; Watson & Grossman, 1994). Still, few faculty development centers have responded to this call. We need to consider whether it is simply innocuous or potentially harmful to continue to ignore the personal needs of our faculty. Adult development theory, as well as these study findings, indicates that the basis for such programming efforts exists.

Research on New Faculty Support

This study focused on the first-year experiences of the new-faculty cohort hired for the 2005–06 academic year at the University of Oklahoma. It aims to identify the felt needs of new faculty for both personal and professional support as they begin their career.

Theoretical Basis

Adult development theory anchors this inquiry in the support needs of new faculty. Viewing these faculty as adult learners, the faculty developer plays the role of an adult educator responsible for the growth and needs of these learners. Theoretical perspectives from adult development include life structure theory (Levinson, 1978, 1986), which emphasizes the internal and external management of the adult self in the world, and transitions theory (Bridges, 1980), which highlights the importance of adapting to new roles, particularly involving a career change. With new faculty in the midst of both personal life and career adjustment, career development theory addresses the multiple personal development issues inherent in occupational adjustment (Hansen, 1997; Super, 1990).

Research Setting

The University of Oklahoma is a flagship public research institution that includes campuses in Norman, Oklahoma City, and Tulsa. It employs over twenty-two hundred faculty, enrolls approximately thirty thousand students, and houses nineteen colleges offering a wide variety of degrees through the Ph.D. (University of Oklahoma, n.d.). The annual New Faculty Seminar Orientation, coordinated by the Program for Instructional Innovation, consists of fourteen weekly luncheon meetings during the fall semester. These sessions give new faculty the chance to meet, eat, and talk with one another, as well as to hear informative presentations by various campus speakers on campus resources and services. Of the sixty-eight new faculty hired in 2005–06, forty-eight regularly attended the luncheon meetings that fall semester, representing a typically heterogeneous cohort: twenty-nine men and nineteen women, ranging in ages from their twenties to their sixties, from thirty-five programs in ten colleges. Although most were Caucasian Americans, two were African Americans; one-third of the group were natives of other countries.

Methodology

Although the literature on new faculty uses both survey and qualitative approaches to gather data (Boice, 1992, 2000; Fink, 1984, 1992; Sorcinelli, 1994, 2002; Sorcinelli & Austin, 1992), no study to date takes a mixed-method approach that sequentially addresses the new-faculty career transition. Because the project was conducted as a phenomenological investigation and approached through faculty development practice, it was important that the participants benefited from being in the study. All faculty involved in the interview and group sessions indicated they did receive some personal benefit from their participation. One faculty member was overheard commenting to a peer:

At first I thought I would be nice (to participate). After the interview was over, though, I realized I enjoyed the opportunity for reflection. No one ever asks you about these things, you know. It was useful to have someone listen, and it helped me think about things.

The participants were recruited from those attending the fall 2005 New Faculty Orientation Seminar. This researcher acted as a participant observer at the lunch tables each week, taking notes on their conversations about their adjustment. By the time the survey was administered late in the semester, those attending regularly had thinned to half ($n = 24$) the original number ($n = 48$). All of the twenty-four completed the survey, and 75 percent agreed to participate further ($n = 16$): ten men and six women from fifteen departments and eight colleges.

The data were collected in three phases during the participants' first year through three means: 1) a first-semester survey questionnaire ($n = 24$), 2) midyear individual interviews ($n = 16$), and 3) end-of-spring-semester focus group sessions ($n = 13$). Although the survey data came from a relatively small sample in relation to the entire cohort of new faculty hires, they represent half of those in regular attendance and all of those in attendance that day. Most of the active new faculty (a demographically representative group) also participated in the interviews, providing a wealth of qualitative data.

The survey used a twenty-seven-item questionnaire adapted for this study from Boice's (1992) survey of new faculty. Almost all of the nondemographic items addressed support needs and stress level and were scored on Likert-scales ranging 1 (Low) to 10 (High).

Further data collection was sequentially planned to offer both individual (interview) and collective (focus group) opportunities for reflection during the second semester. The individual interviews were sixty- to ninety-minute audiotaped sessions conducted in each faculty member's office early in the spring semester. Naturalistic and nondirective, they followed a process called *clustering*, adapted from Karpiak (1996, 1997) in her study of midcareer faculty. Items asked participants to report the first-year support they received both personally and professionally by completing the sentence, "My support needs in this new position are, or have been. . . ." Given a blank piece of paper, they were asked to mind-map their thoughts on the page and elaborate on them in the interviews.

Finally, at the end of the second semester, four ninety-minute focus groups were conducted and videotaped to gain a collective understanding of new-faculty support needs. Such groups allow

participants to express multiple perspectives on a similar experience (Glesne, 2006). This researcher guided the discussions in a semi-structured way, asking the participants to share whether, how, and by whom their support needs were met. No two faculty represented any one program, department, or college, and the cross-disciplinary interaction among the participants seemed to reinforce a sense of anonymity among them while promoting a general, nondetailed exchange of their experiences.

Data Analysis

Questionnaire responses were analyzed using SPSS. Of the respondents ($n = 24$), sixteen were male and eight female, eighteen had Ph.D.s and six master's, 75 percent were in a significant relationship, and 50 percent had family (some with children). Their ages ranged from the midtwenties to over sixty, with 58 percent in their thirties. They spanned the Colleges of Arts and Sciences (botany, chemistry, economics, health and exercise science, mathematics, modern languages, social work, and sociology), architecture, business, education, engineering, fine arts, geosciences, and the university library.

Survey Findings

Table 18.1 highlights the findings on seven items. At the time of the survey, the respondents indicated their mean stress level to be in the medium range (5.54), reflecting an adequate potential for successful adjustment. A certain amount of stress is normal for new employees in transition, whereas a high stress rating would be of concern. Sense of department fit (7.58), campus identification (7.71), and the degree to which the new position meets career expectations (8.25) averaged in the moderate range. These scores suggested good potential for successful adjustment, as professional connections had begun to be established. Items scoring in the high range included their felt need for collegiality (8.25), the collegial support they perceived to be receiving (8.54), and direct support they saw from their chair (9.08). These items indicated a strong need for belonging and for getting feedback from their department chair. These findings are consistent with Fink's (1984) study, which he conducted on this same campus twenty years earlier.

**Table 18.1. Survey Results: Mean Ratings on Items
(Low = 1 to High = 10)**

<i>Mean Rating: Medium</i>	<i>Mean Rating: Moderate</i>	<i>Mean Rating: High</i>
Perceived Stress Level (5.54)	Sense of Dept. Fit (7.58)	Need for Collegiality (8.25)
	Campus Identification (7.71)	Collegial Support (8.54)
	Career Expectations (8.21)	Chair Support (9.08)
<i>(Adjustment potential)</i>	<i>(Connection established)</i>	<i>(Belonging needs strong)</i>

Among the teaching-related items, the perceived quality of student interaction and perceived teaching effectiveness were predictably highly correlated (.729). But an unexpected correlation was found between teaching effectiveness and faculty's need for collegiality (.794). Why would this relationship exist? Further investigation revealed that many of those from the College of Arts & Sciences (half of the faculty surveyed, $n = 12$) had recently attended meetings on faculty matters with their college dean and chairs. Perhaps the additional support they received increased this correlation.

Overall, this group seemed satisfied with their first semester and hopeful about the prospects for their new position—a typical honeymoon reaction. Although the new faculty arrived with a diverse range of experience (the newly degreed with limited experience, those with some-to-plenty of academic experience, and those from professional arenas with no academic experience), most considered their job decision to have been voluntary and within their control (Bridges, 2002), thereby enhancing their initial attitudes toward their new job and life transition.

Interviews

The sixteen participants interviewed early in the spring semester were demographically similar to those of the survey group: 75 percent were in a significant relationship, 60 percent had family or

children, and half were in their thirties. In addition, they came from a broad cross-section of departments and colleges. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed through coded thematic interpretation using NVivo (a qualitative software for coding narrative data), member checking, literature triangulation, and audit review with a project consultant (Glesne, 2006).

Six themes of support needs emerged from the qualitative data, reflecting both personal and professional needs: personal impact, professional roles, relationship dynamics, employment, the higher education system, and campuswide issues. Table 18.2 displays the frequencies.

Table 18.2. Interview Results: Coded Reference Tallies of Six Support Themes

Personal Impact Issues	338
Professional Roles	241
Relationship Dynamics	234
Employment Issues	160
Higher Education System	120
Campuswide Issues	84
TOTAL	1,177

Throughout the interviews, new faculty discussed their need for personal support and the impact of their career transition on their life significantly more frequently than other matters. Personal impact issues included job satisfaction, feelings about being a new faculty member, discovery of the local community, personal adjustment, family adjustment, religious or spiritual issues, and general social needs. For example, one experienced new-faculty hire described his feelings as a new faculty member like “drowning in a whirlpool” and now felt relieved not to have “that big gorilla on my back.” Some mentioned religious or spiritual factors relevant to their personal adjustment. One said his daily meditation practice was crucial to managing the pressure; another found a church community that gave her needed support; still another discovered a new sense of meaning and purpose through teaching. Some first-year faculty credited community support and social interaction as being essential to their own and their family’s adjustment. Several prized having the

flexibility to meet family needs, from medical appointments for a special-needs child to a child's sports event. Regarding the personal pressures of being a professor, one participant said "it pays to be selfish" and just "crank out your research," but he also found this hard to do. He said that it took finding "some kind of . . . place in your skin . . . that you're happy with being."

Professional roles included grant and financial issues, professional development, program issues, research agendas, scholarship plans, service obligations, teaching matters, and time management. Particularly important to the new faculty were the logistics of teaching—"the resources, classrooms, who sets it up, how it's set up." One female faculty said, "So that was number one for me, to understand teaching here, the culture." Most said time management was a problem, and many appreciated having reduced teaching loads during their first year. Of the conflict between teaching and research roles, one male faculty said, "The problem is, I've been too busy with teaching and don't have time to travel. The important thing is to keep hot in your area with people [by] going to conferences." Another participant, one with additional administrative duties, spoke of needing information about the "nuts and bolts" of her job. She said this is what "scared her the most" and admitted that being responsible for a large budget was "anxiety-producing."

Relationship dynamics included support needs related to colleagues, mentoring, staff, students, and supervision interactions. Some departments had sophisticated mentoring programs in place, and new faculty were securely involved, while other departments provided no formal mentoring channels. The new faculty valued the staff support they received, and departmental secretaries were often cited as invaluable sources for knowing "how to get things." Regarding his departmental colleagues, one dual-hire faculty said,

There seems to be a bit more of a tradition here of colleagues not really interacting much with one another. It's definitely different from (our previous university) and it's hard to develop a community if you're not really interacting with your colleagues in some form or other.

Focus Groups

The focus-group data collected at the end of the spring semester, just three months later, revealed an interesting change in the new faculty's support need priorities. Relationship dynamics rose to the top, followed by professional roles, and then personal issues, and the discussions focused less on higher education system, campuswide, and employment issues. The data yielded a total of 439 coded references from thirteen participants (eight males and five females), each from a different department (see Table 18.3).

In these small group sessions, the participants responded to three prompts on their needs and support over their first two semesters: what needs they had, who had and had not been helpful, and how their needs had or had not been met. They expressed appreciation for this group interaction and the exchange of their varied experiences, as well as the confidential nature of the group. One member said, "It really drives it home that there are other people out here who are fighting the same issues, but somehow that sense of community helps."

Participants spoke more extensively than previously about the importance of student relationships, both as a source of support and an energy drain. One participant reported that he learned a lot about his department from students who had been around longer than he had, "giving me knowledge, their knowledge, of procedures and history of what we do in our department, what they think has worked in the past, what needs they feel needs

Table 18.3. Focus Group Results: Coded Reference Tallies of Six Support Themes

Relationship Dynamics	121
Professional Roles	110
Personal Impact Issues	73
Higher Education System	64
Campuswide Issues	44
Employment Issues	27
TOTAL	439

changing.” Another called the university “a fountain of youth,” as he described how teaching invigorated him. Others honed in on the challenges of student interaction, and one explained,

Students do come and bother us a lot more. I never remember when I was an undergrad going to my professors all the time—I have this problem, I have that problem, you know, both personal and academic . . . I just want to shut the door sometimes. It’s like “figure it out for yourself, that’s why you’re here.”

Participants also discussed the crucial support they received from mentors. As one faculty member recalled:

But the biggest thing I’ve had and found very helpful was the colleagues and friends that I can go to. Just somebody you can kind of bounce thoughts off of and get input, somebody that’s been through the same thing before, since this is my first time teaching. It was a person that I felt comfortable speaking with, a friend and colleague of mine.

Another faculty member, hired from the professional arena and new to academe, related his experience with more formal mentoring:

I was lucky enough to be assigned a faculty mentor, and that person was invaluable, along with other faculty members in my department. Knowledge of the department on the street . . . dealing with students, you know, different situations you come in contact with—how should I handle this or that type of thing?

Four additional issues not mentioned in their individual interviews emerged in the focus-group discussions. These fit within the six themes of support needs: community outreach (professional roles), interdisciplinary faculty relations (relationship dynamics), being junior faculty (employment issues), and tacit knowledge (higher education issues). Like the proverbial light bulb, they glowed with excitement when the issue they called “tacit knowledge awareness” surfaced. They shared the realization that they had to discover, informally and on their own, information deemed necessary to their adjustment that no formal channel supplied.

Interpretation of Findings

These new faculty appeared to be learning new things and transitioning through their career adjustment at such a pace that their needs changed priority within just a few months. Brammer (1991) examined the importance of learning to cope with change and finding meaning in life transitions. He contended that people need time and space to reflect and take hold of the new possibilities ahead: "We need to reflect on what the transition means to us, to let the pain or discomfort subside, and to prepare for new experiences" (p. 35). Ultimately, all transitions are opportunities for positive change toward growth and development. Career development theorists address the complexity of multiple aspects of personal development within occupational development (Hansen, 1997; Super, 1990) and call on "career professionals to become genuine agents of change to improve the human condition" (Hansen, 1997, p. 49).

At midyear, the three top core concerns for these new faculty reflected, in order of frequency, personal, professional, and relational themes. By the end of the year, their three top core concerns were relational, professional, and personal. Their professional support needs—issues related to teaching, research, and service—remained a second-ranked priority through both semesters, while personal issues progressively faded from first place to third and relational needs rose from third to first. Even though the group's mean self-rated stress was only in the medium range (from the first-semester survey), personal support was their top concern in the interviews. Perhaps the new faculty achieved some personal stability after the first semester, freeing them to shift their focus to the relational dynamics of securing their place and fit with colleagues, staff, and students. Lindholm's (2003, 2004) research on the adaptive importance of fit within the academic environment lends validity to this interpretation.

These findings mirror those in counseling research in that, in working with adult learners, the adult educator needs to consider whether the learner is *moving into* a new situation, *moving through* it, or *moving on* from it (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989). The importance of an individual's stage of adjustment supports the choice of the sequential methodological design used here to identify the support needs of first-year faculty.

Conclusion

If faculty development represents a specialized form of adult education, and our faculty clients are themselves adult learners going through life and career transitions, then it is time well spent figuring out how best to support and retain first-year faculty. The results presented here suggest that new faculty need much more substantial and enduring support than just an orientation. This study invites replication on other new-faculty cohorts during their first year, starting with an early faculty survey, followed by individual meetings on the personal and professional support faculty are getting, and, finally, cross-disciplinary discussion groups for sharing first-year experiences. Whether or not different patterns of needs and priorities emerge, new faculty benefit from opportunities for individual reflection and collective exchanges and from their institution's expressed interest in their well-being. Obviously, this kind of programming requires intensive staff time and energy, but from a relational point of view, where better to invest our efforts than in our faculty of the future?

Faculty developers can benefit as well. Building a helping relationship with new faculty from the beginning shows them we understand their needs and care about their adjustment and their long-term success. This initial programming can establish strong social and professional bonds that will ensure new hires will take advantage of other faculty development programming throughout their career. We may find our own programs enriched in other ways as well. The information that new faculty can provide may inform us, not only of their changing needs but also of various departmental dynamics—knowledge that can help us understand and meet the needs of the broader faculty.

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