Teaching Academic Career Paths: Implications for Faculty Development

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The central focus of our work as faculty developers is on the teaching careers of faculty members. Whether the scholar lecturing to a large audience or the individual guiding discussion in a seminar, we seek to enhance teaching strengths, ameliorate concerns, and suggest improvements. And on our campuses we have made progress—often with individual clients, sometimes with departments or schools.

But what do we know of the forces that shape the careers of these teachers? When and why do they choose an academic career? How do they come to a college or university and what attracts them? These are a few of the key questions I asked faculty members in a large research-oriented university in order to better understand their career development. They are also questions of increasing interest to researchers who seek to understand the professoriate (Baldwin, 1979; Corcoran & Clark, 1984; Finkelstein, 1984).

To answer the above questions, I conducted in-depth interviews followed by questionnaires.¹ The sample of 112 faculty, from one department in humanities, one in natural sciences, and two professional schools, was stratified by academic rank and sex.²

I found, like other researchers, that the career course is shaped by many forces, some common, others unique to discipline, school, rank, or sex. But the more striking differences

were among academic disciplines or schools. Disciplinary affiliation influenced the timing of career choices, the reasons for choosing a discipline and academia, and the draw to an institution. I relate some of these findings, not only because they offer a fascinating look at the "roots" of academics, but because they inform our work in faculty development. I will conclude with some implications for the future direction of faculty development programs.

DECISION POINTS

Faculty members described two career decision points. The first was choosing a discipline, which often preceded the decision to pursue an academic career. Individuals typically chose a discipline as undergraduates and an academic career later. Still, a range of circumstances and different time spans were required to put a career together. Some seemingly came to academe from the cradle, while others took an indirect route.

Faculty in the natural sciences and humanities reported

TIMING OF DISCIPLINE CHOICE

FIGURE I. Timing of Discipline Choice

earlier decisions than interviewees in the two professional schools. For almost half the scientists, an interest in the physical world manifested itself in childhood or early adolescence, and nearly everyone had decided on a career in science by the end of undergraduate education: "I was home looking through my old things. There in my grade school autobiography I wrote that I would like to be a scientist. So I had that goal from when I was very young, but it wasn't the goal of being a professor or researcher." Humanities faculty made slightly later choices. Still, almost all had set a disciplinary course during graduate studies.

In contrast, individuals in the professional schools reported more exploration and changes of major in undergraduate or graduate school, and as many as a third shifted content areas along the career path. One described his search as an undergraduate for a flexible program of study that would accommodate interests in anthropology, biology, physics, ecology, and math: "I must have switched majors four times."

TIMING OF ACADEMIC CAREER CHOICE

FIGURE II. Timing of Academic Career Choice

Women reported slightly later discipline choices, but in many cases they could be more accurately defined as renewed choices. It was not uncommon for women to return to a field of study after marriage, divorce, part-time academic appointments, public school teaching, or jobs outside academia.

Most faculty members made a decision to pursue an academic career during or upon completion of graduate studies. By that point, it was a straightforward decision, particularly for faculty who viewed their nonacademic options as limited. As one individual in the humanities explained, "In my field, once you get the master's, you're on the ship; you've made your decision."

Only about a fifth of the interviewees decided prior to college to seek an academic career. These persons described themselves as having always wanted to teach college. Others hoped to teach, but not necessarily at university level: "I wanted to be a teacher—but the option of higher education never occurred to me."

A fourth came to higher education from careers in government, private consulting, research institutes, or public schools. These individuals were primarily in the professional schools, and their choice of academia often was deliberate. Several traded financial remuneration for more personal rewards—autonomy, intellectual stimulation, interaction with young people: "I could go back to industry and make more money. But I like the freedom of academia. In industry, projects have to be done. Here, I can pursue interesting research or teaching."

INFLUENCES

Choosing an academic career is a complex process, shaped not only by individual inclinations, but also by family background and social contests. Faculty members cited four primary influences on career choice: individual factors, image of the career, significant people, and socio-historical events.

Individual Factors

Interest in a discipline, academic success, family expectations, and a process of "drift" were the most often reported personal influences on career choices. Many faculty members described a "love of a discipline" tailor-made to their individual

style. Scientists pointed to talents that served their work: "You could call it organized intelligence. You need that to manage research—the grants, equipment, graduate students, post-docs, and technicians." Several in the humanities department described pleasure in the solitary, intellectual, independent features of the professoriate: "You need a certain monastic temperament to enjoy isolating yourself in the library for long hours of reading, thinking, and writing."

In the two professional schools, the attraction and the research were very different—more collaborative, applied, and for a different constituency: "I was somewhat dissatisfied with both my majors. They seemed highly formalized and abstract. I became more interested in problem solving and applying research to the public—in creating products with outside application."

For others, choosing an academic career was a natural

INFLUENCES ON CAREER CHOICE

FIGURE III. Influences on Career Choice

outgrowth of always doing well in school. More women than men reported academic success as a motivator: "I was always encouraged in school work simply by having it come easy." Closely related in influence were families that valued "intellectual achievement, music, and reading," often despite a limited income. One respondent spoke for many when he characterized his family as "working class intellectuals" and his childhood an "enculturation into an academic career."

Lest one conclude that faculty members made conscious decisions at every point in their careers, a third of the sample reported that they came into the career by happenstance: "In the end, I was committed to an academic career, but it was never thought out, it was something I drifted into." Faculty in the professional schools and humanities were more likely to describe the choice as accidental than were those in science.

Finally, half the women (but no men) reported that career choices had been circumscribed by sex role expectations. For some, barriers were set during early socialization: "I was conditioned by my parents to be a teacher. Women taught." For others, the structure of academia posed hurdles: "I wanted to be a veterinarian. But that option was not possible because schools of veterinary medicine didn't admit women." These women resourcefully fashioned choices out of limited options.

Career Image

Over two-thirds of the sample were influenced by the image of an academic career. Faculty members came with an idealistic view of the academy, although some ruefully added that expectations had been reshaped by reality. Many individuals were lured by an image of the research, scholarly or teaching life. For some the rewards of the lifestyle—prestige, autonomy, security—were additional attractions.

For most, a desire to influence their field of research or to contribute to the profession of teaching was compelling. Desire to do research was highest in the sciences and one professional school, while desire to teach was more influential in the other professional school. Faculty members in the humanities department seemed to view the two roles as more complementary, and were drawn to both: "I set out to prove I was a good scholar and good teacher. I once read, 'Research is to teaching as sin is to the confessional. If you haven't done one,

you have nothing to say in the other.' ”

Assistant and full professors often described an early attraction to research aspects of the career, while associate professors more frequently reported an inclination toward teaching and working with students: “Research is something personal; teaching is a faculty thing.”

Significant People

For over two thirds of the sample, professors, relatives, colleagues, or other individuals significantly influenced their career decisions. A college or graduate school professor was, in fact, one of the most frequently reported influences on academic career choice, especially in the humanities and sciences: “An important part of why I ended up in academic life was my relationship with individuals who seemed to have lives of great integrity and to be devoted to knowledge. Those mentor relationships were very important.”

Significant people were mentioned more by women than men, but women reported more support from parents, colleagues, and student peers and less direction from their professors. They more often described a naivete about or isolation from faculty sponsors: “It never occurred to me to seek help from my professors. I talked with other students and then made my decisions on my own.”

Socio-Historical Events

Some faculty members reported career influences reflecting moods and events in the larger society. The 1960s had a compelling effect, positive and negative, on faculty careers across disciplines, rank, and sex. Dramatic increases in the student population, the growth of individual departments and the university itself, the opening of doors to women and minority faculty members, and a societal faith in higher education—all were noted. Many embarked on a career in what they viewed as one of the more “noble” professions: “I was influenced by the idealism of the Kennedy years. Academia seemed a career in which you could do good; in which you had to compromise yourself much less than in business.”

Yet for some of those individuals, the decade took its toll. Now reflecting at mid-career, several felt those tumultuous

years and the ensuing disillusionment about institutional change affected their careers: "I was very involved in causes and in University governance. After a few years I was getting the sense that it didn't make a difference. I do think my great contribution was being involved with students. But it all took a lot of time and at the expense of doing scholarship."

The other critical era of influence was post-World War II. Although the war interrupted college and graduate studies, it also offered a hiatus from career decision-making and an opportunity for exploration and alternative experiences. After the war, the G.I. bill, scientific and technological advances, and expansions in higher education heralded what one respondent termed "the golden age of academia." For some, those golden years offered greater opportunities for work and advancement than they had hitherto dreamed of.

CAREER PATTERNS

The ideal faculty career supposedly begins after years of course work, a dissertation, and entry into a first position. Nearly half the interviewees described such a direct path, but slightly over half experienced a more indirect course, interrupted by war, marriage, or other careers. Scientists most reflected the idealized career as three-fourths pursued a direct course from student to university professor: "Since deciding on what area of science to go into, I've just been on track. The rest is straight forward history for anybody who does this. I got my Ph.D., did a post-doc, and came here."

For at least half the faculty in humanities and professional fields, the route was indirect. They were as likely to describe their career course as an evolutionary process, moving because of opportunity and chance, as one based on planning and goal setting: "My academic development has been affected by chance—not random—but rather things I didn't expect. The opportunities that came along and I took advantage of have represented the milestones in my career."

Women's careers moved more slowly than men's, particularly for women in higher ranks. Even prior to entering higher education, they had limited aspirations; many never imagined themselves in a university setting. And while they described themselves as excellent students, they seemed to work at the periphery of academia; "I was a better student than my future

husband, but I was never taken seriously by my professors. They thought I'd get married and have children."

Women who cited influential professors tended to describe them as charismatic teachers or researchers—"great men" rather than advisers. Once in academia, rising through the ranks and garnering professional recognition were slowed by lecturer or part-time appointments characterized by heavy teaching loads and little encouragement to do research. In reflecting on their past, however, women did not view themselves as victims: "I just went forward, unaware of the difficulties I faced."

Although one might expect family responsibilities to slow women's careers significantly, generally this was not the case. Male faculty members expressed at least equal concern about dual careers, commuter marriages, and childrearing. In fact, the majority of women interviewed were not married and few had children. For many, balancing family life with a university career seemed untenable. One woman explained: "I think the big turning point in deciding on an academic career was whether I wanted to exclude as much of my life as my professors did for a career. I realized that in order to be really good in my field I would have to give up most of the rest of my life."

CONCLUSIONS

Individuals make early decisions about careers at several levels, but many are characteristic of discipline. Among scientists and humanists, attraction to a discipline preceded or closely followed an interest in research or teaching. In professional schools, the opportunity to work with ideas and people in the public arena was as attractive, if not more, than discipline. Beyond different emphases on academic roles, research and teaching take on different form and meaning among disciplinary groups. There are striking contrasts in the training, attitudes, and activities of teachers in different disciplines; faculty developers need to recognize and respect those differences. On my campus this finding has influenced faculty development work. We gather information from clients not only about their teaching but also about the departmental milieu (e.g. attitudes toward teaching, rewards for teaching). We've sketched out "profiles" of a number of departments which help us to design appropriate interventions and strategies for change.

The timing of career choices is influenced by disciplinary affiliation and can affect investment in teaching. In sciences and humanities, faculty often described interest and experiences in research during undergraduate and graduate years. Mentors emerged early and played important roles. Early training in research, early sponsorship, and early success in publication, all help status, advancement, and rewards. But, the same faculty described an introduction to an academic culture in which research in the discipline is the central endeavor. In both professional schools it was a less direct and narrow proposition; it seemed easier for faculty members to reassess commitments and explore new options (e.g. multidisciplinary teaching, community teaching, director of honors program) without moving toward the margin of the profession.

Again, our sensitivity to the culture and view of teaching in different disciplines is crucial when working with individuals and their departments. For example, we find that untenured faculty members in the sciences are reluctant to work on teaching projects. This seems logical given their research-oriented career paths and research demands during pre-tenure years. The concept of a mentor, however, is one these faculty understand and find valuable. We've helped some departments to set up "teaching mentor" programs. Each newly appointed faculty member is assigned a teaching mentor who is an advanced member of the faculty and recognized as a distinguished teacher. The mentor is available to assist the young instructor in his or her teaching.

In choosing an academic career faculty members described considerable conflict between research and teaching interests. Such tensions continue throughout the career. In discussing career development, faculty members often separate their research from teaching (Sorcinelli, 1985). Because institutions gain immeasurably from the contribution of faculty who are successful in both roles, faculty development programs need to find ways to assist individuals in planning scholarly and instructional goals that are harmonious—and that benefit both faculty members and the students they teach. We now award funds for multidisciplinary seminars to encourage cooperation and to foster good research and teaching across departments and disciplines. We encourage faculty members to publish or present the results of their projects (scholarly

and teaching renewal, curricular innovations) in professional journals and at meetings of their disciplinary associations. Through these activities, faculty members also can gain recognition as teacher-scholars on a campus, disciplinary and sometimes even national level.

Faculty members need the support of each other. They often reported that a personal or professional relationship with a professor was critical to research or teaching development (although female faculty members found fewer such mentors). Somehow that flavor of collegiality diminished once they completed graduate school and became college teachers. And not surprisingly, faculty members were more likely to describe teaching as an isolating activity. Junior faculty desired the counsel of respected teachers. Colleagues at higher ranks felt their expertise in teaching was underutilized. Faculty development programs need to encourage colleagues of similar and different ranks, ages, and disciplines to help each other in teaching. Besides the mentoring and multidisciplinary programs, we support teaching roundtables, workshops and lecture series, and team teaching.

Interviews with junior faculty members suggest a narrowing of the academic career path. Assistant professors, men and women, are more attracted to research and less to teaching than colleagues at other ranks. Most noticeable, women, whose predecessors had interruptions along the way or who saw teaching and service as a central focus, now follow a route more like their male colleagues. On one hand, junior faculty members and their departments should benefit from the accentuation of a research career path. At the same time, faculty development programs might have to find ways to encourage and reward a commitment to teaching among those now at junior rank. Again, mentoring programs have had a profound effect on junior faculty attitudes toward teaching. Our instructional development fellowships also encourage young faculty to work on teaching by giving them released time and funds for teaching improvement.

Personal characteristics, attitudes, and abilities of faculty differ among discipline and carry over into needs for faculty development. The faculty of an institution are often described as an academic family. In addressing their needs, it might prove useful to look closely at the siblings within that family.

The range of faculty values might be quite different among elder than younger siblings. The opportunities offered to sons might differ from those offered to daughters. But the priorities, aspirations, and sibling rivalries among and within departments are better understood in the context in which they formed—the academic discipline. Faculty developers have called for teaching improvements at individual, departmental and university levels. In the upcoming years, perhaps some of our attention should focus on disciplinary and professional associations. Our efforts to encourage faculty to disseminate information on teaching innovations at meeting of disciplinary associations is a first step.

Finally, it is clear that the context of teaching development is complex and not reducible to a single feature. Personal characteristics, academic socialization, professional strengths and weaknesses, work, the institutional setting for that work, the life returned to at the end of the day, all contribute to an understanding of faculty members' teaching and research careers. As faculty developers we need to broaden our landscape. We need to look beyond the classroom to other factors that constrain or contribute to faculty members' commitment and effectiveness as teachers.

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NOTES

¹ Coding of the interviews was completed using an inductively derived coding instrument. Approximately 200 variables were developed to categorize interview responses. Analysis of questionnaire data is in process. The interview schedule included:

1. How did you come to choose an academic career?
2. Could you briefly describe your career—the major responsibilities and interests from your first to your current position?
3. What are your major strengths as a faculty member?
4. How does the University recognize or reward your strengths? If not, how might they capitalize on and reward your skills?
5. What skills or abilities would you like to improve? Are there ways the University could assist you to develop or improve the areas mentioned?
6. How can the University assist faculty in developing or enhancing their careers?
7. What are your short- and long-term career goals?
8. Did you ever think of making a career change?
9. How has life outside of work made an impact on your career development?
10. If you were able to start all over again, do you think you would still choose an academic career?

²Twenty-one percent of the sample were assistant professors, 30 percent were associate professors, and 49 percent were full professors, percentages which approximate the full-time faculty population. Seventy-two percent of the sample were male, and 28 percent female. Because of the limited information on the career development of women faculty, the sample of females was purposely larger than the 16 percent female faculty population at IU.