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We Really Like You

By GARY A. OLSON

HEADS UP
Advice for academic administrators

Some decades ago when I was a new assistant professor at a major state university, a distinguished senior colleague explained to me how the tenure system worked.

"It's the old spaghetti method," he said. "You toss a few strands at the wall, and you see what sticks and what doesn't."

He went on to suggest that from the beginning the university only intended to give tenure to a fraction (he claimed a third) of the faculty members it had hired. Those who distinguished themselves would earn a place in the permanent professoriate; those who did not would move to lesser institutions -- if they were lucky.

The university offered no formal support to those of us on the tenure track, much to our dismay. We were expected to absorb all of the academic street smarts we could on our own and, in effect, reinvent the wheel, or to find -- again on our own -- some mentor who could help us navigate the perilous waters of departmental politics as well as instruct us on how to achieve success in the discipline.

Some years later, an assistant professor of geology who was four years into her first academic position told me that she was leaving her large research university for a smaller institution that prided itself on its "friendly" atmosphere. She complained that she did not feel supported by her department or by the institution as a whole.

"I'm just another number," she told me, not bothering to conceal her resentment. "What happened to the community of intellectuals we were all supposedly joining?"

Those two incidents reveal an all-too-common institutional failure to guide, support, and thus retain faculty members. An institution will often invest considerable time, effort, and resources in recruiting new faculty members but then drop the ball when it comes to keeping them.

Successful retention means fostering a culture of support. It means, for example, protecting untenured faculty members from colleagues and departments that encourage them to take on an inordinately large service burden. It also means protecting them from overextending themselves through their own good will and eagerness to contribute.

A culture of support means offering effective mentoring programs. While some institutions have had success with programs that pair a senior professor with an untenured one, those efforts are rife with potential problems. Even when the pairings work, faculty members still need to feel that the institution as a whole supports them.

Perhaps better are programs that regularly convene untenured faculty members as a group to discuss tenure

and promotion requirements, review methods of handling student complaints, learn about available resources (internal grant programs, teaching workshops, assistance with grant proposals or study-abroad applications), and address any other topic that comes up.

I believe that, as administrators, we have an ethical responsibility to guide new faculty members, and, as managers, we have a fiscal responsibility to do so. When an institution begins to lose young professors because they do not feel supported, someone is not doing his or her job.

A culture of support also means providing sufficient opportunities for new scholars to develop a peer-support network. Frequently, newcomers are introduced at an initial faculty meeting, and then are left on their own to meet people not only within their department but -- perhaps more important -- in other departments. Sponsoring receptions and other events for new faculty members throughout their first year or two enables them to develop peer relationships that can help them feel less isolated. Establishing such networks can be especially important to retaining female and minority scholars.

Some mentoring programs include a monthly informational session followed by a reception because the socializing that takes place is often more important than what happens during the formal session. Acquaintances formed early in a professor's career are often long-lasting and mutually supportive.

Finally, in a culture of support, faculty accomplishments are recognized and rewarded, especially publicly, through institutional newsletters, faculty meetings, college addresses, and convocations.

Fostering that culture begins as early as the recruitment process. A department chairman once bragged to me that he had managed to hire his department's first choice in a faculty search and to have gotten her at "the lowest end of the pay range possible." Somehow he believed that he was doing his department a service.

What he didn't understand is that by nickel-and-diming the neophyte instructor, he had already sown the seeds of resentment and job alienation before she had even arrived on campus. And as it turned out, the professor left after only two years and secured a position at a prestigious private college.

The department would have been better served had the chairman (and everyone else) worked to make the new hire feel wanted from the very beginning. Colleges that have been particularly successful in faculty recruitment treat every search -- even for an entry-level faculty member -- as if it were a search for a senior professor. That is, they understand that the key to recruitment is making candidates feel that the institution is genuinely interested in them at every step of the process. That same philosophy should permeate our retention efforts.

Of course, retaining faculty members is not only an issue at the assistant-professor rank. The loss of established scholars is sometimes even more consequential because they take with them years of experience, accomplishments, and institutional history. That is why some institutions have begun to offer a voluntary mentoring program that focuses on how newly tenured faculty members can begin the transition from junior to mid-career status.

For all faculty members, fostering a culture of support means more than providing moral support; occasionally it entails making every effort to come up with a suitable counteroffer when accomplished scholars are being wooed by other institutions.

A colleague once told me that her dean refused to match an offer from another institution that would have amounted to a $5,000 raise. Instead, the dean offered her $2,500 -- the exact amount that she would have received that year in the regular raise process and that she would have been ineligible for had she accepted the counteroffer. Instead, she left for the other institution, and her university lost a productive and nationally

prominent scholar.

When an institution makes a genuine effort to retain a faculty member through a counteroffer, that effort affects more than the given professor. It sends a message to the entire department that the institution truly values excellence in teaching and scholarship, that faculty members who distinguish themselves (and thereby the institution) will be rewarded.

Conversely, when an institution makes only a token effort -- when it attempts to "low ball" a scholar -- it sends the opposite message: that good faculty members are expendable.

Some financially strapped institutions might find it difficult, if not impossible, to match a given offer. But when an institution can't quite match the salary, it sometimes can make up the difference with other inducements: research stipends, course releases, equipment budgets, and summer stipends, for example. An institution may not always be able to afford a given counteroffer, but making an earnest effort sends an important signal about its values.

Occasionally an institution will have trouble retaining faculty members despite every effort to develop a culture of support. That is why it is a good idea to conduct exit interviews with departing scholars. An exit interview might help administrators understand the root cause of a professor's decision to leave -- low pay, a feeling that accomplishments were not recognized, a hostile environment in the department -- and fix it to prevent other good scholars from moving.

In a true culture of support, no faculty member should ever feel like "just another number" whose career rose or fell according to "the spaghetti method" of evaluation.

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