An Investigation of New Faculty Orientation and Support Among Mid-Sized Colleges and Universities

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Colleges and universities are encountering an interesting conundrum in today’s fast-paced and aging culture. Faculty demographics are changing radically as the professorate ages and “the first 77 million baby boomers turn 60 next January.” (Friedman and Moen 2005). The impact of this demographic shift was described by the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (2000), when they projected that by 2010, more than 30,000 full-time and part-time faculty will be replaced. In addition, the authors of the study projected the need for an additional 15,000 new hires to teach the roughly half million new students who will be entering higher education.

While higher education is being impacted by retirements, an AAUP study (Millman 2007) reported that 96 percent of institutions that responded to the survey said “recruiting faculty members was ‘very important’ and 89 percent called retaining faculty members a priority, only 19 percent of the institutions reported that retiring older professors was a high concern.” Are traditional higher education institutions planning adequately for the needs of new faculty members? There needs to be a planned effort to bring new faculty into academe effectively.

Current academic attention is being paid to programs for new faculty (Piercy, Giddings, Allen, Dixon, Meszaros and Joest 2005; Fogg and Wilson, 2005; Stevenson, Duran, Barrett and Colarulli 2005) but these efforts, similar to others in the past, focus on diverse faculty (Fogg and Wilson 2005; Piercy, et al. 2005) and on teaching (Stevenson, et al. 2005), rather than on the entire package of teaching, research and service for all new faculty members at four-year institutions. Other, less recent research has focused on faculty mentorship (Savage, Karp and Logue 2000) and community colleges (Welch 2002); still addressing only part of the puzzle at a time.

Perhaps the lack of academic attention to new faculty induction speaks to a sense that this is an administrative rather than a professional or scholarly issue. Harvard University’s new recommendations for recruiting, supporting, and retaining female faculty members, for example, appear to be almost entirely administrative (Fogg and Wilson 2005). The business world provides rich resources for us to learn more about successful induction programs. The American Society for Training and Development has dedicated volumes to successful orientation programs (Sharpe 2000), including focus monographs on new employee orientation (Westwood and Johnson 2005). According to Gustafson (2005, 36) “If it’s done well, a new-hire orientation should convey the company’s philosophy, purpose, and values. It should also lay a solid foundation for the employee’s success.” Orientation stresses the “why” behind a new employee’s role in the organization.

Therefore, if colleges and universities are to retain the faculty they worked hard to recruit in a competitive market, and if they are to help new faculty to become the most effective contributors at our colleges and universities the next step is clear. They must carefully study orientation to the professoriate and what to tell new faculty about their lives as teachers and scholars.

Purpose of the study
The purpose of this study is to review the current practices in orienting and supporting new faculty in mid-sized colleges and universities in the U.S. by examining three questions:

1. Of the one-hundred randomly-selected colleges and universities selected for the web site review, how many indicate they have orientation programs for new faculty?
2. Of those colleges and universities that have orientation programs for new faculty, what are the common elements or topics?
3. What other types of support are provided for new faculty by colleges and universities?

Sample and Methods
Midsized universities and colleges were identified as those institutions with enrollments of 3,000 to 10,000 students. 390 institutions meeting this criterion were identified, and a random sample of 100 institutions was selected for this study.

Data were collected through web site review. Although each web site presented differently, the general process for reviewing the web sites were (1) look through major web site links for identifiable information dedicated to new faculty or new faculty orientation, (2) identify if a faculty development center exists and search its web pages for support for new faculty, (3) use the search feature on the web site and search for the terms: “new faculty,” “faculty orientation,” “orientation” and follow links to relevant information as well as to additional areas that might contain relevant information.

Because this was an exploratory study, field notes were recorded and tentative categories were identified to capture the information as each institution’s web site was reviewed. Due to the constant evolution and refinement of the emerging data categories during the data collection, at the end of the data collection process the field notes from all institutions were re-coded using the final set of categories.

Results and Discussion
The first research question in this study explored how many of the web sites of the institutions in the sample indicated orientation programs for new faculty. If, as Boice found, “almost all the failures and miseries of…new hires [are] owed to misunderstandings about effective ways of working and socializing” (2000, p. 1), it is surprising that only 53 of the 100 institutional web sites reviewed indicated any reference to new orientation programs. The orientation programs indicated in these 53 institutions varied widely, ranging from a reference in meeting minutes for a proposed orientation program, to a multiple-day face-to-face orientation program. Of the 53 institutions 39 indicated a face-to-face orientation program making face-to-face programs the most common type of orientation activity. Of the 39 institutions providing face-to-face orientation sessions, 19 provided formal or informal agendas on the web sites.

Table 1. Results of Web Site Search for New Faculty Orientation Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial sample size</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to new faculty orientation activities</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides face-to-face new faculty orientation sessions</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides formal or informal face-to-face orientation session agenda on web site</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The second research question looked at the common elements of the new faculty orientation programs and the first element examined was the duration of these programs. Durations were provided for 25 of the 39 institutions and ranged from 1 hour to 3 days.

With such a wide range of durations there is likely an associated wide range of content provided so the 19 face-to-face orientation session agendas were analyzed to identify the topics covered in these orientation sessions. The most common topics identified were technology (19), student affairs presentations (9), research process and IRB (8), effective teaching strategies (8), HR law (7), and benefit enrollment (7) which were each represented in 36% or more of the orientation agendas found. The next most common topics (library overview and faculty as teachers) were found in only about one-fourth of the agenda).

What the researchers found striking was that five of the six most common orientation topics were policy-oriented or logistical in nature. By looking at the entire list of topics covered in these agendas [See link at bottom to table 2. Face-to-Face new Faculty Orientation Program Topics from Formal and Informal Agenda], it can be seen that the majority of the topics focused on policy, logistics, and presentations by departments. If, as other writers and researchers suggest, the successful new faculty experience is composed of working smarter not harder (Boice 2000), and includes effective teaching strategies, a supported research and writing agenda that relies on regular writing habits begun during the early days of employment, and service with an understanding of the institution’s culture and politics, overlaid with clear expectations for each of these areas (Boice 2000; Darley, Zanna and Roediger 2003; Schoenfeld and Magnan 1994), then these suggestions are at odds with the topics included in these orientation sessions. With a few exceptions (effective teaching strategies, faculty roles and responsibilities, lesson planning, and research—support available) these orientation topics appear to prepare new faculty to work at and become familiar with the policies of the institution, rather than orient and prepare new faculty for their roles as faculty members within “the sacred triad” (Schoenfeld and Magnan 1994, 28) of teaching, research, and service.

The third research question examined what other types of support are provided for new faculty members in addition to orientation. Thirty-four institutions indicated additional support for new faculty.

The most common new faculty support was faculty development centers which were identified at 20 of the 100 institutional web sites reviewed. The web sites indicated that these centers, available for new or existing faculty members, provide a range of support for new faculty members including instructional workshops on technology and topics related to teaching and advising. In several cases these faculty development centers also provide a meeting place for new and existing faculty to come together with the formal or informal creation of communities of practice.

This ability for new and existing faculty to come together has the potential to create tangible value in the form of increased knowledge and practice in the areas of teaching, research, and service as well as insight into the institutional politics, norms, and culture. Communities of practice may also create the intangible benefits of trust, innovation, and a sense of connectedness or belonging for the institution that are necessary for success (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder 2002, 15) and retention. This sense of connectedness can also be accomplished through mentoring, and 16 of the 100 institutions identified a mandatory or optional mentoring program for new faculty. On-going new faculty workshops through faculty development centers were also a commonly used support for new faculty.
Conclusions

The review of the web sites of 100 mid-sized colleges and universities revealed several key points. First, although several authors have written on the importance of orienting new faculty to the role of the faculty member, only slightly more than half of the institutions in this sample had any indication of an orientation program for new faculty. Second, the orientation programs identified contained primarily policy, legal, and informational content versus content related to the successful execution of the roles of new faculty as teachers, researchers, and contributors to service. Finally, only about one-third of the institutions offered support to new faculty outside an initial orientation program. These supports did include content related to teaching, research and service, and were available formally through on-going workshops, and informally through mentoring and networking.

This study offers important implications for colleges and universities. As the most experienced faculty in the current workforce retire and institutions compete to hire and retain new faculty members, new faculty orientation and other support activities will be critical. Yet this exploration of existing practices in a sample of mid-sized colleges and universities indicated a large gap between the current orientation practices of logistically orienting new faculty, and the real-life need to prepare them to be effective in the role of teacher, researcher and service supporter.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

There are several limitations to this study’s ability to investigate new faculty orientation and support. First, this exploratory study used web site review as its data gathering technique; consequently, the only data considered for this study were data publicly available on each institution’s web site. It is possible that new faculty orientation and support activities exist and were not reflected or fully described on these web sites. Second, this study focused on mid-sized institutions. It is possible that larger institutions, with larger faculty, staff, and resources, have practices in place not identified at these mid-sized institutions.

It is recommended that further research be conducted to identify in more detail the practices of new faculty orientation and support among colleges and universities so that effective practices can be shared across institutions. These effective practices can then help to prepare new faculty members as they begin or continue their journey as faculty members.

References


Gustafson, K. 2005. A better welcome mat: The secret to turning new hires into loyal employees lies in developing sophisticated orientation programs that go beyond a hello and a handshake. Training, 42 (6) 34-41.


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