Why Collegiality Matters

The second in a series on what pre-tenure faculty want and need to be successful in academe

by Cathy A. Trower and Anne S. Gallagher

Our first column focused on the importance of clear tenure policies and standards in helping assistant professors navigate the tenure track. But the reality is, even at institutions with fairly clear written guidelines, the matter of how to achieve tenure often remains a mystery wrapped in an enigma. Why? Because policies are subject to interpretation and because a certain amount of subjectivity is inherent in any evaluation.

So what do pre-tenure faculty members want? Someone to help them unwrap the enigma and solve the mystery. They want senior mentors in their departments who, as the old Chicago song goes, “really know what time it is” and “really care.”

A collegial department figures heavily in faculty satisfaction — ahead of the institution’s work and family policies, ahead of clear tenure policies, and even ahead of compensation, according to national survey data we collected between 2005-7 for the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education, a research center at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

In our survey data and interviews for COACHE, we found that five aspects of the academic workplace make it challenging for assistant professors to bond with senior colleagues. We’ll look at each factor in turn.

A culture in which “everyone is so busy.” Faculty members are increasingly expected to secure outside grants to support their research, and the competition for those dollars has heightened. While “publish or perish” has always applied, lead times for academic journals have lengthened. Tech-savvy students expect faculty members to be “on call” night and day. And the research laboratory knows no “regular business hours.”

As one assistant professor we interviewed said, most senior scholars “are just busy doing their own thing. It’s not that they don’t like us, it’s just that they’re busy, and don’t notice.”

Confusing autonomy and isolation. It’s easy to feel isolated when you are the only one, or one of a few, doing research in a particular area — a problem often exacerbated by academe’s culture of autonomy. But autonomy is chosen; isolation is not.

“There’s an implicit assumption made that because you’ve chosen the academic ‘life of the mind’ that you don’t mind being alone with your thoughts,” said a tenured faculty member we interviewed. “... A lot of new faculty don’t really care for that much autonomy.” Especially not at this early stage when critical socialization occurs: The contacts you make at your home institution and within academe generally are crucial to your career success.

“It can be pretty isolating when you’re the only one — the only woman, the only pre-tenure faculty member in your department, the only African-American,” a tenure-track faculty member said. “Sometimes you just want someone like you to talk to.”

Departmental politics and personal agendas. A tricky problem for assistant professors, especially those without a senior faculty mentor in the department, is figuring out how to navigate intradepartmental politics. Junior scholars are often unsure about whom to align themselves with if there are factions.

“One thing no one talks about when you’re interviewing,” an assistant professor told us, “is what the
department is really like — who’s at odds with whom, what bad blood exists, historical disagreements that play themselves out in strange ways. I wish someone had warned me about that.”

Compounding the problem is the perceived lack of freedom that junior scholars have to express their opinions, especially those that conflict with the views of the department’s senior professors.

“You learn quickly to tread lightly at department meetings so as to not step on any toes,” said a pre-tenure faculty member. “After all, the senior faculty have your fate in their hands, and it would be pretty stupid to alienate one or more of them.”

**Weak support systems.** Workplace satisfaction is impossible for assistant professors who feel disrespected or who feel their ideas and contributions aren’t valued. A department chair who was promoted in rank at her institution said, “If your department is not behind you, it’s over before it even begins.”

Administrators said it was essential to create a welcoming and supportive climate for pre-tenure faculty members. Said one chair, “There’s so much criticism in academe. We need to be especially sure to let junior faculty know that they are valued and respected members of the department.”

**A culture in which asking questions raises red flags.** Numerous faculty members on the tenure track said they valued having a mentor, whether formal or informal, because they felt they could ask “stupid” questions without fear of reprisals.

Said one junior scholar, “One of the problems is figuring out whether the issue you are having is actually something that you can raise with someone. And clearly that is easy with a mentor where conversations are confidential. Whereas, if I go to just any senior colleague, I am putting myself out there; I am much more vulnerable if the person gets a sense that I am just wasting his or her time with stupid questions.”

**What can institutions do to enhance collegiality for assistant professors?**

**Ensure that mentoring actually occurs.** Assistant professors are no different from anyone else when it comes to needing support from people they trust on the job as well as institutional support (time, money, equipment). But they do differ in what they want from a mentor. Indeed, some pre-tenure faculty members want multiple mentors, some don’t want a mentor at all; the choice is acutely personal.

Department heads play a pivotal role in the careers of assistant professors, so it is vital that chairs learn to become effective mentors and relationship-builders. The University of Minnesota offers a yearlong program for department heads that includes sessions on “Teaching & Learning & Mentoring.”

Institutions should also publicly recognize those who donate their time to counsel others. Brown University, for example, bestows a monetary “Excellence in Mentoring” award.

**Provide opportunities for colleagues to connect.** Assistant professors develop as scholars through intellectual engagement with their tenured colleagues. Professional activities that bring together tenured and pre-tenure faculty members on a campus include team teaching, research groups, and committee work. At Michigan State University, the president and provost offer monthly faculty gatherings, with hors d’oeuvres and beverages, as a “way to encourage informal interaction among faculty colleagues and provide a venue by which faculty can integrate into the community.”

Institutions can also build connections across departments and campuses. Duke University fosters faculty collaboration through interdisciplinary seminars and working groups.
Create a culture of support. During the probationary period, faculty members need to be prepared for the competitive landscape of the faculty labor market. When assistant professors stand for tenure review, they need to “sell” themselves by assembling a strong dossier and collecting letters of recommendation from experts in their discipline.

Pre-tenure faculty members look to trusted tenured colleagues or mentors for advice on how to navigate the political climate within the department, how to use an outside offer to their advantage, and how to ensure a deep pool of potential letter writers. The most effective chairs urge pre-tenure faculty members to attend conferences (and offer travel subsidies) as a way to meet people in their field. Other chairs invite experts in the field to their campuses for speaker series and ask their pre-tenure faculty members to coordinate those sessions.

Finally, our survey results show how important it is to foster relationships between assistant professors. Of vital importance — especially, we have heard, for minority scholars — are orientation programs for new faculty members that extend beyond a single day, encompass all aspects of campus life and tenure-track survival, and make connections to colleagues across the campus.

We’re tried to demonstrate here the many ways that chairs, deans, and tenured faculty members can, and do, show they really care. Our next article will take up the issue of diversity as an integral part of creating a welcoming and supportive culture for all pre-tenure faculty members.

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