

Centering Workplace Wellbeing in Mentoring Programs for Late Career Faculty

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Workplace wellbeing is the ability to pursue one's interests and purpose to achieve enrichment professionally. In higher education, faculty are frequently derailed in their purpose by a culture that overlooks their need for belonging and fulfillment. This is especially true for late career faculty as mentoring in the professoriate is frequently focused on early and mid-career development aimed at tenure and promotion. A range of variables impact workplace wellbeing for this late career cohort including ageism, culture changes in the department and university, and changing goals in academia. Developmental mentoring focused on workplace wellbeing allows faculty to continue building professional skills which help them fulfill their career purpose. Mentoring faculty through the end of the career also has benefits for the institution, including continued enhancement of teaching and historical savvy with institutional change and growth. In the absence of developmental mentoring, the journey may be less clear for late career faculty, other than they want to live out their career purpose. Traits of late-career faculty that impact wellbeing include core identity, competency, career change or redefinition, sage wisdom, and embracing trajectory towards retirement. Mentoring programs which honor these traits can shield late career faculty from burnout frequently caused by the competitive culture of higher education. Mentoring programs, both individual and institutional, that center the interests and pursuit of purpose of late career faculty can enhance their focus and motivation as they approach retirement. It is critical for universities to examine programs aimed at late career faculty and further identify strategies they could implement to create sustainable change in support for late career faculty.

Keywords: Late career faculty, mentoring, workplace wellbeing

Introduction

Wellbeing has become a prominent topic across a wide range of academic disciplines, influenced by the rapid growth of the positive psychology movement (Jarden & Roache, 2023). Davis (2024) reviewed five categories of wellbeing, proposing each must be functioning to some degree for an individual to experience overall wellbeing:

1. Emotional Wellbeing: The ability to self-regulate and cultivate positive emotions.
2. Physical Wellbeing: The ability to maintain body function through healthy living and exercise.
3. Social Wellbeing: The ability to communicate effectively and form meaningful relationships.
4. Societal Wellbeing: The ability to engage actively in a thriving community, culture, and environment.
5. Workplace Wellbeing: The ability to align one's professional life with personal interests, values, and purpose to foster meaning, happiness, and enrichment.

Workplace wellbeing, with its focus on personal and professional alignment, is a pivotal function for late career faculty as it can significantly influence physical, emotional, social and societal

wellbeing as well (Davis, 2024). To develop and maintain workplace wellbeing, late career faculty (with their focus on ending career and need to complete unfinished work) need to continue building skills that align with what really matters to them. This includes building professional skills which help them meet life goals (i.e., retirement and post-retirement), while also living their values and maintaining work-life balance. Work that aligns with purpose can help faculty stay focused, motivated, and successful at work. When workplace wellbeing is fostered, late career faculty can experience more positive emotions, live healthier and have good exercise habits, build meaningful relationships and thriving support networks, and participate in the department culture and greater university community (Davis, 2024). By examining programs aimed at late career faculty, universities can further identify mentoring strategies which center workplace wellbeing for this significant portion of the professoriate at their institutions.

Literature Review

External variables which may impact workplace wellbeing for this late career cohort include ageism, culture changes in the department and

university, and changing goals in academia. While this paper does not focus on those larger macro variables of ageism and culture, an exploration of those intrinsic domains, which foster internal locus of control is warranted for those seeking to develop attuned mentoring and community for later stage faculty. To deepen understanding of late career faculty, Burge (2015) identified 5 traits of late-career faculty that can influence work wellbeing including struggles with core identity, reputation of competency, making a career change or redefinition, expressing sage wisdom, and embracing descent.

Core identity issues

Late career faculty can tire of doing the same work required of them as junior faculty. They may question time spent on committees and become suspect about who reads and acts on reports. Work is still essential, but for different reasons and they seek to determine if and what meaningful achievements still lie ahead for them. Universities often view changing interests as a decline in productivity rather than trying to understand the developmental needs of late career faculty Burge, 2015, pg102-103).

Competency

A common misconception is that late career faculty, typically 60 or older, experience a decline in intellectual capacity, thus their productivity begins to decline. Research has suggested that the brain continues to develop across the lifespan and there is no one stage of life where brain function is steady, rather there is a continuous process of change where some functions become weaker while others become stronger (Harvard, 2017). It is further suggested that age related changes in brain function might be the foundation of wisdom in that older adults can better detect relationships between diverse sources of information, reflect on the big picture, and understand global implications of specific issues (Harvard, 2017). Late career faculty may become less engaged not due to personal decline but due to shifting interests which are undervalued and a university culture that does not affirm them (Burge, 2015, pgs. 105-106).

Career Redefinition

The journey of an academic is long and depending on university culture and practice, faculty may or may not have opportunities to redefine or redirect their career into administration, re-assigned roles on campus, or leading task forces or other special initiatives which align with their purpose and values. When faculty are expected to do the same work they have been doing for 25-30 years, in a competitive culture, their careers are more likely to plateau unless there is intra-institutional capacity to redefine their purpose (Burge, 2015, pgs. 107-109).

The Sage

The accumulation of years of service for faculty may not lead to recognition as a voice of authority expertise or leadership, however sage faculty frequently hold information that can be passed on. Sages can identify past mistakes and guide younger faculty develop the long view for their careers Not all late-career faculty may wish to provide a leading voice, it may be beneficial to provide a status, category or location at their university they can aspire to such as faculty emeritus or endowed position. Likewise, regular interaction with junior faculty can revitalize senior faculty member's purpose and vision for their work. Redeeming a "place of significance" for late-career faculty can result in renewed confidence and self-regard (Burge, 2015, pgs107-109).

Embracing Descent

It is important for late-stage faculty to be at peace with who they are (not what others expect them to be) as they recalibrate their final years in the academy and consider who they want to become beyond it. A department culture which affirms the needs of faculty in this stage allows them greater authenticity in the classroom and among colleagues. Faculty can complete the final years of their academic journey living out their purpose and values versus standards and criteria. Late career faculty given space to find peace with themselves are beloved by students who are also trying to integrate what they believe and who they are (Burge, 2015, pgs. 114-117).

Dodes (2019) posed the term unhappy achiever to refer to high achievers who pursue outcomes with the goal of external validation of their personal and professional worth. When high achieving faculty in the twilight of their career realize that whatever they do in teaching, scholarship and service will never be enough, regardless of how much they give of themselves, it may inhibit workplace wellbeing and impact emotional, physical, societal, and social components as well. When higher education is experienced as a place where "competitiveness, intellectualism, achievement-orientation, hierarchy and evaluations it gives rise to high emotions anxieties, defenses, denials, rivalries, insecurities and vulnerabilities (Knights & Clarke, 2014).

The level of conflict between an academic culture of expectations and a sense of belonging and fulfillment for late-career faculty contributes to burnout (Sabagh, Hall & Saroyan, 2018). Burnout is a state of vital exhaustion characterized by three dimensions: 1) feelings of energy depletion; 2) increase mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and 3) reduced professional efficacy (WHO, 2019).

When vitality, self-image, and identity are not chained to productivity and reputation as the

culture of higher ed assumes, burnout does not interfere with workplace wellbeing (Pope-Ruark, 2022). It is critical for universities to examine policies and programs aimed at late career faculty and further identify strategies they could implement to create sustainable change in support of this cohort. Beyond the personal benefits for faculty members, universities fail to capitalize on the wisdom, and unique contributions that could be provided from senior faculty's vast experience. Examples might include departmental pattern recognition, insight into developmental needs of students, faculty, and programs that is grounded in lived experience.

Program

Universities, in general, have not been strategic in supporting long-serving faculty in the late stages of their career, however there are existing models to build on. A brief internet search yields a variety of professional development opportunities aimed towards long serving faculty such as learning communities or mentoring programs offered via University Faculty Teaching and Learning Centers. A growing number of institutions have established and bolstered Emeritus Faculty programs which engage post-retirement faculty in mutually beneficial ways, however fewer examples of policies and programs based on the specific identified needs and interests of late-career faculty exist (Baldwin & Zeig, 2013).

One example of a program targeted towards late-career faculty is the Pathways to Retirement program at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). One component of this comprehensive program allows department chairs to work individually with late-stage faculty to create an individualized contract for their final years to retirement (UCLA, 2025). Another example of programming based on specific needs and interest of late-career medical faculty is the University of Massachusetts Medical schools' framework for supporting late-career faculty pre-retirement, retirement, and post-retirement (2018). Another study examining the needs and interests of late career medical faculty yielded the development of targeted interactive development workshops and a career transitions toolkit (Neiburh et al, 2024).

To create and maintain a vibrant late career faculty cohort, university policies could and should permit adjustments to allow late career faculty to conclude their careers with fulfilling work that supports their purpose and values while fulfilling the mission of the university. These practices could include such things as establishing legacy scholar/teacher programs, providing late career grant funding, one-time special appointments based on expertise, cultivating alumni engagement, revised course loads, specified technology assistance and training for the classroom. More inclusive policies and practices ensure that late career faculty across the university are treated fairly and consistently.

Based on this brief exploration, several valuable themes and suggestions emerge. The case for

individualized contracts, targeted interactive development workshops, a career transitions toolkit, and recognition of the unique value of a seasoned teaching professional and content expert. Beyond space for personalization or tailored programs, the case is made for changes in university policies and community building, as well as support for use of ever-changing technology.

Results

Workplace wellbeing entails aligning one's professional life with personal interests, values, and purpose to foster meaning at work and greater happiness overall. Purpose is essential because it inspires all faculty to do the work. Purpose can be the driving question, focal commitment, goal, contribution or legacy as faculty endeavors in pursuit to make a difference in some way. Nagoski (2019) suggests purpose is a nourishing experience of feeling connected to something larger than ourselves. It helps us thrive when things go well and cope when things go wrong. Meaning is the value we derive from the pursuit of purpose and values are the beliefs and morals that inform our pursuits. Finally, fulfillment comes from the satisfaction of achieving one's potential and the contentment that doing so is good enough (Pope-Ruark, 2022).

Discussion

Finding and fulfilling purpose is an active journey, therefore, it is critical to examine programs and further identify strategies that could be implemented to create sustainable change in support for late career faculty. In the absence of developmental mentoring, the journey may be less clear for late career faculty. Mentoring strategies at universities which affirm the traits of this late-career cohort (Berg, 2015), adapt to their perpetually changing needs and help them re-establish their purpose can allow them to live out their values with retirement on the horizon. More importantly, support programs targeting the needs and interests of this long-serving cohort can make them more resilient to the conflicts of academic culture and help them avoid burnout.

Beyond the aforementioned program examples which cater to late-career faculty, Pope-Ruark (2022) suggested the following series of prompts that such programs could consider in creating targeted discussions among senior faculty:

- What is your current relationship with your purpose? If the biggest roadblock to pursuing your purpose were removed, what would you do?
- What is the most meaningful reason that you do your work? What do you love to do more than anything else in higher education?
- Who/what do you need to be able to pursue your purpose? How will you know when you are pursuing your purpose? What would it look like to successfully fulfill your purpose?

- If you were pursuing your true purpose, what would the ideal outcome be? (Pope-Ruark, 2022, pp. 82-90).

Using these questions to develop shared understanding of faculty purpose can guide universities to strengthen existing mentoring initiatives and create new efforts which meet their needs, rather than simply focusing on meeting standards and criteria.

Conclusion

In summary, a focus on senior faculty competency is a dynamic and complex endeavor that includes not only expertise, but leadership, institutional knowledge, skills of change, and a commitment to lifelong learning (Shankar et al., 2020). In the absence of developmental mentoring, the journey may be less clear for late career faculty, other than they want to live out their career purpose. Mentoring programs which honor the traits of long serving faculty can shield them from burnout frequently caused by the competitive culture of higher education and help them embrace their trajectory towards retirement. Mentoring programs, both individual and institutional, that center the interests and pursuit of purpose of late career faculty can enhance their focus and motivation as they approach retirement, sustain their workplace wellbeing, and contribute to greater wellbeing overall.

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