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Brief 17: New Faculty: A Catalyst for Change

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NERCHE BRIEF

New England Resource Center for Higher Education
May 2003

The following Brief from the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE) is a distillation of the work by members of NERCHE's think tanks and projects from a wide range of institutions. NERCHE Briefs emphasize policy implications and action agendas from the point of view of the people who tackle the most compelling issues in higher education in their daily work lives. With support from the Ford Foundation, NERCHE disseminates these pieces to a targeted audience of higher education leaders and media contacts. The Briefs are designed to add critical information and essential voices to the development of higher education policies and the improvement of practice at colleges and universities.

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New Faculty: A Catalyst for Change

The message of new faculty is not new, but their power may be. As the demand for new faculty increases due to retirements and increased enrollments in systems and institutions around the country, large cohorts of tenure-track faculty are being hired. Early-career faculty want what they've wanted for many years now: clarity surrounding the tenure process, a workload that is meaningful and manageable, professional development for research and teaching, a hospitable campus climate, a collegial workplace, work-family balance, equity, transparency, and fairness. Many young teacher scholars are interested in collaboration over competition, research that is organized around problems rather than disciplines, and a multidisciplinary work environment shaped by interaction between researchers and users. At the same time, colleges and universities are facing pressures from outside to change what they do, how they do it, and how they measure it—much of this in line with the values and concerns of new faculty cohorts.

New Social and Economic Pressures

With many other career options outside of higher education, new faculty are confident in their abilities to find work elsewhere, if necessary. Some fields are actually losing top candidates to workplaces that provide a better quality of life in terms of pay, promotion, and work-family balance. That new faculty are more inclined than their predecessors to change jobs creates a tension, felt on many campuses, between mobility and loyalty. On the one hand, senior faculty feel burned when they put time and money into new faculty members who go on to accept jobs at other institutions or outside of academe. This can be even more bothersome because salary compression means that new faculty are sometimes paid much more than their senior counterparts. On the other hand, new faculty find it difficult to buy houses and raise families on academic salaries especially when, given the changed marketplace and the vagaries surrounding the tenure process, there is no guarantee that their jobs will be around in the future.

Institutions may have little flexibility in the current climate of cutbacks to match faculty salaries with those in the corporate sector. What else can they do to humanize the institution in order to attract and retain new faculty? In April 2003, Cathy Trower, principal investigator of the Study of New Scholar's at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education, presented some initial findings from the study and led participants from across NERCHE's think tanks in an all-think-tank event titled "A Good Place to Work for New Scholars." Here's what they recommend:

The Role of Administrators in Making Change

Getting the word out The two most important people in a new faculty member's campus life are the chair and dean. Working closely with recent hires, chairs can educate deans about the needs and concerns of these faculty. For their part, deans are positioned to advocate on behalf of new faculty to the upper administration. Now campuses are hiring cohorts of as many as 20 new faculty, creating the opportunity for public conversations to re-examine and revamp the system

Ongoing orientation For the most part, colleges and universities have done a better job orienting students to the institution than they have new faculty. It is certainly equally

important, and perhaps even more so, to make an investment in faculty, especially given the time and other resources that go into the search process. Some strategies include: holding ongoing orientations rather than one-shot programs for new hires; implementing formal and informal mentoring programs; and creating spaces, such as brown-bag lunches, for more casual conversations. Every new faculty member at the University of Wisconsin Madison is assigned to a *group* of mentors. These faculty are pulled from other departments who can play a mentoring rather than an evaluative role. The mentors are proactive and strategic in coaching their junior colleagues on the practical and political aspects of institutional life.

Revisiting institutional structures and policies The changing faculty profile will likely expose policies that are ripe for re-examination, especially as they relate to early-career faculty. Joint appointments, for example, can be problematic: faculty have two chairs, two deans, and essentially two full-time jobs for which only one is compensated. This can present difficulties and can send mixed messages when it comes time for evaluation.

The fact that department chairs tend to move in and out of the position—with ideas and directions changing with each rotation—can be frustrating for new faculty. Administrators can seize the moment to revisit the chair's position and role in department—where the work of the institution takes place—as part of a move to design more accommodating workplaces.

Most institutions are struggling with fewer resources. Even with retirements and faculty turnover, only a handful of new positions are tenure track. The workload implications for those faculty who remain and for the few tenure track faculty who are hired are significant as they struggle to meet the demands for institutional governance and student advising as well as to staff committees. In this context, it is difficult to protect new faculty from service obligations. It may be appropriate to deploy part-time faculty who have a history with the institution in some service activities, such as advising and committee work.

Some campuses have instituted policies that build flexible options into the tenure process, such as “stop the clock” choices for childrearing. But the culture is such that faculty may be reluctant to avail themselves of this option because they fear that they will not be seen as serious scholars. Deans and chairs have power to create an atmosphere that embraces such policies, and to remove obstacles from the paths of young faculty on the tenure track.

Reexamining tenure The 1950s and 60s also saw a period of cohort hiring resulting from skyrocketing enrollments in flush times. A critical difference between now and then was that most were white men with a reasonable expectation of tenure. Those faculty are now retiring, and more women and faculty of color are taking their place—without the guarantee of tenure. Those on the tenure track want clarity about the process, including how they will be evaluated. They have serious questions about tenure as they understand it, as does the public at large. They are likely to ask: Why six years? Why is there no flexibility? Why can’t we even discuss alternatives?

To achieve greater clarity and transparency about the review process, deans and chairs should convene groups of administrators, and senior and new faculty to talk about their understandings and concerns about tenure and promotion. Even then, new faculty may be reluctant to expose themselves to potential criticism by revealing their wants and needs regarding the process. Instead of confronting new faculty directly, administrators may choose to begin by seeking the advice of successful junior faculty about the concerns that they had as new hires.

Navigating the process New faculty voice concerns about cronyism because of the confidentiality and secrecy that surrounds the tenure process. Recent hires feel tension between their roles as new scholars as they try to fit in and understand institutional contexts. In order to be successful they need to know how to interpret campus politics, including how the composition of promotion and tenure committees affect the process. This is often part of the unwritten or unspoken code that can be difficult to decipher for new faculty. Institutions need to develop policies and processes that are clear, frank, and honest, and create venues for candid discussion that identify where policy and practice are not in alignment. Institutional expectations about tenure should be clear and

the advice practical on all campuses. Administrators need to help faculty understand the particular balance expected among teaching, research, and service. They can counsel faculty to approach the development of their personal portfolio in cycles, rather than maximizing all areas at all times.

The reality is that chairs and deans, in addition to the senior faculty who comprise promotion and tenure committees, play the largest roles in making their colleges and universities more humane workplaces—not only for early-career faculty, but for all members of the department or school. A venue for discussions about workplace issues, such as workload, alternative compensation, and flexible time can be created in departments or colleges. But their endeavors must be supported at the highest levels of the institution for true change to occur. Campuses need to create spaces where it is safe to talk frankly about controversial issues and sacred cows, such as tenure. One model is to hold campus-wide think tanks, sanctioned by the president and senior advisors, and charged to examine an institutional policy or process, evaluate its components, and create proposals to replace or modify it. Transparency is not merely a current buzzword. It is an essential component of a humane workplace.

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