Guest Editorial . . . Inherent Dilemmas of an Aging Professoriate

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As the federally mandated retirement rule is lifted, will the academy be overly burdened by aging, reasonably well compensated professors whose scholarship may have diminished greatly and who may refuse to engage in matters supportive to the growth and well being of their discipline and the unit that houses it? As many within the generation of faculty hired in the 1960's and 1970's drift toward retirement over the next five to ten years, university administrators will be required to address this issue. This brief commentary offers some discussion as to whether or not senior faculty remain intellectually and professionally alive as they approach the terminal point in their academic careers.

A 1988 national survey by the U.S. Department of Education (1991) indicated that approximately one-fourth of the professoriate was 55 years of age or older. About 13 percent were age 60 or older. The survey also identified additional demographics of faculty of four-year institutions including gender, race/ethnicity, and professorial rank. In 1988, about three of four (71% to 80%) were male faculty; 86% to 92% were white, and 31% to 45% held the rank of full, tenured professor. Undoubtedly, these figures have changed over the past four years as the professoriate has aged by four to five years. The profession unfortunately does not have available national demographics relative to the physical education, recreation, and dance cohorts, especially figures that would assist administrators in planning faculty renewal, future replacements, and/or realignments of faculty. It would seem reasonable, however, to project a rather substantial number of academics who are approaching retirement age and who will be exiting the academic life over the next few years.

As senior faculty progress in their careers, options are open as to the manner in which they do or do not remain productive as teachers, researchers, and contributors to the professional milieu. Short of specific supporting data, a simplistic view holds that the majority of faculty remain active and productive throughout long careers while others stagnate, slow down, stop, and/or pursue alternative interests with or without additional compensation. It has been suggested by some that significant lapses in faculty citizenship are the exception and not the rule (The Pew Higher Education Research Program, 1992) while others claim that many aging academics become disengaged from their assignments and fail to meet obligations over and beyond minimally assigned activities (Freischlag, 1992).

The tenured, full professor is in an enviable position. To get there he or she must have demonstrated a great deal of productivity within the service and scholarly domains as well as a demonstration of acceptable pedagogical skill. At doctoral and research institutions, the rigor required for tenure and promotion may be increased substantially due to a traditional mandate for significant scholarly and research activity. Once academics have achieved this rather lofty posture at the top, they can continue in a productive mode or they may be permitted

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to "coast in" and retire by degree over time with minimal contributions.

In a recent examination of the professoriate, Boyer (1990) affirmed the notion that faculty functions should be diversified. On large university campuses, departmental faculty should be allowed to specialize and produce in disparate ways. Collectively, specialized, unique talents and productivity go to complement and strengthen the whole of the academic enterprise. Boyer's report also suggested that certain dimensions of scholarship are universal, that is, requisites for all faculty, such as establishing and maintaining credentials as a legitimate researcher and staying in tune with the profession and professional developments within one's disciplinary unit. Disconnected professors can become nonproductive, ineffective, and a drain on the academic unit. The tenured, full professor generally has a great deal of freedom in choosing how to contribute over the latter portion of her or his career. And as Boyer notes, senior professors should be allowed to demonstrate diversity in function toward achieving both individual and institutional goals.

Due to a number of reasons, however, including academic tiredness, transitional issues evident within the discipline and profession, less than desirable compensation, inadequate resources, and perceived leadership voids some senior faculty refocus their efforts in new directions. Razor (1990) suggests that many faculty may be reluctant to pursue traditional roles so vital to the ongoing health and vitality of academic skills. These include such responsibilities as serving on departmental committees and task forces, as program coordinators, student advisors, student club advisors, facilities coordinators, placement directors, and alumni coordinators. In addition, some long-term faculty may become disinterested in teaching, especially at the undergraduate level, and demand light loads so that their efforts can be directed elsewhere such as conducting research or writing books and other educational resources for extra compensation. Such behaviors are not unrelated to recognition and reward strategies conjured up by university administrators.

Research productivity is especially important and should be conducted by all capable scholars, particularly the senior cohort who serve as strong mentors and role models for the younger group. The general perception holds, however, that research activity diminishes during the latter years of a professor's career even though the activity is generally well rewarded by the university in terms of increased compensation, reduced teaching loads, kudos for the researcher, and additional resources for the researcher. In fact, institutions of all types tend to support a value system that rewards research activity over teaching and learning (The Pew Higher Education Research Program, 1992). Research is highly valued especially among academic colleagues who also conduct research and publish (Anderson, 1992).

What are the desirable roles and expectations of the senior cohort relative to scholarly activity? Should the aging professor be expected to continue producing research and publications throughout a career, or does this responsibility largely fall under the aegis of young and middle-age Ph.D.'s? Are age and productivity related? The literature on productivity (see, for example, Creswell, 1985) suggests that those who develop a propensity for research and scholarly activity early in their careers generally remain productive over an extended period of time. Perhaps the obverse of this is also true. Certainly the senior professoriate does not represent a homogenous group relative to work habits and scholarly contributions as specific roles evolve over time.

Some faculty, as they approach the top of their career, undoubtedly redirect their energies elsewhere or just burn out and their productivity and contributions to departmental goals are minimal. These are generally older professors, though not exclusively, who may have taught the same courses and performed similar functions for a long period of time and have settled into a comfortable routine that will carry them through retirement. They may be hard to move

(Watkins, 1986) and refuse to retool and readjust to curricular and educational changes. Among the less than fully contributing faculty, a "take-care-of-myself" or "I'll do my own thing" posture may result in part due to attitudinal and institutional changes (Freischlag, 1992). An academic observed recently that his physical education colleagues currently use the university as a mailbox—they devote most of their time to extraneous efforts toward producing income through ranching, selling real estate, insurance and the like. A departmental chair shared with me the fact that two of his aging professors, just a few years away from retirement, would accept nothing more than modest teaching loads so that they would be free to engage in non-campus activities. Parker Palmer, a rather visable critic of higher education, has suggested that many senior faculty find themselves disconnected from the passions that brought them into the university, disconnected from their students and their colleagues, and are living in pathological situations they helped create as they move toward retirement (Wycliff, 1990). Academic renewal for these professionals is largely out of the question. Their contributions may be minimal, their departmental allegiance questionable, and they remain within the system primarily due to a tenure system that protects them (Winn, 1992).

Due to the economic slowdown, many universities have come up with attractive retirement packages so as to entice senior faculty toward early retirement. In turn, early retirement of senior faculty allows the department/institution to ease out some of the older professors while bringing on younger, freshly prepared Ph.D.'s at a substantially reduced cost. This also represents a vehicle for transfusing what may be a stale faculty with new talent and specialized expertise. The downside to this practice, however, is that some highly productive scholars may also be convinced to retire early thus leaving a void in the research arena that may be detrimental to the disciplinary unit.

Perhaps an exacerbating factor is due to departments bringing on large numbers of faculty in the 1960's and 1970's to keep abreast of the burgeoning student population. This cohort, many of whom were generalists by preparation, settled in for a long career and some departmental administrators have been hard pressed in providing participatory faculty development and retooling programs or in bringing aboard young Ph.D's for the purpose of upgrading ineffective programs and energizing students and older faculty.

The dilemma presented here is a realistic issue for several university administrators. Degrees of faculty dissatisfaction, staleness, and underproductivity, an endemic phenomenon within the academy, may be evident for some time, particularly as this cohort of faculty turn the corner toward retirement and if the environment within higher education remains less than ideal. While few positions are more attractive and fulfilling than that of a full, tenured professorship, some faculty will tend to contribute less to the education of young people and to the goals of their department than to their own individuals agendas. As this aging cohort retires, many university administrators should have considerably more freedom than in recent years to realign their faculty to match programmatic goals and directions for the 21st century. Over the next decade or so there should be considerable change within the professoriate and curricular offerings as many older professors exit due to retirement. If so, the evolving phenomena just might stimulate some constructive developments within HPERD professions that will provide significant renewal for the approaching millinneum.

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