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The Transition from Practitioner to
Professor: The Struggle of New Faculty
to Find their Place in the World of
Academia

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THE TRANSITION FROM PRACTITIONER TO PROFESSOR: THE STRUGGLE OF NEW FACULTY TO FIND THEIR PLACE IN THE WORLD OF ACADEMIA

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Abstract

Becoming a college professor brings both the feeling of self-accomplishment and discernment regarding this prestigious achievement. Most doctoral candidates are practitioners in the field of public education and will hopefully transition from a principalship to the office of a college professor. While this journey is filled with personal attainment, some of the doctoral graduates experience a variety of struggles along the way to their positions in higher education. This study examined this journey for some of those who have made the move. The questions posed to the participants centered on the benefits, disadvantages, and suggestions on ways to assist fellow completers who have decided to take a position in higher education. Four primary struggles were identified as a result of the study: (1) struggle with the role, (2) struggle with self, (3) cultural struggle, and (4) future struggles. Through a narrative approach, the participants addressed their feelings regarding the move to a professorship, struggles they faced along the way and the impact the professional change had on their lives.

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The Transition from Practitioner to Professor: The Struggle of New Faculty to find their Place in the World of Academia



NOTE: This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of the Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a scholarly contribution to the knowledge base in educational administration.

J. Craig Coleman, Editor
Stephen F. Austin State University

Introduction

Each of us can remember the feeling we had after receiving the offer of our first position as a university professor. Feelings of excitement and nervousness held our stomachs in knots, and we were often up till the wee hours of the morning wondering what the future would hold for us as we attempted to become one of “them” who we had held in awe during our doctoral coursework. For those of us leaving the role as school administrator, the new role was a major departure from the hectic life of a school principal or superintendent, and we were all just happy to be able to catch our breath for a moment.

The transition, we would soon realize, held aspects that we hadn’t considered when we agreed to take on the role of university professor. Many of these aspects came in the form of a struggle within ourselves and with the culture and environment of the university, a system much different from that of the public school, as we sought to develop our identity and find our place in the life of a professor.

The purpose of this article is to give a voice to those who are making the journey from the role of school administrator to that of university professor. To this end, the writings presented here are a joint effort of nine professors new to the professoriate. It is hoped that their voices will provide aid in the transition process for others, answer questions of those who may be thinking about making the transition, and offering ideas for university department leaders in helping their new faculty make the transition from practitioner to professor.

Related Literature

Universities spend much time, effort, and resources in hiring faculty. Searches are costly and turnover of faculty strains already exhausted budgets (Ambrose, Huston, & Norman, 2005; Zhou & Volkwein, 2004). In order to retain qualified professors of educational administration, it is our responsibility to find ways in which we can support those new to the professoriate and assist with their assimilation into a new organizational culture.

Expectations of the Role of New Faculty in Higher Education

School of Education faculty often come to the professoriate with experience in the principalship as well as district office administration, including the superintendency. While this previous leadership experience is valuable, one still has to learn the culture and politics of higher education, which prove to be vastly different than the K-12 arena (Glickman & Ross-Gordon, 2005; McCann & Radford, 1993). There is pressure for improved teaching at research universities, while teaching universities are now requiring a more extensive research

agenda of their faculty members. Often there are contradictory messages concerning expectations regarding teaching, research, and service; it is difficult for new professors to sort out those activities which most count towards earning tenure (Aguirre, 2000; Van Patten, 1995; Olmstead, 1993).

According to Johnson and DeSpain (2004), the newcomer to higher education is often confused and frustrated by the lack of congruence in their expectations of the role and the university's expectations for them. These authors further related that the newcomer to the university level often has a difficult time with understanding the expectations of the "Teacher/Service/Scholar Model" element of the job (p. 46).

Induction of Faculty in Higher Education

Research in the area of new teacher induction has shown that it takes several years of consistent, systematic mentoring in order to retain teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2003). It would also be reasonable to expect that the mentoring of new faculty should occur over a period of several years and provide the same support as school districts: the type of assistance found to keep teachers in the profession. Akin to the new teacher experience, without collegial support new faculty often experience feelings of alienation, isolation, and disenfranchisement (Piercy, Giddings, Allen, Dixon, Meszaros, & Joest, 2005; Erickson & Rodriguez, 1999).

A review of the literature (Hensley, Erickson, Kinsey, & Stine, 2006), however, has found there is a dearth of formal mentoring programs at the university level that provide new professors with the support they need to become successful in teaching, research, and service to the community. In a study completed by Queralt (1982), faculty who received formal mentoring demonstrated greater productivity in leadership within their respective professional organizations, were the recipient of more competitive grants, and had a greater record of publishing than faculty without mentors.

Several studies have found that the retention of new faculty also rested upon the presence or absence of collegiality (Ambrose, Huston, & Norman, 2005; Zhou & Volkwein, 2004; Erickson & Rodriguez, 1999; Sorcinelli, 1994). Lack of positive working relationships, support for one's research agenda, and little assistance with teaching or research were named as factors leading to separation from the university. The department chair and his/her support of new faculty also had a great impact on the retention of faculty (Johnsrud & Heck, 1998). An additional factor in new faculty's decision of whether to remain at the university was that of professional development (Rice & Austin, 1988). As stated in Rosser (2004, p. 287):

Providing adequate funding to support faculty members' professional activities and development can be important to their retention... (this) often includes travel support to attend research meetings or professional development seminars... and provision of funds to participate in those efforts that enable faculty members to maintain a current and relevant research agenda in their area of expertise. Faculty members thrive on the intellectual and collegial stimulation from their peers when they attend professional activities and national research meetings.

It is because of issues like those cited above that led the authors to the realization that writing about our experiences could possibly aid others in their process of transition and search for their identity and place in the world of academia. Our experiences might also provide valuable insights into mentoring and induction processes at university programs for new faculty in departments of educational administration.

Background of "The Struggle"

The genesis of this paper occurred at the recent National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) conference in Lexington, KY, where the authors attended a panel discussion concerning the issue of transitioning from practitioner to professor. Dialogue between the participants at the panel discussion led to a realization that each of the members in attendance had encountered similar experiences in their process of transition

from the role of school administrator to that of a life in academia, and the idea was born to write of these experiences in order to inform those who may be experiencing or thinking about experiencing the same transitional process.

Throughout the interactions and dialogue of the participants it was discovered that the overall transition process for new faculty can be described as a “struggle.” Within this struggle, we were able to determine four categories of struggle that were experienced during the transition: (1) the struggle with the role, (2) the struggle with self, (3) the cultural struggle, and (4) the struggle for the future.

The Struggle with the Role

For many faculty members initially entering the professoriate, there is relatively little time between their role as graduate student and that of university faculty member. The world of research and academic writing remains unsullied in their minds as they accept their new mortarboard as a junior professor. This is not, however, the typical experience for those who complete their graduate degrees while serving in K-12 school administration. For them, the gap between graduate school and the professoriate typically is nearly two decades – a midlife career change (Borra, 2001). Those who find themselves in this midlife transition may struggle at first with the new role. The requirements to publish, present, and to serve in the academic arena vary considerably from the practical administrative work to which they have become accustomed, but with administrative determination set in motion, the junior professor begins to take on the challenges of academia. With a list of action items and a stack of work folders, the former school administrator aggressively approaches these new assignments: prepare for residential courses, facilitate online classes, advise interns, develop a new course, align benchmark assessments with ELCC standards, and begin brainstorming ideas for publication and presentation. As compatible as these tasks seem to an administratively oriented mind, the adjustment can be a struggle.

While the department of educational administration has a generic job description of an assistant professor and a written set of tenure guidelines, which seemingly outline what is expected in terms of teaching, writing, and service, in actual fact, there are also numerous unwritten regulations. New faculty often find themselves struggling to work within these two sets of expectations, both spoken and unspoken, in their efforts to understand their role with regards to scholarship, service, and teaching.

Scholarship

The greatest confusion with respect to the role of professor seems to lie in the area of scholarly writing. While the tenure guidelines essentially indicate that at least one refereed publication per year is required throughout the promotion and tenure process (these requirements may differ depending on the guidelines of the university), the guidelines say nothing regarding the required mix between primary and secondary authorship. Only by discussing this situation with veterans of the process does one determine that at least half of these publications require primary authorship on the part of the faculty member. Another requirement is that scholarly publications only count as writing if they appear in refereed professional journals. In many cases, such journals may be somewhat obscure and have a very limited readership. While publishing an article in a national educational administration or curriculum journal would reach many thousands of readers, if these journals do not use a jury process for the selection of articles, then publishing in one of these journals only counts as service to the profession. Therefore, the chance to reach and impact a large audience is somewhat thwarted by the system.

Service

Service includes service to the program area, to the department, to the college, to the university, and to the profession. Some junior faculty members find it difficult to achieve the coveted appointments to college and university committees, in particular. Those appointments tend to go to tenured professors with more name recognition. There is also some

confusion regarding what constitutes service. As previously mentioned, writing may count as service to the profession if it is published in a non-refereed journal. In a similar vein, the value of professional presentations also varies. An invitation to present a paper, extended as the result of a refereed process, may count as much as a juried article. However, an invited presentation to a county teachers' institute would only count as service to the profession. This is true in spite of the fact that the institute presentation may be in front of an audience of seventy teachers, whereas a presentation resulting from a juried process may only be in front of a handful of people.

Teaching

Teaching appears to be the most straightforward of the areas upon which tenure and promotion decisions are made. New faculty members in educational administration have been teachers before and are more familiar with this expectation of the role. On the surface, teaching results can be measured in a fairly objective manner, based upon mandatory student evaluations. However, even within teaching there are unwritten rules, and only by talking with survivors of the tenure and promotion process does one discover these unwritten, yet required, expectations.

In the final analysis, many professionals moving from public school administration into the professoriate are coming from situations in which the job performance expectations were much more clearly defined. A vast majority of these individuals have been highly successful teachers and administrators and are quite capable of being productive in higher education. Once they determine the actual performance expectations of their departments and universities, they are likely to be successful. Unfortunately, some new university faculty members often spend up to a year learning how to play the new game.

Understanding and performing the new role of university professor is only a part of the overarching struggle found within the transition process for those entering the professoriate. We will next discuss the second struggle that new faculty members must manage as they leave school administration for a life as an academic: The Struggle with Self.

Struggle with Self

Many principals strive for the doctorate degree to support their efforts to provide the very best instructional program for their schools, and to serve as a role model for life-long learning. At some point in many of these individual's careers, their professional needs shift and they desire to make their impact on education through a different route. A call to return to the classroom, teach the next generation of administrators, and contribute to research in improved leadership compels many to transition from practice to the professorate. At the time that those principals choose to leave actual practice and enter the professorate they "flip" the tables of their perception. No longer are they the top of an organization, they are at the bottom. They are no longer among the most educated in their circle; again, they are near the bottom. This profound shift in professional self-identity has the potential to produce a major life crisis for those making this transition.

There is definitely a sense of identity associated with being the principal of a school. It is a position that one generally builds up to, jumping through several "hoops" and paying many "dues" before one's name is on the principal's door. That effort helps shape the self-identification with the position. One's self-perception is inevitably influenced by of hundreds of students and staff members' perception of "their principal." Personal and professional identities become melded.

Deciding to leave professional practice for the opportunity to teach that practice to a new generation does not come without struggle. Distinct stages of progression through this transition can be categorized as:

1. Rising dissonance with status quo
2. Self-articulation of dissonance
3. Analysis of dissonance

4. Emotional and intellectual adjustment to possible alternatives
 - a. Self perception
 - b. Perception of others
 - c. Finances/lifestyle
5. Personal decision to change roles
6. Public announcement of change
7. Confrontation of dissent
8. Resolution of dissent through reliance on internal adjustments to decision
9. Newly establish harmony

The first five steps of this pattern are internal steps. Although they may be shared with a close confidant, the “working” mechanisms in these steps must be completed in the mind of the transitioning individual. After the internal progression of this decision is processed, the final four public steps can be completed with little or no internal resistance.

The struggle with the decision to give up the role of the principal, and return to the classroom to teach at the university comes from letting go of one’s self-identity. The pressure of feeling other’s shifting perceptions of your identity, although possibly self-inflicted, is just as heavy. The idea to transition positions may take months or years, many of these without clearly articulating a self-dialogue, not to mention discussing the idea with anyone else. The realization that one has accomplished all that they wanted to as a principal and the search for “something more” is not a quick or easy process. Unfortunately, it may not be possible to accomplish everything you want to as a principal, yet the mind is seeking a different challenge. Early steps toward the deciding to pursue academia may be countered by corresponding needs in the one’s school. Overcoming this syndrome requires letting go of a “god complex” that can consume a principal with the responsibility of their school.

In recognizing one’s limits, a sense of release can replace the burden of a delusion of grandeur. When truly enjoyed, the work of a principal can be difficult to let go of, along with the professional-identity that comes with it. It is generally not a one-time decision, rather it is a cyclical struggle that ebbs and flows with anxiety at the thought of walking away from what had long been one’s professional goal. When the internal decision process has established that one is absolutely certain they want to pursue the challenge and adventure of academia, they are prepared for the public announcement of the decision to family, friends, and their school. If one is not confident of their decision, the initial reactions toward this announcement may cause severe self-doubt.

One can never know with certainty the perceptions held of them by their loved ones. It may be assumed that to their children they are “Mom” or “Dad,” yet in the eyes of their child they may also carry the role of “principal.” Unbeknownst to that principal, their loved ones may be very proud of what they do for a living, considering it a “bragging point” within their social circle. A principal is an authority role that all school children understand, and working in that role may certainly impress many children. One transitioning principal was actually told by her son, “But I like saying my mom is a principal,” as if he was ashamed of saying, “My mom is a professor.” This would have been a devastating blow to that principal, had she not moved through the stage of anticipating other’s reaction to her decision. Countering with an explanation of her goals and dreams, and asking him to empathize with her desires quickly changed the son’s attitude to one of support. Perhaps his friends had been impressed that his mother was a professor, or perhaps he realized she had the right to pursue her own happiness; nonetheless, he embraced the idea of a content mother, even at the cost of a family income reduced by half.

The struggle with self-identity is a step in personal growth that is worth its conflict. A human’s worth is more than what they do for a living or how much they earn. By letting go of a position perceived by many as powerful, and embracing the lifestyle of the “privileged poverty,” one has the opportunity to find themselves as a whole person once again. With

adequate time to confront any inequalities between one's professional identity and one's personal identity, it is possible to overcome fear of being perceived as less than what we are.

As we have witnessed thus far, the transition from practitioner to professor can be a struggle. The new professor not only struggles with understanding the role and expectations of their position and understanding the changes within their own identities, but they also struggle with the culture of their new environments.

Cultural Struggle

Suffice it to say that university life is different from that of K-12 institutions. This difference is evident to the new faculty member when they first step foot onto the college. In order to better understand the struggles that may face the new faculty member in the process of transitioning from practitioner to professor, let's hear from a voice of experience.

Dr. Jackson's Experience

My first introduction to campus culture and the politics of higher education came during a session embedded in the new faculty orientation schedule-it was a closed door, "anything goes" discussion with the union representatives. New faculty hesitantly asked tentative questions which were quickly answered by the union president and committee members followed by a dialogue of issues and grievances that continued to plague administrative/faculty relations. I quickly surmised that relations were deteriorating by the week, if not the hour and minute, and resolved not to become embroiled in the turmoil.

While all full-time tenure track professors were entitled to an office or at least a space, I was bemused to learn that no one was really in charge of assigning space. Offices vacated by non-renewed or retired professors were quickly taken over through squatter's rights or the deeding of the space through a benevolent benefactor with inside knowledge of space availability.

Being in charge of a growing program, I applied my entrepreneurship abilities and techniques, learned in a for-profit, private college, to build up enrollments by recruiting students. I met with numerous admissions representatives and counselors, convinced students to abandon the general humanities programs to enroll in my career focused courses. My success in improving enrollments and pushing needed changes through the curriculum committee and senate in one year resulted in comments in my evaluation noting a too aggressive style and the need to become "more sensitive" to the college's culture. Being renewed for another year also left a bitter sweet recollection of doing too good a job in the eyes of the retention committee. "Where had I gone wrong?" I asked myself, understanding that the tenants of leadership also meant taking risks, but not here, at least not too quickly or with too much energy. The lethargy of academia required a slower pace than I was used to in the world of "do it now" as a practitioner.

I quickly came to realize that although new faculty members were allowed to think, it would be inexcusable if those thoughts were expressed in an open forum. Becoming as invisible as possible in all interactions with tenure faculty became a primary goal of survival in the college community. This was not an easy task having been in a leadership role for over twenty years, but I realized that the administration supported the culture of new faculty intimidation by doing nothing to change it.

Probably the most daunting issue is that of re-appointment and tenure. Compiling voluminous portfolios for submission to the critical eyes of deans, provost, vice-presidents of academics, committees and ultimately, the president, is de-humanizing. As a thirty year plus professional educator, this is a process that can only be described as the deadliest and most treacherous climb up the higher education Mount Everest. I had previously thought that the hurdles imposed by the dissertation committee were perilous. I was wrong.

University culture continues to hold many surprises and contradictions. Trying to understand the "hidden curriculum" of that culture has been an on-going struggle between my professional self and my faculty self. I am developing a new identity aligned to the nuances

of the professoriate, hoping that I don't lose sight of why I entered these hallowed walls in the first place. Hopefully, the passion for teaching will lead me to all other possibilities as I explore and experience a new professional arena.

As evidenced above, the cultural aspects of university life can often be intimidating for the new faculty member. Dilemmas and challenges may abound for the new faculty members. Balancing teaching, research, and service while gaining an understanding of the political power structure within the university may seem daunting. However, although the transition from practitioner to professor may prove to be a struggle, there are the rewards of the position that are great. We may learn from the past in order to create a better future. To this end, the authors present the Struggle for the Future in an attempt to offer advice and recommendations for creating a smoother process for those involved with the transition.

Struggle for the Future

Certainly, our experiences and the research give us a blueprint as to how to assist new faculty in order that they may have a smoother transition than many of us have had. It is strongly suggested that schools of education, as well as professional organizations such as National Council for Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) and University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) provide training for department chairs as to the needs of those entering the profession. Chairs may assist the development of new faculty in many ways, including emotional support, financial resources, and networking opportunities.

In addition, the university must support a systemic, systematic, and coherent mentoring process. It is difficult to navigate the culture and politics of the university setting, and providing a university mentor will help the new faculty member avoid some of the potential pitfalls that may occur early on in one's academic career.

It is incumbent upon us, who have now been through the first few years of the professoriate and learned how to navigate the culture of the university, including expectations for teaching, research, and service, to pave a smoother road for those coming to the profession. Recommendations for making a smoother transition include: providing training for department chairs, mentoring new full-time faculty, mentoring adjunct faculty, keeping ourselves professionally current, and participation in ongoing networking.

Recommendations for the Future

Providing Training for Department Chairs. What types of assistance do new professors of educational administration need? We need to be proactive in the larger discussion with our department chairs. While those coming to leadership positions most likely have years of practitioner experience, the department chair needs to vociferously protect their time and not expect new faculty to take on additional leadership roles, such as chairing search committees, developing new curriculum, etc. There also needs to be support for the experience that the practitioner is bringing to the role and its value in providing real-life experiences and knowledge to future school leaders.

Mentoring New Full-time Faculty. Those of us who have experienced the first few years of the professoriate can further enhance our personal growth and that of our profession by serving as mentors to newer faculty. Research clearly shows that mentors also benefit from the mentoring relationship. They gain satisfaction from assisting new colleagues, improve their own managerial skills, and gain additional stimulation or insight from bright and creative new faculty members (Reich, 1986). Who better than the faculty who have recently shared the experience, to serve as mentors and assist others in avoiding unnecessary challenges?

Mentoring Adjunct Faculty: When we are working with practitioners who are adjuncts, we need to ensure that they understand the implications of teaching, research, and service expectations of the university. We need to actively invite them to be a part of our professional organizations and research agendas.

Keeping Ourselves Professionally Current: In order to best serve our students and communities, we must be active in the K-12 educational system. Our research agendas and teaching must include an agenda that assists with the transformation of the current system and promotes student learning and teacher growth. Collaborative research agendas with districts as well as other universities will further our own growth as well as add to the profession as a whole.

Ongoing Networking is Imperative: Participation in state and national organizations, and cultivating and nurturing relationships both within and outside of the university are essential for the well being and growth of all within the professoriate. Joining and actively participating in state and national organizations can help with assimilation and success in the organizational culture as you build and cultivate meaningful relationships. There is strength in numbers, and it is important to know that we are not alone in the pursuit of our endeavors.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to discuss the transition process for those who are making the move from practitioner to professor. It is hoped that the paper will stimulate a dialogue surrounding this transition and help to inspire (those with the power to make a change) a smoothing of that process.

Although the struggle that comes with the transition can, at times, appear overwhelming, there are many rewards that make the life of academia desirable. The new professor is entering a world that is unfamiliar and vastly different from the K-12 environment from which they came. As stark as these adjustments seem, this transition conjures up an earlier phase of their professional journey, a time when the world of school administration seemed far removed from the rhythms of the classroom. The projects, deadlines, board meetings, budget reports, classroom observations – all of it quite different from the lesson planning and instruction they had grown so accustomed to. They struggled with that new role as well, and with time they know that the rhythms of the university will become familiar. Until then, it is the struggle that consumes them.

The attempt to balance the struggle with the role, the struggle with self, the cultural struggle, and the struggle for the future can often be daunting, but there is no doubt that we can make a difference in alleviating this struggle for those transitioning from practitioner to the professoriate, and it is our professional obligation to do so.

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