Faculty work in challenging times
Trends, consequences, & implications
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Aaron Kaufman returns to work after a week's vacation with his family. There are over a hundred e-mails and a stack of mail from students and colleagues waiting for him. He has received a letter from the Center for Teaching inviting him to participate in a diversity training and possibly a new living-learning program that includes significant service-learning and community outreach. There is a message from the dean reporting that due to budget cuts they will not be able to replace the two faculty his department lost to early retirement this year, but will need to hire some two or three adjuncts or one non-tenure-track position. Does he know of any recent graduates or colleagues who might be interested? There is an e-mail from a former student who just received tenure thanking him for his support over the last five years. He has just about finished the e-mail when a colleague stops by to share the news that the department was successful in obtaining a new multimedia projection system for their main classroom, but that the technical support budget has been cut. Does Aaron know anything about transferring video to CD-ROM?

This story of challenges and opportunities in academic life is all too familiar. While we have packed much into Aaron’s first day back, we believe the way in which these challenges and opportunities confronted him simultaneously, with little time for reflection, is characteristic of the way many faculty experience their work in our times.

This article explores the consequences and implications of four contemporary trends affecting faculty work-life and the academic profession in higher education: reductions in funding (and subsequently resources), increasing entrepreneurship, the changing nature of academic appointments, and efforts toward reform of undergraduate education. A central question framing the discussion of these major forces reshaping higher education is this: How might the academic profession respond to these trends in ways that enhance faculty performance, well-being, and satisfaction, and thereby foster the ability of faculty members to serve students, institutions, and society?

In asking this question we assume that faculty are a crucial investment and resource for higher education (Bowen and Schuster 1986). However, faculty cannot be effective in responding to current trends and institutional imperatives unless they are cultivated and supported (Braskamp 2003). Based on the research of Charles J. Walker (2002, 2003) on faculty well-being, we further assume that faculty will respond most effectively to change if they are striving to achieve challenging and meaningful goals, are experts at the work they do most often, have sufficient control of their work, have reliable sources of social support, and receive feedback on the quality of their work on a regular basis.

Besides reflecting on four trends shaping faculty work lives, the purpose of this article is to consider ways in which the challenges inherent in each of the trends might be understood and managed in order to ensure faculty well-being, cultivate productive work, and preserve the ability of faculty to contribute optimally to their students, institutions, and to society.

Four trends in higher education

Fewer resources. The recent economic downturn significantly affects the nature of faculty work in colleges and universities across the country. In particular, public colleges and universities, whose budgets rely on increasingly limited state funding for support, face ever more difficult challenges. Our own institution, the University of Massachusetts Amherst, has recently received an unprecedented $41 million cut in state funding and is
Faculty are challenged to teach more, collaborate more, and to engage in activities for which the traditional faculty reward structures have had little regard from admissions decisions to curricular reform to faculty hiring and evaluation decisions, higher education institutions' role as public agencies diminish (Zemsky 2003). The nature and structure of faculty employment. Part-time and non-tenure-track appointments in higher education have increased (Baldwin 1998). Just as the eighteen- to twenty-two-year-old residential student no longer represents the majority of new students on campus (Keller 2001), neither is the full-time tenure-track professor reflective of the new faculty member. More than half of all full-time faculty appointments made during the 1990s were non-tenure-track appointments (Finkelstein and Schuster 2001).

Three major forces have collided to create this sea change in the structure of academic positions. A distrust and lack of confidence in the benefits of tenure, an assumption among managers that using part-time over full-time faculty and non-tenure-track over tenure-track appointments is cost effective and flexible, and a belief among constituents outside and inside the academy that non-tenure-track positions are more accountable to institutional goals have fueled these changes. Calls for greater accountability have also increased the use of post-tenure review (Licata and Morreale 2002), and management reforms such as merit pay (Birnbaum 2000). In addition to the obvious concerns regarding faculty loss of job security, we should be concerned that many of these changes in the structure of the academic position have occurred without using data regarding the assumed benefits of greater cost-saving, efficiency, and accountability, with little awareness or input on the part of faculty, and without attention to how these changes affect the quality of education. Research from the Harvard Project on Faculty Appointments (Mallon 2002) indicates that renewable term contracts do not necessarily enhance flexibility or accountability, two benefits assumed by advocates. Benjamin (2002) examined the use of part-time faculty in teaching undergraduate students and found several areas for concern regarding student-learning outcomes.

Reform in undergraduate education. Major shifts in the nature of undergraduate educa-
tion have occurred in the areas of diversity, technology, and student affairs/academic affairs partnerships. Cultural forces, as well as the increase in student diversity over the last decade, have driven the development of diversity courses and diversity requirements in undergraduate education. As of 2000, approximately 63 percent of institutions polled either had diversity education requirements in place or were developing such requirements, and roughly 75 percent of institutions with diversity requirements had them in place for less than ten years (Humphreys 2000).

Reform of undergraduate education has also influenced the number and types of collaborative activities in which faculty are encouraged to engage (Brady 1999). Renewed efforts to foster the development of personal and interpersonal competencies, as well as the academic skills of students, are manifested in a variety of educational approaches that require academic and student affairs partnerships and collaboration. Examples of collaborative programming include service learning, field experiences, team teaching, and residential living-learning communities. Academic/student affairs partnerships often require that in their teaching, faculty members teach beyond their expertise in their disciplinary area, and help students link subject matter to civic development, interpersonal skills, and personal competence. Faculty are challenged to teach more, collaborate more, and to engage in activities for which the traditional faculty reward structures have had little regard (Schroeder 1999, Golde and Pribbenow 2000).

The third trend is the increase in both the number and sophistication of computer technology applications for teaching, research, and communication. Faculty who adopt technology for teaching, research, and service find themselves challenged to master changing technology, changing expectations for their availability and accessibility, and changing research venues, all associated with sophisticated information transfer, information management, and improved communications capabilities (Baldwin 1998, Young 2002).

While challenges wrought by changing expectations for the learning environment, awareness of diversity, and technological development are distinct from one another, their effects bring similar potential for desirable or undesirable expansion of the faculty role, professional development, and balancing the complex demands of teaching, research, service, and family.

**Consequences**

On the one hand, analysts suggest that diminishing and alternative resources, the changing nature and structure of faculty appointments, and educational reform efforts represent "a major period of transformation akin in magnitude to that which occurred in the late nineteenth century when the American university emerged" (Austin 2002). On the other hand, historians suggest just how resistant higher education can be to modification. We think the truth lies somewhere between major transformation and immunity to change. Much of what happens is in our hands, and will be a product of how, if at all, we respond.

David Breneman (2002, 7) articulates the possible negative aspects of these trends: At some point, quantitative change yields to qualitative change. The quality of faculty life may slowly erode to the point that highly talented people are no longer attracted to the profession. The freedom to conduct meaningful research may be undermined by pressures to teach longer hours and more students. The constant search for new sources of revenue may irremediably change the social role of higher education institutions as they become increasingly entrepreneurial. All of these changes are visible in today's colleges and universities: It remains to be seen whether their onward march will prove to be inexorable.

We share Breneman's concerns and add to them. Research indicates faculty are experiencing "overload" (Rice, Sorcinelli, and Austin 2000). Chief academic officers at all four-year institutional types report that their faculty are stressed by fears that they must excel at all areas of their work simultaneously. Faculty activity in nontraditional forms of scholarship such as the scholarship of teaching and engagement is up; so also is faculty involvement in seeking external grant funding, traditional research activities, and presentations at national conferences (O'Meara, forthcoming). Given the reduced number of faculty on campuses and the increasing need for faculty to "share in the task of reconfiguring institutional resources and make sense of tough financial realities" (Neumann 1995, 5), as well as engage in the activities mentioned
above, we anticipate faculty burnout. Each of the trends mentioned here has the potential to distract or to bring faculty closer to the work that attracted them to the profession. Thus, it will be critical for faculty to navigate change in ways that revitalize as opposed to leaving them tired and unfulfilled.

**Strategies for responding to change and cultivating well-being**

John Henry Newman once said that, “to live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often” (Newman 1989, 40). While we do not suggest that there is such a thing as a “perfect” response to the issues facing faculty and their institutions today, it is likely we can fashion more effective responses to change by cultivating faculty capacity to encounter change in healthy ways. Returning to Charles Walker’s (2003) assumption that institutional vitality and faculty vitality are essentially linked, faculty capacity to respond effectively to the changes we have outlined is tied to their own vitality and well-being. In this section we revisit Walker’s (2002) five conditions for faculty well-being and suggest how these conditions might be achieved as faculty and administrators respond to current trends.

*Expertise* is an important condition of faculty well-being (Walker 2002). Faculty are most likely to flourish when they are experts at the work they do most often. However, in constantly changing environments, they are often thrown into situations where they are least knowledgeable. Faculty professional development will be an essential response to such changes higher education institutions face today. As Green and McDaule (1994, 9) observe, “Many colleges and universities invest up to 80 percent of their operating budgets on Human Resources. Yet little money is budgeted for professional development. Many people reach a plateau caused by the structure of higher education institutions rather than by limitations of their abilities.”

Faculty in all career stages need assistance from administrators and colleagues in identifying the ways to prepare themselves for new roles and responsibilities. For example, many faculty need assistance in becoming more entrepreneurial about their work and seeking external funding. Retirements and the loss of administrative and faculty positions have pushed many faculty into department chair positions, teaching large classes, and/or coordinating academic programs, roles for which they are unprepared. Centers for teaching and professional development are needed to assist faculty in developing skills and knowledge necessary for these new roles.

The costs of not investing in faculty resources are expensive. Kanter (1985) observes that people often resist change in organizations because of a fear about their own future competence. Advancements through using technology in pedagogy, the kinds of personal connections we are asking students to make with other students in learning communities, and awareness of diversity in classrooms requires that faculty acquire new skills. Once they have developed these skills, commitments to these activities may follow, since, when faculty experience the efficaciousness of their work, they are more likely to take risks, to be creative in their work, and to take advantage of opportunities to increase their skills and knowledge (Walker, 2003).

*Control of one’s work* is a second component of well-being. The restructuring of faculty appointments occurring nationwide provides one example of an area where faculty can either be given some voice in decision making or be disempowered and ignored. When the dean wrote to Aaron Kaufman and broke the news that they would not be able to replace his retired colleagues with tenure-track lines, he did something very helpful by asking Aaron if he knew of any colleagues who might be interested in the new positions. He invited Aaron into the departmental discussion about how it would handle the new appointments, who might apply, and what the position might look like. Kanter (1985, 52) observes, “the more choices we can give people the better they'll feel about the change.”

While faculty are given significant autonomy, much of their work is interdependent and linked with the other faculty in their department. They have much at stake in how departed faculty are replaced, if at all. Consequently, it will be very important for administrators and faculty to work together in developing adjunct, contract, tenure-track, and other new appointments. Working together decreases the uncertainty many faculty feel about the future of their institutions and programs and invites greater loyalty as department and college faculty feel—and, in fact, are—valued for having shared in decision making.
One strategy for providing faculty sufficient control of their work is what Boyer (1990) referred to as "creativity contracts," or arrangements whereby faculty can focus on one or two aspects of their work (e.g., teaching and outreach) for a set period of time and be evaluated and rewarded based on that work. Kansas State University has created such "individualized assignments" and found positive outcomes in both faculty satisfaction and institutional effectiveness as a result (Clegg and Esping, forthcoming). By providing a structure whereby faculty are in control of where they make their greatest contributions, they will contribute to different aspects of the mission and be more available to respond to opportunities that arise in new areas.

A third component of well-being is having reliable sources of support (Walker 2003). Despite the achievement-oriented and individualistic nature of many colleges and universities, research on all institutional types suggests that to thrive, faculty need a sense of community in their workplace (Bland and Berquist 1997). Especially during significant periods of change, faculty need strategies to support each other as they adapt from the old way of doing business to new habits.

It will be critical for departments to meet, hold retreats, or otherwise communicate to make critical decisions together about shifts in positions, resources, and opportunities. In addition, administrators should consider new ways to form alliances and mentor each other through challenges and opportunities. When faculty feel connected to their institutions, they volunteer to help their institutions in times of crisis (Walker 2003). Thus, finding ways to enhance campus community will help all actors respond to change proactively.

Feedback on the quality of one’s work is a fourth component of well-being (Walker 2003). Research on faculty has shown that faculty are driven by a desire to achieve and attain excellence in work areas most important to them (Blackburn and Lawrence 1995). Yet, there are few ways for faculty to measure how they are doing at responding to a significant change, achieving a goal, or mastering a skill. A lack of useful, concrete feedback causes faculty to become distanced from their teaching and teaching reforms (Bess 1977). On the
other hand, when faculty are involved in programs where they receive thoughtful critique, they are likely to become inspired and more committed to the activity. One example of such a program is the New Teachers Workshop held every summer by the Society for Values in Higher Education (www.svhec.org). This summer program offers new faculty the opportunity to have their syllabi and teaching critiqued for clarity, tone, and engagement, with feedback on their performance from other participants. Such programs offer faculty the right level of challenge and support that leaves them more committed to teaching. In order to be sustained in this work, faculty involved in undergraduate education reforms such as service learning and integration of technology need to continually assess the impact of these efforts on students’ learning and their own growth as teachers.

Likewise, Neumann and Terosky’s (2003) research on mid-career faculty suggests the importance of honoring faculty in their role as continual learners in all aspects of their professional work, including institutional service. Many faculty, for example, asked to join task forces on changing faculty appointments or strategic planning exercises related to budget cuts and market opportunities, might consider what they could learn from their task force experiences and plan how they will acquire new skills or gain knowledge about their institution while performing such service.

Last but not least, faculty need challenging and meaningful goals to ensure well-being (Walker 2002). While not everyone in higher education would call their job a “vocation,” many do. These faculty and administrators are motivated by a sense that they are making a difference in students lives, pushing the frontiers of knowledge, and/or building a strong institution. It is important for faculty to consider which kinds of change provide opportunities to achieve personal and professional goals. Within many current trends influencing faculty work life may be opportunities to discover “big questions, worthy dreams” and “inspiration” (Parks 2000). Randy Bass discussed his goals for teaching online several years ago at an American Association for Higher Education (AAHE 1999) conference. He spoke of the value of being able to print out all of his online discussions with students because it helped him to “make learning visible,” literally. By reading through discussion transcripts he was able to reshape the course to maximize the number of “aha” moments students experienced.

Technology served as a critical resource toward his ultimate goal of revealing when and where learning was taking place—and increasing it. Likewise, Nadine Cruz (1996) has referred to the purpose of service learning as “combining intention and action in a movement toward just relationships.” Service learning can become a vehicle to enhance social justice in the world. In both of these cases reform offered serious opportunities to actualize deeply important personal and professional goals.

Some trends in higher education are admittedly harder to tie to a “worthy dream.” Budget cuts and changing faculty appointments can simply mean fewer resources, less innovative programs, less job security, and more work. However, thoughtful faculty leaders and administrators should at least attempt to turn this kind of change into healthy discussions among their colleagues as to what is most sacred to them about their programs, which values they want to maintain, what is distinct about their institution, and how they will make it through difficult times together.

Conclusion

Each fall faculty return to their campuses only to find that their institutions and the environment surrounding them have changed in some subtle or significant way. Faculty and administrators must help each other respond to what they find by developing the depth and breadth of their expertise, learning new skills, and relating reform and changes back to their personal and professional goals. Colleges and universities that find a way to draw out, strengthen, and/or facilitate the development of new talents and resources within their faculty will remain vital, healthy, and creative in the face of change.

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