Patterns of Successful Faculty Career Change: A Study of Career Transition Within the University

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In a survey of 4200 faculty members at 160 universities in 1977, Patton and Palmer (1981) indicated that more than 25 percent of faculty members in American universities and colleges seriously considered leaving academic life permanently, and 32 percent would be equally or more satisfied outside academe. Taylor (1982) later confirmed that educators, by personal choice or necessity, were making a steadily increasing number of career changes.

Not every faculty member however, can change his or her career as desired. A Ph.D. holder in economics, for example, may find it difficult to obtain a position in a business department. Moving to another university, especially in a tenured position is also unlikely. Academic budget stringencies cause universities to hire young Ph.D.'s who are available in large numbers rather than to recruit higher-salaried tenured faculty members. Therefore, many faculty must remain in positions, even though their career interests have changed.

In order to increase productivity and maintain professional growth of faculty members as well as to keep quality faculty members from leaving the university, opportunities for successful career change within the university must be provided. Opportunities within the institution certainly may help all faculty members, but especially tenured members, who are looking for a new challenge or who experience program uncertainty or

other, personal, problems, but at the same time may wish to remain in teaching.

Unfortunately, very little information is available about patterns of successful career change. Such information would be helpful to faculty who want to change their careers within the university. Furthermore, very few studies have investigated the process of career change—why, when and how career change takes place.

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to discover patterns of successful faculty career change by looking at the process of change from the beginning to end. The purpose was not to test specific hypotheses or to predict or find cause-effect sequences of faculty career change. Rather the attempt was to thoroughly understand the phenomena of faculty career change and possible patterns of the change that might emerge from the study.

Twenty five faculty members who were serving comprehensive, private and public universities across the United States and who had made a successful change within the same university were interviewed. All of the interviewees' names were given by university administrators. They were volunteers and were still teaching within the same university through the interview period, which was July 1984 through April 1985. The interviews were indepth and face-to-face. Only data from the 15 successful faculty career changers who met the criteria of the study were included in this study. These were: their changes involved moving from one area of specialization to another and their taped interviews were sufficiently complete to be transcribed.

The methods of phenomenological investigation (Giorgi, 1979; Spiegelberg, 1965) have been used in this research. In order to approach the experiences of the subjects naively, the researchers did not review the literature on career transition until all protocols were analyzed and essential meanings of each protocol had been revealed.

MAJOR THEMES

For faculty in this study, career change was a critical event that led them to experience a new version of professional life—one that was a step toward greater security, growth and vigor in

their professions. Career change typically resulted in feelings of hope, growth, enjoyment, as well as a more challenging and exciting professional life to the changer. However, the change also brought frustration, uncertainty, risk, discomfort and feelings of loss to the changers during the time of the actual transitional period. Change was an interactive process that affected not only the changers themselves but also the university, both old and new departments and colleagues, friends, family, as well as other persons involved in the process of change.

Six essential themes emerged from the experience of faculty career changers. These essential themes may be described as follows:

Theme 1: Background and Characteristics of the Changers

Before the transition, the changers in our study held various academic degrees ranging from the master degree to doctoral degree, and academic ranks from instructor to professor. Most, however, had doctoral degrees and held the rank of full professor with tenure.

Changers offered various reasons for choosing their first areas of specialization or training, including special interests, scholastic awards, and desire to participate in the growth and advancement of the field. In addition to their areas of specialization, changers consistently had interest and experience in some other field, expressed through hobbies, previous work, consulting, research, and other avocational pursuits. Many career changers were interdisciplinary-oriented by training or work experiences.

Changers were typically liberal, flexible and sometimes aggressive. They had strong determination and had high intellectual ability and energy. They consistently looked for new opportunities and challenging work. They viewed career life as dynamic.

Theme 2: Factors that Influence the Change

The changers often left their former careers because they felt or found that their careers gave them less security and fewer opportunities to grow professionally. Forces of change could be classified into three types: 1) direct external force, 2) indirect

force, 3) voluntary self-directed force.

Type 1 changers were directly forced to change, whether willing or not. They had to leave their former position if they wanted to remain within the university. It usually was an unplanned and immediate change caused, for example, by program reorganization or budget cut.

Type 2 changers were indirectly forced to change their careers. Although they were in no danger of losing their jobs, the working environment was unsatisfactory in some way. Dissatisfaction most often originated at the department level. Typical sources were problems of promotion or conflict with colleagues.

Type 3 changers left their original career areas voluntarily. Their careers may have been still promising and growing, and their promotion and security were still assured. However, their areas of interest had shifted. Reasons for change usually were personal rather than the result of the working environment.

None of the influences, either personal or those related to work, however, independently caused the changers to switch careers. Rather, it was the interaction among influences that caused the change.

Theme 3: Choice of Career Area

Faculty used various methods to acquire information relevant to their career paths. These methods included assessment of their own aptitudes, exploration of the status and prestige associated with areas of personal interest, personal assessment of abilities and interest in various areas, as well as survey of available positions and investigation of conditions of acceptance and support in new areas. Changers also considered opportunities to advance in the new area, as well as urging from colleagues and family to change careers.

During the survey and decision-making period, changers often felt excited, fearful, at risk, and uncertain about the change, and they sometimes hesitated to make the final decision. Some changers, however, were certain about their direction and were confident in making the move.

Three criteria guided the decision process: personal interest, perceived advantages of the new career, and possibilities for success. Some changers emphasized only one or two criteria while others considered them all.

Theme 4: Support for and Barriers to the Change

Some influences supported and other influences discouraged the changers in their decision to make a change. These influences were classified into five levels, beginning with the changers personally and extending to the university influence.

The changer. Being a tenured professor or being very competent in the previous career made a given career change easier. Changers that were tenured generally made a change with little or no concern about a subsequent promotion. Acceptance and respect given by new colleagues supported the changers greatly in their effort toward academic and social adjustment in the new career. Besides their status and competence, the changers' willingness to change was the most important motivator to a successful change.

The changers also considered family support as a desperately needed requisite to the successful change. The changers' lack of trust in informal education, on the other hand, was a barrier that negatively affected their confidence to change. As long as the changers suspected the validity of knowledge gained from informal education, they lacked confidence in making the change.

Colleagues and friends. The support and stimulation to change given by colleagues and friends helped changers to feel confident about the change and to process subsequent growth. In contrast, resistance from new colleagues certainly caused uncomfortable feelings in the changers. This resistance diminished the quality of the working climate and inhibited changers' growth in the new career.

Department. The receiving department chair had a critical, direct impact on the changers from the inception to the end of the change. A welcoming, supportive, reasonable and flexible department chair had considerable influence on the changer's decision to change and on the success of the change. As a professional in the field, the department chair could acquaint the changer with the new area and offer facilities and opportunities required to provide an environment conducive to work.

In contrast, unwillingness of the new department chair to accept a changer for any reason clearly discouraged him or her from considering a particular career move. Changers certainly did not want to move into a position where they were not wanted. Similarly, unwillingness of the changer's original

department chair to allow the move (because of the loss this constituted to his or her department) prolonged the move.

University. The type of university support that facilitated changes included recognition of the change, funding, provisions for auditing courses, decreased workloads and released time. In contrast to older more established institutions, newer and more recently established universities often had flexible systems which facilitated the changes more easily.

The university's understanding and acceptance of the career change was also an important source of support, helping changers feel more secure in freely processing their changes in accordance with their needs. The possibility of success, therefore, was high when such acceptance was present.

External support to the university context. Scholarships, financial support and training programs outside the university were also very helpful to the changers. Furthermore, examples of role models or of well organized career change programs that the changers observed either inside or outside the university also helped them prepare for new careers more easily and efficiently.

Theme 5: Processes of Transition

The process of career change included four types of adjustment during the transitional process: physical, intellectual, social and psychological adjustments. The physical adjustment refers to the process of moving oneself physically from one working environment to another. The physical transition consisted of four steps: (1) Time setting. Usually a specific event, such as receiving tenure or learning of a university policy that supported faculty career redirection, triggered the decision as to when to move. (2) Initiating. Physical changes could be initiated either by administrators or by the changers themselves. The person who initiated the transition always had an important function in managing, organizing and pushing the transition toward identified goals. (3) Negotiating. Changers, relevant department chairs, and university administrators inevitably spent time negotiating such questions as the transfer of tenure, promotion, salary, welfare benefits, academic preparation, support, the steps involved in moving, work loads, and so on. (4) Moving. The changers began to move after negotiations

were completed. Usually there were two phases of moving: temporary and permanent. A probation period helped the changers test and confirm their real needs, interests, and determination to remain in their new career. This phase was followed by a decision to remain permanently.

Intellectual adjustments included redirection, expansion, integration, change, and retraining intellectual skills in another area of interest. Intellectual transition required either formal or informal learning, and sometimes both.

Finally, faculty found they needed to make social and psychological adjustments during the transition process. The transition period was an exciting, confusing and frustrating time during which career changers experienced feelings of both loss and gain. Changers found excitement and challenge in their new careers, which motivated them to learn more. At the same time they had to confront living and performing a new role in a new and different work environment.

Theme 6: Life After the Change

The changers found many alterations in their professional and personal lives after the career transition. Alterations in professional life included changes in academic work, promotion, professional status, working environment and collegial relationships. Changers' personal lives were also altered, including ways of thinking, personal style and use of leisure time.

Generally, the changers claimed success in their new careers. They were pleased with the choices they had made; they felt they had a "new lease" on life and that the new career was more attractive, challenging and exciting than the old. Changers developed a broader view of knowledge and understood more about events going on around them. They were able to work and to grow professionally, with a hopeful future. Even though some faculty lost their department seniority or felt uncomfortable with some new colleagues and different administrative systems, most were not overly troubled. They enjoyed their new careers and did not seriously consider leaving academic life as long as they would be allowed to grow or to pursue their interests. Most of them felt the process of change continuing throughout their work. Some wished for temporary leaves of absence in order to get direct experience outside the

university so that they could return as better teachers. Most found their new careers to be ideal and did not anticipate changing careers again unless their situations changed and began to inhibit their growth.

PATTERNS OF SUCCESSFUL FACULTY CAREER TRANSITION

From analysis of the experiences of these faculty career changers and the relationships among the essential themes of career change phenomena observed in this study, three patterns of the career change process emerged. These patterns were distinguished by forces and factors that influenced the change. Each pattern of career transition is described in the following section. Figure 1 summarizes the three patterns in relationship to the six themes discussed previously.

Pattern A: Institution-Initiated Change

The changers in this pattern were grouped as the 'direct-change force' group. The factors that influenced their change came primarily from the university. For example, a change in university policy or a lack of program funding may have resulted in program reorganization, or even in program termination. This situation forced the faculty member who wanted to continue teaching within the same university to seek another career.

The academic backgrounds of the changers in this pattern were not a primary factor related to the type of change. The major criterion that the changers in this group used to select a new career was the possibility of being successful in the new career. During the period of pressure and insecurity, the changers looked for a new career in an area in which they felt comfortable, accepted and welcomed. This meant that the career had to be one in which the probability of receiving support from the university and the new department was high. Certainly, each changer considered his or her interests and possible advantages of the change before selecting the new career. However, for Pattern A changers, interest and advantage were less important than the possibility of completing the change successfully.

THEME 1:
REASONS FOR
SELECTING THE
FIRST CAREER

THEME 2:
FORCES AND
FACTORS
INFLUENCING
THE CHANGE

THEME 3:
NEW CAREER
CHOICES —
MAJOR
CRITERIA OF
SELECTION

THEME 4:
SUPPORTING
FACTORS

THEME 5:
PROCESSES
OF TRANSITION

THEME 6:
LIFE AFTER
CHANGE—
SATISFIED
WORKING
SITUATION

Bold face indicates principal factors, criteria or transitions of priority as judged by the changers.

FIGURE 1: Three Emergent Patterns of Successful Faculty Career Transition

Faculty in this pattern of change (particularly those who were tenured) usually received full support from the university in the form of leaves of absence, recognition, financial assistance, and help in managing the change. The changers themselves usually sought information informally to determine the best career choices. However, most of the steps in the plan of transition were formally arranged by the university.

Since these changers were forced into the transition by the university, there was a chance the change might not afford them much prestige. Limited prestige was one of the barriers to their acceptance in the new career. A considerate department chair could improve their circumstances by attempting to understand, accept and support the changers as they assumed the new role. The chance of acceptance into the new career was improved also if the changers personally knew the department chair or some members of the academic unit into which they moved.

Generally, the changers needed all types of support from family, colleagues, department chairs, and the university. What seemed to be most significant was the need for psychological support. Families and colleagues were able to help greatly in making the change less painful and more positive.

The process of career transition was most often a formal one, managed through university administrators or through a university committee. It began with the physical transition that included timing, negotiation, planning, and moving. The actual move began either before, during or after the intellectual transition. The intellectual transition was mostly done formally. Since the changers in this type of transition had seldom prepared themselves prior to the change, taking another degree was the quickest way to gain knowledge in the new area. When the new career was in a far different area from the previous one, a master's degree in the new area was usually acceptable. If the new area was related to the previous one, the changers might pursue a doctorate.

During the time of physical and intellectual transition, it was equally important for the changers to process social and psychological transitions simultaneously. Psychological and academic support from colleagues helped changers a great deal in confronting the problems that emerged as they grew professionally in the new career.

Changers who successfully processed their intellectual

transition and social adjustment were able to adapt satisfactorily to the associated changes in life-style and responsibilities. Intellectual and social adaptation allowed these individuals to reestablish themselves in a new work setting within the same university, and to feel comfortable in their new careers.

Pattern B: Situation-Initiated Change

The changers in this pattern often left their careers because of an indirect change force. Factors that caused the change came primarily from the immediate working environment: the department, program, colleagues or characteristics of the individual's assignment. For example, change might be prompted by a change of administrators, a non-congenial department chair and/or colleagues, declining student enrollement in the program, lack of advanced teaching and research opportunities or unavailability of tenure-track positions. Occasionally, personal factors such as family influences were instrumental. Although changers could continue working in the same career, they did not feel comfortable in an unsatisfactory or insecure situation. They felt that a better choice was to leave the former career for a new opportunity and a new challenge.

The backgrounds and characteristics of changers in this pattern were not much different from Pattern A. Pattern B faculty wanted to grow, to do substantial work and to gain more recognition, rather than remain in what for them had been an unproductive working climate.

The major criterion used to select a new career tended to be advantages the changers perceived that would accrue from the change, such as greater opportunities, more substantial and advanced work, opportunities for private practice and consultation, a better work situation or a tenured appointment. As with Pattern A changers, faculty in Pattern B also considered personal interests and potential for success as criteria for the best career choices. However, they viewed these latter criteria as no more significant than the advantages they sought from the changes.

The changers in this pattern may or may not have received support from the university, depending on the choice of new career. If their new career choices were compatible with university needs and policies, changers received full support from the

university. Otherwise, they received little or no support. Conversely, some changers viewed university support as an important factor that would help them make the transition successfully. Therefore, they chose a new career that served the university's needs and policies in order to get support for the change. In this case, the possibility of success seemed to be more important to them than their personal interest.

Regardless of the criteria used, changers tended to receive support from their departments. Situation-initiated changers usually had already started to prepare themselves prior to making a physical move. They studied the possibility of acceptance by the new department chair and colleagues, and the availability of certain career opportunities. Some participated in professional activities within one or more of the career options, or took a few courses in order to survey the status of these possible careers and to assess their interest in those choices of careers. Their curiosity and ability to contribute to the field, therefore, were already evident to the new colleagues and they were recognized as potentially valuable contributors. As a result, gaining support was easier, especially when the department needed more faculty in that particular area.

The process of transition was either formal or informal. In the instance when changers responded to the needs of the university, the process of transition tended to be managed formally by the university. That is, it was done in accordance with a plan negotiated with university administrators or with a university committee. Typical support was financial support for academic preparation in the new career and full or partial leave.

However, when the new career did not serve the immediate needs and policies of the university, changers typically conducted the transitions by themselves, from initiation of change to the intellectual transition. A formal agreement about the actual move was certainly needed, but this only occurred after personal contact, which normally began at the department chair level, was made. The formal agreement for change was made between the previous and the new department chairs, with university approval.

The process of intellectual transition began either before or during the physical move. However, most changers who had been experiencing dissatisfaction in the previous career for some time typically made intellectual preparation prior to the time

everything was in place and they felt ready to make a move. Some changers even had finished the process of intellectual transition before the physical transition took place or was completed.

The process of intellectual transition could result from formal or informal learning. If the new career was totally different from the previous one, completing another degree was necessary, most often at the masters level. If the new career developed from the changer's interests, the change was usually carried out through informal classes, self-study, personal research, in workshops or through other related professional activities. These informal learning activities continued even after the physical transition had taken place. Some changers had little or no confidence in the validity of informal learning; consequently, they temporarily felt uncomfortable and at risk in their new careers. This uneasiness in turn was a barrier to their psychological adjustment and intellectual development as well in the new career.

Acceptance and support from new department chairs and colleagues assisted greatly in making intellectual, psychological and social adjustments. Although the need for support from both spouse and university was evident, support from either of these sources was not perceived as needed to the degree that was true for changers in Pattern A, Institution-initiated change.

Changers in Pattern B were satisfied simply if they were able to do more challenging work under stable conditions. Because of the change their responsibilities often changed greatly. Most of them were able to do more research and teach advanced courses or assume responsibility for new, challenging administrative work. Even though some of the changers felt uneasy with the working environment in the new department, this was not a deterrent as long as they experienced professional growth in the new area.

Changers found their career life more interesting after the change and some felt the new career was less complicated and more enjoyable than the previous one. For example, the faculty member that moved from music to business found more personal free time in evenings and on weekends without required attendance at recitals and performances.

Pattern C: Self-Initiated Change

Changers in Pattern C were those who indicated a willingness to change careers. Apparently no working situation served as a major factor influencing the change. Rather, the change force was self-initiated, based upon a shift of interest.

There were two types of shifts in interest. One type of shift was to an interest area which broadened knowledge. Changers who made this type of shift were those who apparently had pursued their real interests in the first career, had achieved their goal of tenure and/or promotion to full professor and subsequently desired to expand their knowledge to another field. Intellectual curiosity caused this change. New interests, however, did not just happen; they often germinated for a period before they began their physical transition. Such interests mostly related or were applicable to their former careers.

The second type of interest shift was to pursue a long-term interest other than the one that had been chosen originally for a career. These changers lost interest in their first career shortly after they began working in it. The new interest actually emerged from an original one that was not chosen as the first career. They pursued the earlier interest through avenues such as hobbies, avocations or private consultation. Once changers felt confident about new career skills, they were thus able to pursue the new career without concern about previous achievement. The need to pursue their real interests was more significant than previous achievement.

When compared with faculty in the first two patterns, Self-initiated changers seemed to have a greater desire to learn new things, to broaden their knowledge and to attend to professional growth. This of course may be the result of having the opportunity to express their interests without risk of losing a job.

For faculty in Pattern C the major criterion used to select the new career was certainly their personal interest. They considered the possibility of success and advantages of career change before making an actual move, but success or advantage were not as important as their personal interest.

Changers in this pattern were very conscious of their interests. They had been seeking and developing knowledge in their real interest areas for several years. The process of acquiring new career knowledge mostly involved informal learning

including self-study, classes, and workshops or seminar participation. In some instances, Pattern C faculty offered courses that related to the new area as a teaching experiment; or they conducted research, presented papers at professional conferences and discussed their new subjects with other professionals in the new career field. Another degree was not required in order to move to the new career.

Changers began to make the physical move when they felt they were well prepared—when their knowledge and competence in the new career was evident and accepted by the professionals around them. As a result, when the actual move was made, Pattern C changers typically received respect and recognition from the new department chair and colleagues. Recognition and respect from colleagues were the primary support that helped these changers grow professionally. Furthermore, because their previous work was accepted in the new field before the physical transition, these changers tended to receive financial support from the university, especially if the change served the mission and needs of the university. One changer also received support from a professional association outside the university.

In conclusion, Self-initiated changers usually helped themselves gain academic competence in the new career before the physical move. Support from others, especially from the new career department, most often came later. In Pattern C, the process of transition began with an intellectual transition, followed by a physical transition.

Psychological and social transitions took place throughout the physical transition. The psychological and social transitions that were made prior to the physical transition usually assisted the faculty members with the intellectual transition and helped establish relationships between the changers and new colleagues. The psychological and social adjustments that were made after the physical move often helped the changers adjust themselves to the working environment in the new career and to the loss of tenure.

These changers had already experienced new career lives before the physical move; therefore, their attitudes toward their new careers were already positive and their career life-styles changed very little after the transition. What they really experienced after the shift in career was a change of their social

relationships—new colleagues and working environments. The changers in this pattern were satisfied with the new career because they were able to pursue their real interests.

DISCUSSION

These findings suggest that both internal and external factors influence faculty career changers. However, faculty in this study did not view money as a major influence. Many changers stated that the quality of life was more important than money. They were also satisfied with academic life and did not want to leave it.

These faculty career changers shared characteristics such as open-mindedness, flexibility, creativity and intellectual ability. Strong determination and enthusiasm were also important characteristics which contributed to the success of change.

These findings indicate that career change decision making is a dynamic process; persons move forward and backward through the decision-making stages as they experience the situation at hand. The changers in this study analyzed information about their situation in a variety of ways. They tried to understand the nature of potential careers and their own possibility of success; and they reflected and reconsidered many times before making a decision. The decision was based on a combination of criteria for each individual, revealing the complex, multi-dimensional and dynamic nature of faculty career change.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The knowledge gained from this study is relevant for potential faculty career changers, university administrators, and faculty development personnel. The study offers insight regarding possible difficulties and barriers to transition. With this awareness potential faculty career changers may be able to prepare themselves appropriately for the change, using the model to help themselves anticipate problems they may experience. Furthermore, changers may be able to plan career change strategies more deliberately, based on these findings. For example, they may be better able to determine the time to move, what to be concerned about in negotiating the change and how to gain acceptance in the new career.

Results of career change that can contribute significantly to the academic growth of faculty and development of the whole university are also important. For example, program development can result when faculty members receive assistance in extending their competencies and expanding their career choices. By moving across disciplines, faculty can create new interdisciplinary experiences for students. On the other hand, prohibiting or resisting faculty career change may result in reduced faculty productivity, ineffective decision making, and inappropriate responses to stress. Instead, universities can choose to be constructively supportive. For example, faculty career change might be legitimized by providing career development programs, improving career change policies and streamlining transition procedures.

From this study, faculty members who decide to remain in their academic careers may learn how they can successfully redirect their efforts to renew their professional lives. They can learn of the possibilities for change and how to move through change appropriately. Furthermore, this study may help faculty members understand the importance of supporting colleagues who are changing or redirecting their careers. Finally, a better understanding of this phenomenon should assist career counselors and faculty development facilitators in providing more relevant and useful information as well as support for their clients.

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