

Transitioning from University to Home

Success

The two of us became fast friends. Fellow grad students, both dedicated to our teaching and research in science education at Midwestern U. Each leaving our alma mater feeling like we were ready to become the best of faculty no matter where the job market took us. Now a year later, where are we? And, what roads have we traveled?

As for me, I can't describe all of the emotions that went through my mind when I finished teaching my last class of the year in May. I had done it! I had finished my first year as a professor at State U. However, the year could be described as tumultuous at best. A time of personal and professional change. I began with a lot of enthusiasm for everything. Even cleaning out the old adjunct office that was to become my new home was exciting. I slowly became accustomed to making decisions about what was important and what was considered trivial. Time management continued to be a challenge, with an unconscious emphasis on teaching, knowing that it is best to achieve a balance between teaching, research, and service. Balancing work and family also became important as my new position became more time-consuming.

Meanwhile, my colleague took on her own journey. So much happened during the past 15 months. After receiving her degree, she moved to Connecticut, got married, and then had her first child. She writes, "My role changed as I went through these different stages- from a doctoral student to a wife and a mother. I was not well prepared for all these changes, and it took me quite a while to get adapted to these new roles. It has been fun, joyful, and meanwhile overwhelming". Each of us experienced the success of getting that hard-earned degree, and achieved other successes as well. Whether in the classroom, or at home as a new wife and mother, success was evident, but with a few concerns about our newly emerging careers.

Vexation

For my colleague, getting back into the job market after spending some time off to raise a family was difficult. She writes,

"A few months ago, I started thinking about getting back to the job market. I only looked for the openings in my state of abode and adjacent states within driving distance so that our family could stay together if I was successful in my job search. There weren't many openings. I did get a few interview invitations, but none fit well. It has been difficult and frustrating during the job search process over the past few months. What have been some possible barriers that I needed to overcome to successfully land a job in the academic field? Was it my blank record on my vitae during the past year? Or was it my novice interview skills? Or could it be my lack of K-12 school teaching experiences in the States? After being away from any science education professional work for more than a year, I have been feeling isolated from the academic field, and do not know where to turn to get help. How many young science educators are out there experiencing the same vexation as mine? Our national organizations, such as NARST, have been playing a small role in mentoring and helping the junior faculty to survive the first few years of their new career while going through the stressful and nerve-wrecking tenure process. Could our

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national organizations play the same role in helping the young science educators who are passionate about science teaching and learning, but cannot find a place that is a good fit?"

As for myself, I was experiencing a different vexation. For instance, why is it that after investing several months in a search for a new faculty member, and welcoming that person into the 'fold', a department leaves you to find your own way? Left without the formal support of a mentor, I began to feel isolated. Is it the case that my chair feels I already know all I need to know or do not want help? The 'lone science educator.' Don't get me wrong; there were several faculty members in my department who stopped by for informal chats in the doorway of my office or over coffee at the student union. Many conversations around 'what used to be' or told as war-stories about overcoming teaching and research hurdles were common. It also became evident that there was quite a bit of confusion among the faculty about what a person with a Ph.D. in Science Education might do (besides teach). How can I adjust to these unfamiliar norms of this new institutional culture that is so different then the norms of my degree-granting institution?

The literature base is full of research of the importance of mentoring new faculty members. Mentorship of junior faculty can only help to improve the education of the teachers of science, as faculty are given guidance on best teaching practices, classroom resource and time management, etc. In response to the need for mentoring young professionals in the field of science education, our national organizations have encouraged panel discussions based on strategies that can help pre-tenure faculty members achieve success. These sessions have focused on topics such as time management, and balancing service, teaching and research, as well as publication and authorship. While providing a nice range of topics and a venue in which to network among peers in a non-threatening environment, the sessions are often too quick and are pervasive with anecdotes. Knowing that my professional needs will change over the course of my academic career, I am concerned that workshop sessions will only continue to focus on superficial topics related to first-year faculty. And what about the mentoring needs of science educators like my colleague?

"Although research on this subject is sorely needed, an effective way to increase the likelihood of retaining talented young faculty might be to provide excellent guidance by senior mentors. Even through relatively simple mechanisms, such as luncheons and workshops with senior faculty, junior faculty can obtain needed guidance on career goals, ethical behavior, housing and financial issues, collaborative relationships, grant-proposal writing, resource people, teaching policies, department politics, personal issues, and criteria for appointments, promotions, tenure, and salary." (National Academy of Science, 1997, p. 39)

Can our national organizations in science education take on a larger role in mentoring young science educators?