

# **Stayin' Alive: Professional renewal for mid-career faculty**

**Amy Strage and Joan Merdinger  
San Jose State University, San Jose, CA**

# 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

# The Problem:

- ▶ 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)

# Our research questions:

- ▶ 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 & Knepfelkamp, 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

# First and second 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 come 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!!

