

## Chapter 4

## THE CREATIVITY CONTRACT

The quality of scholarship is dependent, above all else, on the vitality of the faculty. Institutions that thrive understand the need to help faculty build on their own strengths and sustaining their creative energies throughout a lifetime. Henry David Thoreau captured the importance of renewal in comments about his decision to leave the reflective, introspective life at Walden. "I left the woods," he wrote, "for as good a reason as I went there . . . it seemed to me that I had several more lives to lead, and could not spare any more time for that one. It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route and make a beaten track for ourselves" (opening lines of the conclusion of Walden—should cite text. I only have Walden as part of an anthology).

Reward is essential. Yet, on many campuses, the work of the professoriate continues to be defined in single-dimensional terms. Faculty are often viewed or labeled, "researchers," or "teachers," as if professional commitments are narrow and unchanging. Such a restricted view of scholarship leads inevitably to plateaus of performance. To counter such stagnation, Lee Knefelkamp of the American Association of Higher Education suggests that career expectations should be broadened—and urges that faculty life be viewed through the metaphor of "seasons." "There is no rhythm that fits every single person, no order that can be predicted" (Liberal Education, 76 #3).

Underlying these shifting patterns, powerful social and developmental forces are at play. Like most adults, professors are subject to a "sequence of stable and transitional periods." As they get older, their lives at home and at work mature, and it flies in the face of all experience for colleges and universities to expect the same type of performance across a lifetime. As educator Roger G. Baldwin writes, "alternating periods of goal seeking and reassessment are common as

academics proceed through their careers. Higher education should acknowledge the changing character of these periods and help professors travel through them successfully" (1990:24).

Each stage in an academic career has special tasks to be accomplished, and each has distinctive dangers as well. The novice professor struggling to master new tasks and gain full entry into the academic world has to balance a different set of demands than the professor well along the tenure track, the established midcareer professor, or the late career professor facing retirement (Baldwin 1990:31-37; McKeachie).

Novice faculty, in today's marketplace, must often spend several years as "gypsies," moving from campus to campus on one-year or part-time appointments at the same time that they are trying to perfect their teaching skills and publish their first articles and books. Further, many young women find themselves under intense career pressure at precisely the time when they need to be raising young children—a situation that has been compounded by the trend toward longer post-doctorate work in many of the sciences (*Chronicle*).

Once settled down, faculty who have finally gained entry to a tenure track position often feel under great pressure to "make a name" through established channels of publication. But this is also a time when teaching requires considerable effort. And time is required to participate in institutional tasks, in committee work, for example. The danger here is stress and burnout. As Baldwin notes: "The press of fixed responsibilities leaves little time to stay broadly informed of developments in one's field or to plan for an uncertain future. . . . Keeping the demands of the early career manageable can prevent burnout and preserve fragile faculty morale" (1990:34).

Midcareer and late career professors march to different drummers. Faculty experience a peak in status and recognition, and demands for their service from outside their institution often grow. Wilbert J. McKeachie comments: "For the established senior professor, service on national committees, requests to write chapters in invited symposia, or invitations to deliver addresses may take time formerly devoted to research and teaching" (p. 14). For most faculty at this stage, the principal danger is becoming mired in a "career plateau." Late career professors, especially, need new professional challenges if they are to avoid the worst dangers of

disengagement—feeling isolated from disciplinary developments and feeling irrelevant to institutional concerns.

Finally, the life pattern of academic productivity may vary according to the intellectual or aesthetic effort in which a professor is engaged. Mathematicians and physicists, for example, are most productive in their younger years while historians and philosophers tend to be most productive later on. Einstein propounded his first theory of relativity at the age of 26, while Kant's seminal work *The Critique of Pure Reason* did not appear until he was 57 years old. Then, for the next nine years, there followed an outpouring of writings that revolutionized philosophical thought.

According to Clifford Geertz, this type of pattern is recognized, if not hallowed, in the humor of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. Historians here have been known to quip that the Institute is a nursery school for young mathematicians, while the mathematicians, in turn, have called the Institute a nursing home for historians (Geertz).

Recently, the New York Times presented graphs that showed relative change over lifetimes in the number of outstanding contributions, as judged by experts. (See Figure 1) Physicists, for example, make most of their contributions by age 35, with astronomers peaking about ten years later. In the arts, lyric poets hit peak creativity before age 30, while novelists matured somewhat later, reaching the height of their creative powers around age 45. It is particularly heartening to note, by the way, that in some fields, creativity that has declined surges again in late life.

Clearly, any system of faculty evaluation and reward must recognize these differing patterns of productivity, so far as age, career, and discipline are concerned. What's needed is a view of the career path that reflects flexible standards, and not the rigid, inflexible standards that are all too often used today. Specifically, we recommend that colleges and universities develop what might be called *creativity contracts*—an arrangement by which faculty members could define their professional goals for a three- to four-year period, shifting easily from one principal scholarly focus to another. Looking down the road, we can imagine the day when staying with

one dimension of scholarship—without a break—would be considered the exception, not the rule.

Maintaining one's productivity is clearly more than getting another research grant or being promoted to associate or full professor. There are times when teaching becomes too routine, when course content no longer feels fresh, and when interest in the students begins to lag. In this regard, Knefelkamp further suggests that we need to consider an ecology of academic life "based on an understanding of a system of rewards and incentives that is responsive to the great variety of contributions that the different seasons imply" (*Liberal Education*).

Underlying the shifting patterns of academic life are powerful social and developmental forces. Psychologist Daniel Levinson (cite) describes adulthood as having stable and transitional periods. "During the stable periods," he notes, "the adult pursues fairly clear goals. But periodically, the individual must reorder priorities, changing behavior in order to compensate for neglected dimensions of the self, unfulfilled ambitions, and newly acquired interests" (Baldwin and Blackburn). Other scholars describe the life pattern as an evolutionary process. After ambitions are firmly in place, adults tend to experience a series of successes and disappointments in pursuit of these goals. And with age and experience, goals often lose their driving quality and careers become static.

Eric Erickson, approaching life patterns from yet another perspective, described the middle years of adulthood as a time when "generativity" and "stagnation" are in competition. Generativity, he points out, is sparked by new priorities, a larger sense of caring, a desire to reach out, to share and belong. Stagnation, on the other hand, grows out of feelings of isolation, a belief that one's work has little meaning.

These varied descriptions of life cycles support the need for flexibility in academic life. It flies in the face of all experience for colleges and universities to expect a professor to engage in the same type of performance across an entire career. Each season presents special challenges and poses distinctive complexities as well. The novice instructor, for example, is expected to

master new skills and gain full entry into the academic world. Faculty who are awarded a tenure track position often feel under great pressure to "make a name" through established channels of publication. But this is also a time when teaching and advising require considerable effort and tenure professors also the greater expectations to participate in institutional tasks, in committee work, for example.

The danger for those in mid-career is stress and burnout. As Baldwin notes: "The press of fixed responsibilities leaves little time to stay broadly informed of developments in one's field or to plan for an uncertain future. . . . Keeping the demands of the early career manageable can prevent burnout and preserve fragile faculty morale" (1990:34).

Late career professors march to yet different drummers. Older faculty experience a peak in status and recognition, and demands for their service from outside their institution often grow. Wilbert J. McKeachie comments: "For the established senior professor, service on national committees, requests to write chapters in invited symposia, or invitations to deliver addresses may take time formerly devoted to research and teaching" (p. 14). For most faculty at this stage, especially those not nationally engaged, the principal danger is becoming mired in a "career plateau." Late career professors, especially, need new challenges if they are to avoid the worst hazards of disengagement—feeling isolated from disciplinary developments and irrelevant to institutional concerns. What is most certain, and must be more fully recognized, is that faculty in late career stages have considerable capacity for growth. They are in a prime time for integrative and applied scholarship. Their ability to bring more to teaching is also high (Havighurst, 1972; McKeachie, 1984).

Finally, there is strong evidence that the life pattern of productivity may vary according to the intellectual or aesthetic field in which a professor is engaged. Mathematicians and physicists, for example, are most productive in their younger years while historians and philosophers tend to be most productive later on. Einstein propounded his special theory of relativity at age twenty-six, while Kant's seminal work, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, did not appear until he was fifty-seven. Then, for the next nine years, there followed an outpouring of

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Recently, the *New York Times* presented graphs that showed the varying patterns of outstanding contributions over lifetimes. (See Figure 1) Physicists, for example, make most of their contributions by age 35, with astronomers peaking about ten years later. In the arts, lyric poets hit peak creativity before age 30, while novelists matured somewhat later, reaching the height of their creative powers around age 45. It is particularly heartening to note, by the way, that in some fields, creativity that has declined surges again in late life.

Clearly, higher education must encourage flexibility in academic careers. What we propose is that faculty evaluation not only be broadened, but that it be continuous and, above all, individualized, as well. Once again, diversity, not uniformity, is the key. If faculty are to build on their strengths and contribute constructively to their institutions, evaluation criteria must be tailored to individual talents as well as campus needs. And it is especially important that the criteria used reflect changing patterns of personal and professional life.

What's needed, we believe, is a view of the career path that reflects flexible standards. Specifically, we recommend that colleges and universities develop what might be called *creativity contracts*—an arrangement by which faculty members could define their professional goals for a three- to four-year period, shifting easily from one principal scholarly focus to another. We view such an arrangement as an important means by which faculty members can maintain an enthusiasm to scholarship while truly contributing to the intellectual community of which they are a part.

With the creativity contract arrangement available, we can imagine a faculty member who initially would devote most of his or her scholarship to specialized research, and then might turn to integrative questions taking time to read in other fields or write essays on the meaning of investigative work. Contrary to writing a textbook also might illustrate the point. Still later, a

contract might be drawn that would focus on field work, involving the professor in school consultation or survey as major advisor to a governmental body. Scholars could, of course, also use the creativity contract to design a new course, or spend time with a mentor on another campus. A career approach such as these, one in which faculty could be both productive and continuously renewed, should not only be permitted, but encouraged and, of course, rewarded.

The benefit of such flexibility was well documented in our recent survey of faculty. One professor at a research institution, added a comment to his questionnaire that provide insight in the need for the faculty career pattern to be both flexible and open. "A few years ago," he said "I felt much differently about my work and institution than I do now. I would have answered your questions on morale and a career change negatively then. My school gave me the time, room, and encouragement to move in new directions. In my case, I am now directing new writing programs campus-wide and introducing new concepts like computer-assisted instruction in writing and writing across the curriculum. I have, quite frankly, felt a sense of renewed purpose, energy and usefulness in my work. I hope that other institutions are as flexible and open to new ideas as mine."

What we are calling for may appear utopian but we believe it is attainable. The goal of the country contract is not to encourage an erratic pattern of activity; rather it is to sustain productivity and creatively across a lifetime. It is a means of acknowledging the diversity of faculty and, correspondingly, to assure more vital institutions. Indeed, looking down the road, we can imagine the day when staying with one dimension of scholarship—without a break—will come to be considered the exception, not the rule. Howard Bowen noted in his research on college and university faculty what this professor had learned so fully; namely, that "vitality is sustained by freedom, variety, and new experience" (p. 41).