

Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

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Transitions: What's Love Got to Do with It?

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It was the second week of spring semester when a small Chinese woman entered my office. She had been actively recruited to teach Chinese culture in a special freshman learning community. Her English was very proficient, and I was surprised that she had only been in the United States for five months. What started as a conversation about her students' lack of civility slowly evolved into a conversation about her colleagues' lack of support. In her perception, not one person in her department expressed concern about her adjustment; not one person listened to her concerns about students and teaching; not one person extended help unless she requested it. True to her traditional heritage, she was ashamed of the tears; but her eyes would no longer contain them.

Do you think this story is fiction? I'm sad to say that it is not. This encounter happened to me this past year, at an institution that prides itself on being a "family." I spent over two hours that day with the woman I'll call "Li Chin," listening to her story and straining to sort out exactly how this could happen on my beloved campus.

Collegiality—Really?

In his ground-breaking research on new faculty, Bob Boice (1992) concluded that new faculty must do three things in order to succeed in academe: they need to teach well, they need to do meaningful scholarship, and they need to build collegial relationships. However, Boice was surprised to find that the most important of these three

was not teaching or research—it was collegiality.

Since then, two larger national studies of new faculty (Menges & Associates, 1999; Rice, Sorcinelli, & Austin, 2000) confirmed the findings of Boice and others. The social context of the department plays a large role in new faculty success and satisfaction. Without the support of experienced faculty as friends, role models, and mentors, new faculty rarely succeed in teaching and scholarship. Without guidance, new faculty are unable to decipher the expectations of the institution, especially with regard to reappointment and tenure. Without community, newcomers find themselves overly anxious, stressed, lonely, competitive, and intellectually understimulated. (See also Boice, 1999; Sorcinelli, 2000.)

So What Happened to Li Chin?

Is her department unusually dysfunctional? Are the faculty uncaring, or even nasty? Do the faculty dislike this woman and regret the hire? Sadly, the answers to these questions are "No." While the chair and faculty have their individual and collective foibles, it is a respected department full of excellent teachers, productive scholars, and fine people. My conclusion is that the chair and faculty in this department are not particularly mindful about the needs of someone transitioning into a new institution and new culture.

Li Chin is so disaffected with her departmental colleagues that she requested that I introduce her to as many people across campus as possible. She wants to build a social network outside the department. I want to prevent her resignation.

The Cost of Neglect

Academe is currently experiencing unprecedented turnover in personnel. Thousands of senior faculty of the post-war generation are retiring; "rising stars" are being recruited by more prestigious institutions to fill these vacancies; "academic entrepreneurs" are moving within or outside academe in search of salary increases; and part-time faculty are increasingly filling the gaps. Thus we are conducting record amounts of faculty searches and are expending record amounts of resources in those searches. Last year my institution conducted 140 searches and spent approximately \$162,000 for travel, lodging, advertising, and moving expenses. This

figure does not include photocopying, local travel, meals for search committees, etc. And it certainly does not reflect faculty, staff, and administrators' time. Oh, to think of the incredible academic projects that could have been planned, implemented, and evaluated with that amount of funding, time, and energy!

Even with this sizeable expenditure of resources, many new hires leave an institution after only a few years — not for higher salaries or retirement, but because they have become baffled by and disillusioned with the system. Without collegial support, each day became a struggle to puzzle out policy and procedure, collective beliefs, departmental norms, and institutional assumptions. Left to their own devices, these new faculty gradually became disenchanted and often embittered when asked — either explicitly or implicitly — to leave. Anyone who has encountered a faculty member who was denied reappointment and/or tenure knows also the deep emotional toll — on both the one denied and the ones denying.

What Is Your Story?

Do you remember when you were a newcomer? Do you remember the support that you received — or didn't receive? Are your memories pleasant or painful — or a mixture of the two?

Now let's focus on the present: How do you now support your new colleagues? How do you currently contribute to creating a supportive environment in your department? Check the spaces next to the items that you personally have undertaken for new faculty during the past 12 months:

- ___ I contacted new hires before they moved to the area to introduce myself.
- ___ I contacted new hires before they moved to the area to offer help with relocating, moving, and getting settled.
- ___ I asked about their professional interests (teaching, scholarship, and service).
- ___ I asked about their personal interests (family, hobbies, etc.).
- ___ I asked about the adequacy of their office space, equipment, technical support, etc.
- ___ I introduced them to others on campus.
- ___ I invited them for coffee, tea, or lunch.

- ___ I invited them to my home.
- ___ I provided information about campus resources (teaching and learning center, media services, computing services, counseling services, health promotion, etc.).
- ___ I provided information about community resources (recreation, farmer's market, school system, day care, senior center, etc.).
- ___ I invited them to campus and community cultural events (gallery openings, theatrical performances, musical recitals, etc.).
- ___ I inquired about their professional goals for teaching, scholarship, and service and gave them feedback on their plans.
- ___ I discussed my teaching with them.
- ___ I shared my syllabi and other course materials.
- ___ I invited a new faculty member to my classes as a guest speaker.
- ___ I invited a new faculty member to my classes as an observer to give me feedback on my teaching.
- ___ I offered to observe their classes and give feedback.
- ___ I offered to team teach with new faculty.
- ___ I offered to collaborate on disciplinary and/or classroom research.
- ___ I invited them to co-present at a professional conference.
- ___ I offered to review a new faculty member's manuscript for publication.
- ___ I discussed reappointment, promotion, and/or tenure policy and procedures with them.
- ___ I offered to review and give feedback about their reappointment, promotion, and/or tenure materials.
- ___ I offered to include them on grant proposals.
- ___ I informed them about learning opportunities on and off-campus.
- ___ I offered to mentor new faculty.
- ___ I ensured that they had input in curricular discussions and decisions.
- ___ I supported new ideas that they brought to the department/college.

Give yourself one point for each space checked. Give yourself 10 extra points if you did any of the above for part-time faculty. Subtract 5 points if you are a chair or other campus administrator; this is

already your job. Or subtract 5 points if you are not a chair or other campus administrator, and you think it's their job! If you scored 20+, you are a great friend to new faculty. If you scored 10 points or less, you probably can do more to help your new colleagues, both full-time and part-time.

It Takes a Village

There is an old axiom that it takes a village to raise a child. If you are a parent, you know how true this is. We parents rely daily on our extended families, neighbors, friends, day-care providers, schoolteachers, counselors, sports coaches, after-school staff, camp counselors, religious/spiritual teachers, and others to care for and guide our children.

In the same way, it takes a college or university to attract, support, guide, and retain our new faculty, especially our new women faculty and faculty of color. A strong sense of belonging is a powerful deterrent to leaving. And a strong sense of belonging is created by all of us—all of us in our academic village.

References and Resources

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