



Extending Academic Life and Engaging Valuable Human Resources

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June 2015 guest commentary (for Adrianna Kezar)

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Faculty staffing arrangements and career paths, like all aspects of higher education, are evolving. Academic life is changing in response to rapid economic, social and technological developments causing institutions to rethink business-as-usual. In the process, customs and policies that have structured faculty life for a century or more are proving to be inadequate to meet the shifting needs of institutions and their faculty members.

Today, many college and university professors are postponing retirement and working well beyond the "normal" retirement age of 65. True, recent economic conditions and the market meltdown of 2008 caused many senior academics to delay their departure from the academy. However, other forces are at work as well. Many professors are living longer, healthier lives than their predecessors from just a generation or two before. Often these individuals want to remain intellectually engaged; continue to be a part of the community they have served for a long time; and provide ongoing service to their institution, community or society at large. As retirement looms on the horizon, many professors see an absence of attractive options for meaningful engagement when they leave their academic position. Or as some academics describe retirement, when they "fall off a cliff," become virtually invisible, and lose their professional identity

Concurrent with changes in faculty retirement patterns is the growth of retired faculty organizations, emeritus colleges, and retirement centers. These associations of retired faculty (and sometimes retired staff) offer emeritus professors an alternative vision of post-retirement life. This vision may include opportunities for retired faculty to stay connected to their institution and colleagues; remain active intellectually; and provide valuable service utilizing the professional experience, skills and expertise they have developed over a lifetime. The associations take various forms and emphasize different combinations of intellectual engagement, research support, social activities, service opportunities, and advocacy for service and support for retired professors. Many also recognize the valuable efforts of emeritus faculty with awards and honors that acknowledge their continuing contributions following retirement.

In a nutshell:

Retired faculty organizations are broad-based associations offering a mix of "social activities, learning opportunities, support services, and advocacy roles intended to enhance the lives of retired professors."

Emeritus colleges are a more sharply focused type of retired faculty organization, with primarily an intellectual and scholarly mission. They may sponsor lectures, discussions, courses, and other learning opportunities; support research projects; and recognize the scholarly and service achievements of their members.

Retirement centers usually serve the needs of an institution's retirees defined broadly, frequently including retired staff members as well as current faculty.

More than 200 higher education institutions in the United States now have some form of retired faculty organization. These include prominent research universities like the University of Southern California, Arizona State University, Emory University, Cornell University, and Indiana University as well as smaller institutions like Skidmore College, Wellesley College, and Wesleyan University. Some of these organizations are directly affiliated with the institution they serve. They may receive modest funding from and report to the provost's, alumni, or development office. Others are freestanding associations of retired faculty (and sometimes staff), relying primarily on dues, contributions, and even small endowments to support their activities and services.

As professors from the Baby Boom generation near retirement, colleges and universities would be wise to consider how their community could benefit from some form of retired faculty organization. These organizations provide many opportunities for higher education institutions and local communities to access valuable human resources in an era of financial constraint. They can connect their members with short-term opportunities to teach, mentor students or early-career professors, use their expertise to address specific institutional problems, and serve the community in other ways. They can help alumni

associations reach out to graduates from past decades and assist development offices in the design and implementation of fundraising initiatives. Perhaps even more important, active organizations for retired faculty can make retirement a more attractive option for vital senior professors when they can see appealing engagement and service opportunities following formal departure from their faculty appointment.

Research on the challenges and stages of academic life (see, for example, Gappa et al., 2007; Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006) has resulted in a wide range of services, support structures, and strategies to aid professors as they travel through the induction, novice, and even mid-career years of academic life. At many institutions, early career professors now have help as they work to learn effective teaching strategies or master the grant-seeking process. Likewise, many veteran professors have access to assistance as they struggle to integrate technology into their teaching or transition to a new research focus.

Notably, and in contrast, "emeritus" has vague meaning at many institutions and comes with arbitrary status or support. The absence of attention to retired faculty and the lack of a clear vision of life after retirement can have cascading effects for institutions: Senior professors may be reluctant to retire due to a lack of appealing professional opportunities once they turn in their office key, and when faculty postpone retirement, institutions lack opportunities to recruit new faculty members who can ensure fresh perspectives and a steady flow of talent through a college or university.

Changes in our society, economy, and even life spans place new pressures on higher education and call for new ways of doing business. Now is a fortuitous time to reexamine how we structure the latter years of academic life. Post-retirement opportunities supported by some form of strategically designed retired faculty organization can provide a vision of a meaningful and rewarding life following retirement. These organizations also can provide a structured way for institutions to stay connected with emeritus faculty and continue to benefit from their retired faculty's professional talents and enthusiasm.

Creating formal, but flexible, support structures for retired academics seems appropriate as American society at large seeks new policies and structures to support and engage the growing numbers of healthy, vital older citizens who are redefining later life. Higher education must keep pace with these larger trends and consider creative ways to support and utilize the talents of their emeritus faculty. Carefully conceived organizations for retired faculty offer a win-win situation for professors, their institutions, and the communities that can benefit from the knowledge, wisdom and creativity emeritus professors have cultivated over a lifetime.

June 2015

1 For a detailed discussion of the factors influencing faculty retirement decisions, see: Yakoboski, Paul (2015). *Understanding the Faculty Retirement (Non)Decision: Results from the Faculty Career and Retirement Survey*. TIAA-CREF Institute paper to be published June 2015.

2 Baldwin, R.G., & Zeig, M.J. (2013). Emeritus colleges: Enriching academic communities by extending academic life. *Innovative Higher Education*, 38, 355-368.

Other works cited: Gappa, J.M., Austin, A.E., & Trice, A.G. (2007). *Rethinking Faculty Work: Higher Education's Strategic Imperative*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Schuster, J.H., & Finkelstein, M.J. (2006). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

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