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FACULTY DEVELOPMENT UPDATE

The Vitality of Senior Faculty Members: Snow on the Roof—Fire in the Furnace

These excerpts come from a monograph by Carole Bland and William Bergquist examining the internal and external factors influencing the productivity of senior faculty members, and describing how individual and organizational features combine to affect faculty productivity and satisfaction. The volume is from the Association for Study of Higher Education—ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education (ASHE—ERIC) Higher Education Reports series; in it the authors review the literature on senior faculty.

By 2000, 50 percent of full-time faculty members will be over 55, and 68 percent will be over 50. At the same time, many of the country's universities and colleges are planning to make major changes. For example, the largest higher education systems in the world, the University of California and the California State systems, will be in the middle of major face-lifts. The University of Minnesota will have revised its structure and refined its "be everything for everyone" commitment to a narrower mission.

So just when many universities and colleges in America are making major shifts in their missions and in their organizational structures, faculty members who are expected to implement these bold new visions will be signing up for their senior citizen discount cards. Is this situation a cause for alarm? Or are we fortunate to be undertaking these major changes just when our most experienced faculty members are still on board? Does the fire still rage under the snowy roof? How can we best assure the continued vitality of these senior faculty members, who will be called upon to move higher education into the next century? (p. 1)

Those authors who have addressed the issue of senior faculty's vitality in recent years usually include all members of the faculty who are (1) full time, (2) tenured (or at the highest level of their profession), (3) working in a collegiate institution for many years (usually at least 15), and (4) more than 45 years of age¹. It is this group of faculty that is the focus of this monograph (p. 3).

The challenge for senior faculty. Some are concerned that senior faculty may not be as productive. . . . [With regard to teaching,

while the results of research on the subject are mixed,] it is clear that senior faculty are interested in, committed to, and devote significant time to teaching. No studies found a large negative association between a faculty member's age and effective teaching. (p. 31) [With respect to research productivity] great individual differences exist. For example, "high-level producers (those publishing more than one article per year and accounting for one-third of the sample) even after decline at 55 to 64 [were] more productive than the remaining two-thirds of the sample had been at their peak" (Horner et al. 1986, 322). The conclusions from an extensive review of faculty productivity and age are worth noting:

When one takes into consideration the percentage of the productivity variance being accounted for by the age variable, good sense would say to some, set it aside. The relationships are so weak that if it were not for a strong, yet apparently ill-founded, faith that an age/productivity relationship does exist and would be found if only one were smart enough to document it, one would table this line of inquiry and move on to a more profitable vein in order to mine for other factors affecting faculty productivity. (Blackburn and Lawrence 1986, 280)

Internal factors affecting the productivity of senior faculty. It seems that faculty members' competence and productivity do not significantly decline as a function of age. The priorities of senior faculty do appear to change, however, as evidenced by their focusing on quality rather than quantity in research, and their roles as institutional leaders. Understanding the characteristics of productive faculty members, whatever their age, as well as those endemic to senior faculty can help one select new directions or changes in the institution that facilitate vitality (p. 39). In many ways, age and experience provide the benefits of rich, highly integrated cognitive structures and interests in broader and interdisciplinary issues, a desire to facilitate others' success, and a need to focus energies on productive activities that have enduring meaningful impact.

Institutional factors affecting the productivity of senior faculty. The changing experiences of [senior faculty result not only from personal maturation, but also from the profound changes taking place in institutions]. Shifts in public funding, changes in students' interests and values, and the politics of [the] university and state all contribute to the changing character of the vitality [faculty bring to their careers] (p. 59). ...A comprehensive review of productive research organizations found a consistent set of features in these institutions: clear goals that serve a coordinating function; an emphasis on the institution's priorities; an academic culture; a positive climate; assertive participative governance; decentralized organization; frequent communication; sufficient and accessible resources; a critical mass of faculty who have been together for a while and bring different perspectives (the size, age, and diversity of the groups); adequate...rewards; targeted recruitment and selection; a brokered opportunity structure; and seasoned, participative academic leadership (Bland and Ruffin 1992).

Themes to guide approaches to the vitality of senior faculty. Four themes should be kept in mind in the selection of [faculty

development strategies for senior faculty]:

- An important interplay occurs between the individual and those institutional factors that facilitate faculty vitality.
- Faculty vitality is a responsibility of both the individual and the institution.
- Faculty vitality is best preserved through preventive measures rather than heroic measures to save “stagnant” or “stuck” faculty.
- Leadership plays a critical role in individual and institutional vitality (p. 83).

Blackburn, R. T., and H. J. Lawrence. 1986. Aging and the quality of faculty job performance. *Review of Educational Research* 23 (3): 265–290.

Bland, C. J., and M. T. Ruffin. 1992. Characteristics of a productive research environment: Literature review. *Academic Medicine* 67: 385-397.

———, and W. H. Bergquist. 1997. *The Vitality of Senior Faculty Members: Snow on the Roof¾Fire in the Furnace*. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report (25)7. Washington, D.C.: The George Washington University, Graduate School of Education and Human Development.

Horner, K. L., J. P. Rushton, and P. A. Vernon. 1986. Relation between aging and rated teaching effectiveness of academic psychologists. *Psychology and Aging* 1(4): 319-324.

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