Stayin’ Alive: Professional renewal for mid-career faculty

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Our context:

- **SJSU is a large comprehensive campus**
  - In the heart of the Silicon Valley
  - 7 colleges; 25K+ students;
  - roughly 700 T/TT faculty; 50% age 50 or above

- **Teaching is important and challenging**
  - heavy teaching load (4–4)
  - very diverse student body
  - innovative pedagogies

- **Very resourceful and accomplished faculty**

- **Very challenging year**
  - furloughs, budget woes
Over half the nation’s higher education faculty are at mid-career or beyond

- They are tenured and fully promoted
- They have no more institutional “hurdles” to spur them on

Many are “vital”, “thriving” and very engaged, but others are “burned-out” and need some “renewal of the spirit” (Chang, 2006)
What the literature says:

- Key sources of mid-career faculty dissatisfaction:
  - Too little time for scholarship: difficulty staying current in their fields (Camblin & Steger, 2000)
  - Too little time for students: difficulty making time for students’ needs (Baldwin, 2000)
  - Too little authentic connection with the campus & its mission: Disconnectedness & domestication (Boyce, 1993, Clegg, 2003)
What the literature says (cont’d):

Key sources of mid-career faculty satisfaction:

- Opportunities to take on new challenges (in teaching, in scholarship, in service)
- Flexibility and balance (both at work, and between work and home)
- Fulfilling and sustained professional relationships (with colleagues on campus and beyond)
What experiences distinguish “vital” from “stagnant” mid-career faculty?

What do they see as sources of satisfaction or frustration about their work-lives?

What professional renewal opportunities would better enable them to “thrive”?
Our theoretical framework:

- Erikson’s stage of “generativity” vs. “stagnation” (1964/1993)

  - Generative individuals see themselves as productive, guiding the next generation, making meaningful contributions.

  - Stagnant individuals see themselves as stalled and irrelevant; they have difficulty defining or pursuing goals.
Our theoretical framework (cont’d):

- Carol Dweck’s notion of “growth” vs. “fixed” mindset (2006)
  
  ◦ Individuals with a “growth” mindset see effort as the key to success; they see failures as learning experiences.
  
  ◦ Individuals with “fixed” mindsets are easily deterred and discouraged, and disengaged.
Our theoretical framework (cont’d):

“Facilitative environments” that promote “generativity” and “growth” mindsets (Widick, Parker & Knefelkamp, 1978):

- Opportunities to experiment with new and varied roles
- Choices that may lead to meaningful achievement
- Time for reflection and retrospection
What permits faculty to feel “vital”:

- Theme 1: “If a man does not know what port he is steering for, no wind is favorable.” (Seneca)
  - Vital faculty...
- can articulate explicit and personally meaningful professional goals
- perceive that their work enables them to make an important contribution (to students, to faculty colleagues, to scholarly/professional community...)
- Sample quotes: “found my passion”; “gaining traction every day”; “some days I feel like I know where I’m going!”
What permits faculty to feel “vital”

- Theme 2: “Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.” (Seneca)

Vital faculty …

- describe how they “made their own luck”:
  - What goes in to opportunity? (problem, people..)
  - What goes in to preparation? (expertise, effort, intentionally applied, interest)
- monitor themselves (know their “canaries in the coal mine)
- can be frustrated by colleagues who flounder and stagnate
What permits faculty to feel “vital”

- Theme 3: “It is not because things are difficult that we do not dare, it is because we do not dare that things are difficult.” (more Seneca)

Vital faculty…

- have a particular disposition toward risk and challenge – the “growth” mindset; drawn to a level of challenge that feels comfortable to them

- see value in “productive failures” and other forms of constructive criticism

- balance “private” and “public” practicing
Professional development retreat:

- SJSU competed successfully for an ACE–Sloan Faculty Career Flexibility Award
  - Grant initiatives address the entire faculty career cycle, from recruitment to retirement; mid-career program is one key part of the workscope
  - See work–life balance issues as an integral part of professional growth and renewal
  - Reframe the issue – we have a fairly toothless “post-tenure review” process: move away from evaluation *per se* and towards reflection and intentional planning
  - Build on existing structures; reinforce partnerships across campus – facilitates sustainability of grant–funded initiatives
Post-tenure Faculty Professional Renewal Program

- **Participants:**
  - 15–25 tenured full professors per cohort
  - Drawn from across the campus

- **Structure:**
  - Pre-retreat group meeting (1 hour, late March)
  - Retreat (full day, off-campus, early April)
  - First follow-up (1 hour, mid May)
  - Second follow-up (30–60 minutes, September)
Pre-retreat meeting/homework:

Participants meet briefly in half-cohorts to go over the logistics and expectations of the program.

Participants asked to read, and write to prompts about two books:

Carol Dweck’s *Mindset*

Tom Rath’s *Strengthfinder*

Howard Gardner’s *Five Minds for the Future*

Goal: to get faculty to reflect on their professional trajectory and to prime the pump for a day of collegial conversation and planning.
At the retreat itself:

- Discussion of homework, satisfactions, impediments
  - Establishing common ground and unique experiences
- Self-select into groups for in-depth conversation
  - Four-part matrix: teaching, scholarship, service and work–life balance
- Reflection: As our day draws to a close, please...
  - discuss one or two insights you have gleaned about yourself and/or ways you can support your own personal or professional renewal.
  - identify and elaborate upon one or two specific professional goals that you plan to pursue during the year following the retreat.
  - identify the resources or skills you feel you need to acquire to achieve that/those goals.
  - enumerate specific activities you will undertake along with a timeline.
- Reflections returned to faculty a week before follow-up meetings
A powerful process – participants felt significant impact

- Delighted to (re)connect and share with colleagues
- Very appreciative of chance to focus on themselves and their own needs
- Some felt the impact immediately, even before the retreat, as they read their books and wrote their homework; some realized the impact a week or more after the retreat
- Appreciated the follow-up as it made them continue to think about the issues they raised at the retreat
- Many kinds of frustration surfaced (primarily with the institution) – (some old wounds, some new ones)
Next steps:

- Working with our Center for Faculty Development and Support to sustain and extend this model of professional growth and renewal:
  - Consider replacing our “Teacher Scholar” year-long residency model (more “bang” for our “buck”?)
  - Consider adapting a more limited version of this model for our pre-tenure faculty (piloted a “Beyond the Tabs” half-day retreat this Spring)
Stayin’ Alive!!