

# Reinforcing Our

## Strategies to Support Faculty in the Middle Years of Academic Life

FEATURED TOPIC

MID-CAREER FACULTY are the keystone of the academic enterprise. They fill essential instructional, program development, administrative, and citizenship roles at their institutions. They form a bridge between faculty generations by mentoring new colleagues and assuming leadership duties as their senior colleagues move toward retirement. Mid-career faculty are key players as their institutions adapt in a time of continuous change. They can be either allies or stubborn opponents as their institutions adjust to competitive pressures, revise programs to meet the needs of increasingly diverse students, and integrate

new educational technologies. This article examines strategies that several progressive higher education institutions are using to support and gain maximum benefit from their mid-career faculty members.

There has been much attention to early-career faculty, and even to future faculty, over the past two decades. Recent research clarifies the challenges novice faculty encounter (see Austin 2002a, 2002b; Boice 1992, 2000; Sorcinelli and Austin 1992). At many institutions, ambitious orientation programs, mentoring systems, and grant opportunities targeted specifically at new professors help to ease their transition into the academic profession. Likewise, programs such as *Preparing Future Faculty* and publications such as *Building the Faculty We Need* (Gaff, Pruitt-Logan, and Weibl 2000) help to equip aspiring professors for the demands of academic life.

In contrast, we know little about faculty in the long, ill-defined phase after their probationary years and before retirement emerges on the professional horizon. These mid-career

faculty have been largely ignored in higher education policy and practice. There has been little acknowledgment of this long and important phase of academic life or of the distinctive challenges it presents. We know even less about what colleges and universities do specifically to support mid-career faculty. To a large extent, faculty in the middle years are taken for granted and expected to fend for themselves as they carve a path into the uncharted middle years of the academic career.

Clearly, mid-career faculty deserve attention and support because of the critical roles they play within their institutions and the academic profession. They also deserve support because of the many transitions and adjustments required in mid-career, as veteran professors strive to maintain productive and meaningful professional lives. After years on the job, mid-career professors frequently need to update their knowledge and skills as well as adapt to the rapidly advancing technologies that are reshaping the nature of academic work. Many also need to realign their work with the changing direction and expectations of their institutions. Furthermore, after the demanding probationary years, many mid-career faculty seek a better balance between their personal and professional lives. Essentially, professors in mid-career need to define new goals and chart a clear path forward without the structure and specific targets that the goals of tenure and promotion provided earlier in their careers.

### Strategies to support mid-career faculty

To what extent are institutions capitalizing on and supporting the mid-career phase of their faculty? In an attempt to answer this question, we conducted a national Web-based investigation to identify strategies specifically designed to address the needs of mid-career faculty in colleges and universities. Focusing on institutions with teaching and learning centers, we examined support for mid-career professors in

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# “Keystone” Faculty



small, mid-sized, and large public and private colleges and universities across the United States. We examined in our analysis any program or policy information that specifically addressed mid-career faculty.

From our systematic search, we learned that programs or initiatives addressing mid-career faculty needs often vary in purpose, structure, and approach. We have categorized these initiatives by their principal focus or strategy in order to clarify the varied ways institutions are aiding mid-career professors.

#### ***Mid-career awareness/mid-career information resources***

Initiatives in this category utilize Web sites or publications to increase general awareness of mid-career faculty issues and any resources available and applicable to professors in mid-career. The University of Washington, for example, uses an informational Web site to support mid-career faculty development. Specifically, this Web site promotes mentoring of mid-career faculty in areas such as proposal development and redirecting research activities. It also provides recommendations on how to enhance mid-career development and address specific mid-career issues such as keeping pace with new developments in one's field and identifying new research topics.

#### ***Programs for career planning, development, and renewal***

This category includes programs and initiatives that encourage faculty to reflect upon their professional lives, identify new professional goals, acquire new skills, and develop concrete career plans. The College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University offers a post-tenure faculty development program. This program provides an opportunity for post-tenure faculty to reflect on their teaching, scholarship, and service. Additionally, the program assists faculty in designing professional development plans. Similarly, the Professional Renewal of Faculty Program at Kansas State University provides mid-career faculty with opportunities for career development. The program aims to help mid-career faculty achieve or increase satisfaction and success "by redesigning their current position or developing a new job role in cooperation with their department heads." Likewise, a collaborative program involving Colgate University, Hamilton College, Skidmore College,

and Union College provides an opportunity for post-tenure faculty at the four institutions to participate in faculty exchanges among the colleges as part of a development process for planning future career goals. Macalester College's Academic Leadership Seminar offers another avenue to promote mid-career faculty development. The seminar gives mid-career faculty an opportunity to learn about major challenges confronting higher education, especially liberal arts colleges, and cultivate the skills needed to move into key leadership roles on campus.

#### ***Mentoring or networking***

Programs in this category aim to bring faculty together to form mentoring or networking relationships in an attempt to exchange ideas, enhance productivity, and promote professional growth. The Faculty Mentoring Project at Oregon State University places mid-career faculty in mentoring relationships and provides professional development stipends to support either instructional design, career growth in new areas of scholarship, utilization of technology, or projects that extend the one-on-one mentoring to larger groups. Macalester College's Co-mentoring Program in Teaching and Scholarship places senior and junior faculty in mentoring partnerships with the expectation that junior faculty will benefit from senior faculty experience and expertise, while senior faculty will profit from the fresh perspectives of junior faculty as well as their state-of-the-art knowledge and research skills. Post-tenure faculty issues can also be addressed through inter-institutional networks. One example is a peer network that links veteran faculty from liberal arts colleges in different regions of the United States to advance the careers of senior women science professors.

#### ***Teaching support***

This category of programs for mid-career faculty focuses on updating or expanding teaching skills and the enhancement of student learning. The Ohio State University is addressing the needs of mid-career and senior faculty through the Ohio State Teaching Enhancement Program. This program offers yearlong opportunities to reflect on and improve teaching within a community of peers. The program is designed to revitalize career

development and establish interdisciplinary collegial relationships across the campus. The University of Minnesota offers the Mid-Career Teaching Program, in which a group of post-tenure faculty members meet monthly to share teaching practices and resources. Another example, at Gustavus Adolphus College, provides mini-grants for mid-career faculty who are “changing directions” in their teaching. These mini-grants are used to support faculty projects or development that will result in improved teaching and student learning.

**Research support**

Several initiatives focus on supporting mid-career faculty as they pursue their research interests. Some programs specifically reserve a portion of research funding for faculty at mid-career, recognizing that mid-career can be a challenging time to compete for research support. The Kellett Mid-Career Award at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, is one example of research funding that is reserved for professors in the middle phase of their careers. Although some funding programs for mid-career professors do not impose restrictions, others

restrict their financial support to mid-career faculty who are pursuing a new direction in their research. “Bridge funding,” a related form of support we identified, assists mid-career faculty between research grants. For example, Florida State University offers a limited number of “bridge-funding” awards for mid-career faculty who have lost research funds. The program is intended to “establish connections to find some new productive avenues in a new research area.”

**Awards and recognition**

Several institutions provide awards for mid-career professors as a form of recognition and reinforcement. We found mid-career awards for service, research, and teaching. These awards may or may not provide monetary compensation to the recipient; in any case, the awards recognize major accomplishments or contributions by professors in the middle years of academic life. For example, Iowa State University offers the Mid-Career Award in Excellence in Research/Artistic Creativity. The University of Virginia offers the Cavaliers’ Distinguished Teaching Professorship award



College of the Holy Cross

only to tenured faculty at the associate or full professor rank. Indiana University offers a Distinguished Service Award to mid-career faculty for exceptional service to the institution.

#### ***Mid-career faculty support at different organizational levels***

Determining how best to support mid-career professors is a challenging task, especially in a time of constrained resources. Our national search revealed that mid-career faculty issues are being addressed at several levels—by individual institutions, by consortia of several institutions, and by national organizations and associations. Most of the initiatives we identified were tailor-made to comply with the circumstances and needs of mid-career faculty at a specific higher education institution. However, we also identified projects and programs for mid-career faculty that several institutions sponsor jointly. These types of initiatives offer the benefit of resource and cost sharing. A modest institutional investment can yield more service and support to mid-career faculty when colleges and universities work together. Of course, compromises are necessary when a team approach is used, and programs cannot focus on a specific institution's needs quite so directly.

In addition, we learned that some national organizations are offering services and growth opportunities for mid-career professors. One example is the Institute for Experiential Learning Faculty Fellows Internship Program offered in cooperation with AAC&U. This program brings mid-career faculty to Washington, DC, to utilize their expertise in a different venue, acquire new knowledge and insights, and experience the professional renewal that comes with a change of scene and challenging new work experiences. Opportunities for mid-career faculty sponsored by national organizations supplement the support provided by individual institutions or small groups of institutions and greatly increase available opportunities for professors' growth during the middle years.

The programs described above show that higher education has begun to focus some attention on faculty at mid-career. The programs provide assistance designed specifically for professors in the middle phase of academic life in order to enhance their professional performance and promote their career development. These initiatives recognize that the middle

part of the career is a distinctive phase of academic life. They acknowledge that mid-career faculty are important to the well-being of colleges and universities and the vitality of the educational enterprise. These programs send a loud and clear message: mid-career faculty are valued by their institutions and critical to the institutions' continuing success.

#### **A model for mid-career faculty development**

Our search identified a variety of ways institutions are supporting mid-career faculty and encouraging their continued professional development. Some initiatives help mid-career professors to reflect on their professional achievements and growth needs. Some support short- and long-term career planning that will energize and direct faculty work in the post-probationary years. Some provide opportunities for faculty to experiment with new roles and responsibilities, prepare for leadership positions, or move into different teaching or research areas. Several provide the resources and reinforcement essential to continued professional growth in the lengthy post-probationary years. However, only a few of the initiatives we identified address mid-career faculty issues in a coordinated and comprehensive manner.

Each of the types of faculty assistance discussed above could be an important element of a system designed to support mid-career faculty development. We have integrated these varied elements into a comprehensive model of the mid-career faculty development process (fig. 1). This model can guide any dean, department chair, or faculty development committee that wishes to design a support system for faculty in the middle years of academic life. The model can also help institutions to assess and identify gaps in their services to mid-career faculty. The model presents key steps in the mid-career faculty development process along with important forms of support needed to sustain this process. We briefly discuss the elements of the model below.

#### ***Career reflection and assessment***

To continue growing professionally during the middle years, faculty members need opportunities to reflect on their careers and assess their professional strengths, weaknesses, and development needs. Annual faculty activity reports, post-tenure review processes, and periodic faculty retreats present natural opportunities

for mid-career reflection. Structuring these events in the academic life cycle to be more developmental than evaluative can stimulate the type of active career reflection that can promote renewal in the mid-career years.

**Career planning**

When mid-career faculty engage in systematic career reflection, they are better prepared to develop strategies that will keep them moving professionally and align their professional growth with the direction in which their institution is moving. Structured opportunities to develop both short-term (one to three year) and long-term (five to ten year) career plans can help mid-career professors identify concrete goals to energize and direct their professional efforts during the years no longer structured by the quest for tenure or promotion.

**Career action/implementation**

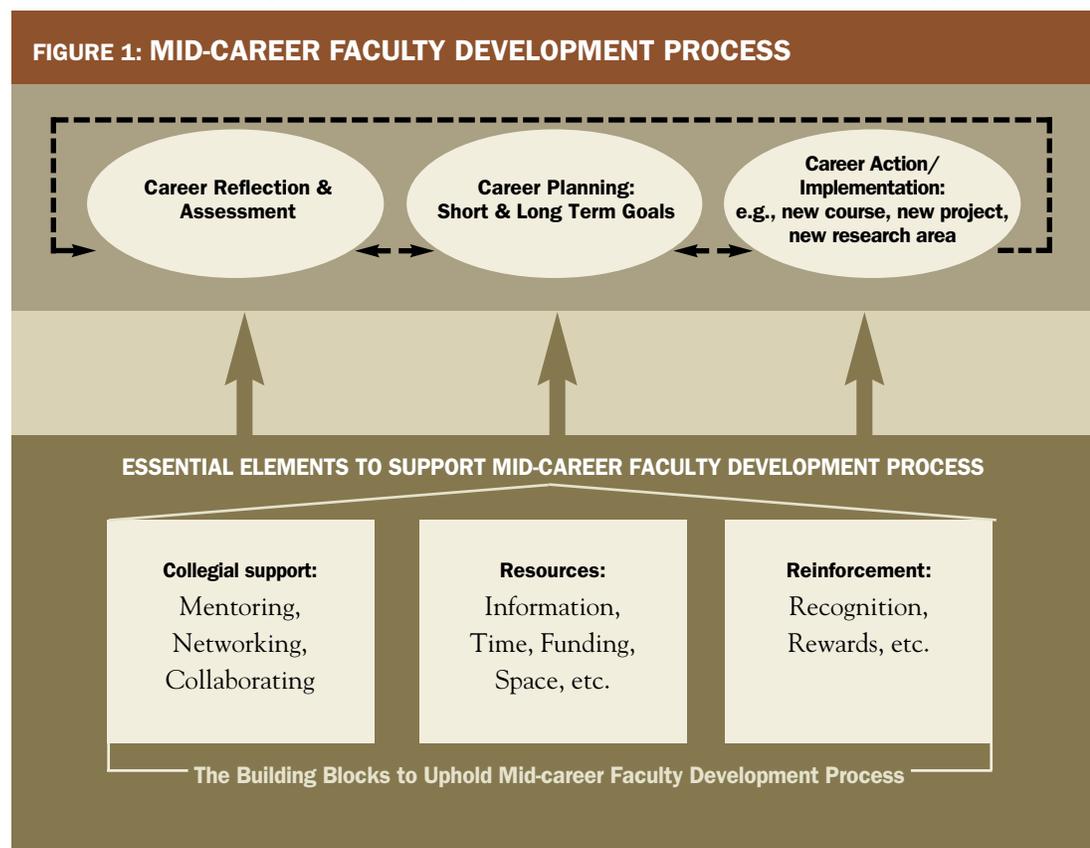
Opportunities to test or implement carefully developed career plans should be an important part of any systematic effort to encourage professional growth and career advancement during the middle years of academic life. In the career action/implementation stage,

growth opportunities should be aligned with professors’ distinctive interests, situations, and development needs. For example, while a history professor may benefit from an opportunity to incorporate new technologies into his or her classroom teaching, a biology professor may need to take courses in computer science in order to do research in the interdisciplinary field of bioinformatics.

Reflection and assessment, career planning, and opportunities for implementing carefully crafted plans are each important components of a comprehensive approach to supporting mid-career faculty development. Ideally, this growth cycle will continue as new professional challenges and opportunities restart the reflection–assessment stage. Nevertheless, the steps in this process are not sufficient to guarantee vital mid-career faculty.

**A foundation to support mid-career faculty development**

The lower portion of figure 1 suggests that a solid foundation is necessary to support the mid-career faculty development process. Mid-career faculty need collegial and organizational assistance in order to keep growing and



adapting while they assume challenging administrative, leadership, and mentoring responsibilities at their institutions. We saw varied forms of this support in the diverse mid-career faculty initiatives and programs we identified.

### ***Collegial support***

We located numerous programs that provide collegial support for mid-career professors. Some programs promote collaborative research or team teaching. Some build networks to help mid-career professors pursue new subject interests and branch out in new research directions. Others set up formal or informal co-mentoring partnerships designed to help junior and veteran colleagues learn from and support one another's professional development. Each of these techniques provides collegial support that can be as influential at mid-career as it is in the early-career years.

### ***Resources***

Resources are essential to facilitate mid-career faculty growth. In some cases, funding is required to permit a professor to attend a

workshop on a new instructional or research technique or to meet with a collaborator at another institution. Sometimes a modest amount of release time or creative scheduling is needed to permit a mid-career professor to engage in an exciting service project or prepare to teach a new interdisciplinary course. Occasionally, information about an off-campus summer institute or foundation grant opportunity can encourage a mid-career professor to take on a new career challenge. Carefully targeted resources, even when modest, can motivate and enable mid-career professors to keep growing in the service of their students and their institutions.

### ***Reinforcement***

It is easy to take mid-career faculty for granted and to overlook their achievements and contributions to their institutions. This inadvertent practice violates basic psychology. Rewards and recognition are essential elements of a coordinated system to promote mid-career faculty development. The mid-career faculty awards for teaching, research, and service that



Michigan State  
University

we identified recognize and reinforce continuing growth and achievement by mid-career faculty. Something as simple as a citation presented at a faculty meeting or a personal note from a dean can reinforce efforts of mid-career professors who experiment with new teaching strategies or branch out into emerging new subject fields. Institutions that want a flexible, adaptive faculty must recognize and reward mid-career professors who disrupt comfortable work routines in order to adapt to a changing educational environment.

### Conclusion

The model presented in figure 1 provides a flexible guide for planning initiatives to support mid-career faculty. To serve and get the most benefit from their mid-career professors, colleges and universities should provide opportunities for career reflection and assessment, career planning (short-term and long-term), and the implementation of career plans. In addition,

### Only a few of the initiatives we identified address mid-career faculty issues in a coordinated and comprehensive manner

colleges and universities should build a solid foundation for continuing mid-career faculty development through collegial support, access to necessary resources, and recognition and rewards for mid-career faculty

who continue to grow professionally in the post-probationary years.

Many colleges and universities have recognized the need to help their new faculty members adjust to the multiple demands of academic life. Consciously promoting mid-career faculty development is another step institutions must take to ensure that their “keystone” faculty adjust to changing conditions and fulfill their potential to serve the academic community. Higher education today requires continuous learning and renewal. Our institutions of higher learning will not succeed in a competitive environment if their veteran team members do not work to stay in shape professionally and adapt to changing rules of the academic enterprise. By systematically supporting their mid-career faculty, colleges and universities are actually supporting themselves. □

To respond to this article, e-mail [liberaled@aacu.org](mailto:liberaled@aacu.org), with the authors' names on the subject line.

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