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*Women and minorities who make unadaptive starts in the professoriate evidence a series of reliable turning points early in their career, typically within their first few semesters on campus. Origins of such career fault lines begin with deficits, notably in regard to preestablished mentoring and social networks. The simple nature of these turning points also implies strategies for preventing or reversing the disappointing and marginalizing beginnings so common for nontraditional new hires.*

## **Early Turning Points in Professorial Careers of Women and Minorities**

*Robert Boice*

Why has a growing chorus of dissatisfaction and documentation failed to improve the lot of women and minorities in the professoriate (Blum, 1991)? Appropriately, we place much of the blame on sexism and racism: academe has provided a chilly climate for these nontraditional faculty members (Rothblum, 1988). But we could also fault ourselves for not yet identifying the practical interventions most likely to help women and minorities fare better in professorial careers.

My own efforts with marginalized professors aim more at the second issue, of finding ways to hasten the reversal of tradition. I base this chapter on the assumption that we need to know more about where careers of nontraditional faculty go off track and how to prevent derailments. Specifically, I present three steps of inquiry that: (1) locate the reliable and common turning points of women and minorities in troubled careers; (2) show how quickly and needlessly crucial events occur for these marginalized newcomers; and (3) suggest the potential ease and economy of preventing these negative turning points.

To map the career patterns of nontraditional and traditional newcomers (that is, to fix the sequence of turning points associated with lasting patterns of success or marginalization), I rely, first of all, on a long-term, reflective strategy from cognitive science for recovering reliable memories of turning points in careers. As I use this procedure, it immerses recent hires in repeated sessions of recall over periods of at least a year. In contrast, other studies of faculty members draw career maps from single, spontaneous recollections of events that determined directions. Second, I focus on faculty careers during what biologists might call the primary critical period, the brief window of time during which newcomers either imprint on appropriate social models or else face a peripheral and perilous existence. And, finally, I draw on observations of a group of exemplary women and minorities to gain insights about what can help their counterparts fare better in academe (Boice, in press). As a rule, research on women and minorities tells us too little about success.

### **Three Study Questions**

I began my investigation of career turning points by asking whether clear negative marker events occur predictably for faculty and, if so, when. I then asked whether career turning points differed noticeably for women and minority faculty and, finally, whether the career experiences of highly successful women and minority faculty would give insights as to how negative turning points could be prevented. In what follows, I describe the research procedure and report on the patterns I observed.

**When Do Negative Turning Points Occur?** Customarily, we look on faculty careers in terms of developmental stages that last as long as, say, the six or seven years leading to tenure decisions. From these global accountings previous researchers have drawn conclusions about what might have facilitated careers, usually in terms of missed opportunities for resources and rewards throughout professorial lives (Blackburn and Havighurst, 1979). But these inquiries tell us little about early experiences that might set lasting patterns of marginalization. There is but a single precedent based on thoroughgoing research: we already know that initial habits and successes in writing productivity are difficult to reverse (Creswell, 1985).

By the time I began my own efforts at career mapping I had seen signs of early turning points in a decade of research with new faculty (Boice, 1992b). And I had happened onto Perkins's (1981) methodology for retrospective thinking aloud protocols. I modified his strategies (which he uses for uncovering key thoughts and

feelings that accompanied creative acts) into a series of patiently conducted reconstructions of points-of-no-returns in careers. Briefly, I trained individuals to recall and describe pivotal events since coming to campus; subjects carried on a train-of-thought narrative as I listened, took notes, and occasionally asked for clarification or summarization. As we carried out the recollections in repeated sessions during which all accounts began again from scratch, I was able to elicit increasingly refined and reliable reconstructions of central events in what individual participants and I came to agree were the most crucial of turning points. I present details of this methodology elsewhere (Boice, in press).

With a minimum of direction and a lot of practice, the participants in these studies learned to move past superficial explanations of career event to what Perkins calls "reporting." The following excerpts from one new faculty member illustrate the difference between explaining and reporting:

*[Explaining]:* I reacted defensively because there was no way to be ready for the sexism that I encountered here. The jokes about my pregnancy showed me that my colleagues were not ready to deal with women's issues.

*[Reporting]:* I can recall the moment, maybe a point of no return, when I felt helpless here. . . that I would never be accepted by the men in my department. I cheerfully and spontaneously joined a few of them for lunch, by just asking if I could join them. I soon felt unwelcome. I suspected that I had interrupted something that they didn't want to continue in my presence. I thought to myself: "This feels like being a graduate student. I'm not their equal. I'm not really welcome. This is how it's going to be here. . . with you, the little girl, on the outside looking in."

With repeated practice at listing the most crucial of career events that shaped their destiny as fledgling professors, all these subjects spontaneously trimmed their lists to three, four, or five turning points over the yearlong course of our investigations. My directions to participants were limited to reminders about the value of minimizing interpretations and of sticking to events with the greatest likely influence on their careers.

The first and most essential finding of my inquiries with retrospective thinking aloud protocols was that turning points came with surprising--often devastating--speed. All but a few new faculty members eventually cited experiences during their initial semesters that promised to have lasting influences on their careers.

Even where I tracked new faculty into their sixth and seventh years with once-a-semester interviews, the reliability of listing the same early turning points held fast. So did reports of anger over other discouraging beginnings. That is, while events beyond the second year often exacerbated poor beginnings, they rarely changed already established directions. Points of *no* return not only appeared rapidly but they also seemed to occur irreversibly.

To provide another check for the consistency of early turning points reported by faculty, I studied midcareer faculty with the same retrospective thinking aloud procedure with repeated sessions of recall and listing of crucial events (Boice, 1992a). Once experienced at recalling thoughts and feelings, the most disillusioned of mid career faculty (N = 33) listed a reliably similar set of negative experiences and interpretations that had occurred during their first years on campus. Their experiences fell into broad categories: (1) collegial isolation, (2) collegial disapproval, (3) self-doubts about competence and (4) feeling victimized and suspicious. The most telling of turning points seen from the vantage of midcareer virtually duplicated the timing of similar experiences for the samples of unadapted new faculty. Evidently, turning points do happen early on and then endure.

**Do Events Surrounding Points-of-No-Return Distinguish Women and Minorities from White Men?** When I began to report on the maps of the early careers of new faculty in colloquia and publications, some listeners and readers, all of them men, made a similar supposition. They imagined that I had depicted a degree of collegial isolation, lack of resources, and slow progress in domains such as teaching where men were no less disadvantaged than women and minorities. My colleagues were probably mistaken. The incidence of subtle discriminations, of lesser social supports from sources such as chairpeople, and of stresses and unmet expectations was apparently greater for women and minorities than for White males in these samples.

To answer this question even more systematically, I undertook a series of comparative inquiries beginning with traditional methods; at first, I relied on repeated interviews about the experiences and plans of new faculty (N = 42 women, including 7 of color; 42 White men plus 4 of color) coping with two large campuses, one a comprehensive and one a research university (Boice, in press). Interviews usually continued for six successive semesters. Women's responses stood out on many dimensions: First, they, far more than their male counterparts, valued teaching but were more put off by negative experiences as teachers (for example, seeing colleagues as disinterested in discussing teaching; sensing that students would only accept them if they were entertainers; realizing that male students treated them less generously than they would male professors). Second, they, more than White men as new faculty, sought out collegiality, especially friendship, but ended with far fewer opportunities for useful mentoring or collaboration in research or teaching. Perhaps women are less comfortable with the hierarchical nature of mentoring than men are (M. Svinicki, personal communication, Aug. 1992). And third, they, compared to males, reported more instances of illness and of debilitating anxiety while teaching or writing.

But there were disturbing confounds in these inquiries. Because women were far more disclosive in these somewhat open-ended interviews, their contribution to the sample of experiences more than doubled the input of men. The result probably distorted accounts of new faculty lives. Moreover, even with what I had learned about women as new faculty, the correctives for their complaints remained somewhat vague. For example, it was obvious that women were less tied into the most important kinds of support networks. But how, beyond offering them participation in the same mentoring programs as men (Boice, 1992b), could we overcome this deficit? To answer this question, I moved to another inquiry.

In a more-involving probe with the same cohorts of newcomers, I used a detailed assessment device, the New Faculty Faring Index (NFFI; Boice, in press). The NFFI evaluates progress of new faculty over four general categories: (1) immersion in career and campus activity (for example, interacting with students outside classrooms and participating in campus activities such as choral groups); (2) regimented habits of working (for instance, regularly spending at least two hours a week on scholarly writing); (3) self-management (for example, evidencing optimism on a standardized analysis of spoken or written "discourse"); and (4) social management (for instance, spending as much time at collegial networking, on and off campus, as at writing, and arranging adaptive mentoring that includes support, advice, and networking).

The NFFI requires direct observations by faculty development practitioners acting as classroom and office visitors, as interviewers of chairpeople and other senior colleagues, and as analysts of archival materials (such as manuscripts completed, student evaluations of courses, and renewal decision reports). One advantage of this scrutiny lies in the fact that new faculty themselves were not always the best judges of how they were progressing. Through these multiple sources, I found that:

Women evidenced a far higher incidence of blocking at writing and of procrastinating in general  
 Minorities were especially likely to be perceived as separatists who spurned mentorship and sponsorship  
 advances from senior colleagues

Both women and minorities failed more generally to take advantage of opportunities to enlist undergraduates  
 as research assistants or colleagues as collaborators

Both of these marginalized groups were more often seen by colleagues as identifying too closely with  
 teaching and students, to an extent that would undermine their careers as researchers and scholars.

These NFFI results provide the first systematic ratings of new faculty faring, indices that in fact predict survival and satisfaction for new hires. My own ongoing reanalyses of samples of new faculty whom I have tracked for years (Boice, 1992b) corroborate the link between high scores on the NFFI and other indexes of success such as retention, promotion, and career satisfaction. Moreover, each of the twenty rating items of the NFFI suggests remedies for low scorers. Finally, the NFFI, by evidencing positive connections between all its dimensions, reminds us that teaching does not occur in a vacuum: as a rule, new faculty who fared poorly across the measures of teaching (for example, student evaluations, classroom comfort, involvement with students) performed just as problematically in areas such as collegiality and scholarly productivity.

On the other hand, the NFFI falls short of specifying economical correctives because it pictures shortcomings for women and minorities in a way that suggests almost too many remedies for practical implementation. Thus I found myself looking for a way to simplify the picture.

The next step of investigation relied again on data from the retrospective thinking aloud protocols, this time focusing on samples of notably unadapted new hires ( $N = 21$ ). The results revealed the following sequence of crucial experiences for the most unadapted of White men as new faculty: (1) feeling deceived about resources for research during hiring; (2) realizing that the busyness of teaching would discourage publishing and career goals; and (3) giving up on colleagues as potentially fair. For unadapted women, the composite list of turning points differs somewhat. The crucial experiences for unadapted women include: (1) feeling treated as second-class citizens during recruitment; (2) feeling neglected and unsupported by colleagues; (3) discovering that students demand pandering; and (4) deciding that the work is too stressful to be worthwhile. And, finally, the sequence of crucial events for minority women looks like this: (1) discovering that loneliness is complicated by the prospect of never feeling a part of a department and campus; (2) feeling overwhelmed with fears of failure and with helplessness about remedying personal shortcomings such as language problems; and (3) deciding to deal with students and colleagues by becoming tough and quiet.

In some ways the pattern of early failure is similar across all three groups. Alienation occurred quickly, usually within the first semester or two. Decisions to give up on careers, to just muddle along or to leave campus, came shortly thereafter. In other ways, though, the pattern does distinguish women and minorities from White males. Unadapted men felt put off and forced to withdraw from competition by a combination of not getting the resources they saw as necessary to compete as researchers, by perceiving teaching as a distraction that kept them from publishing as much as they had hoped, and by having colleagues who seemed to treat them unfairly.

Women as new and unadapted faculty, in contrast, reported being derailed more by personal events for which they often felt responsibility: by social slights, by collegial isolation, by rejections from students, and by the stresses of marginalization. Thus, the issues for men and women fit predictable patterns, with the former caring mostly about competition and fairness, and the latter caring more about cooperation and affiliation. In contrast, the profile of early career events for unadapted minority women heightens the contrast with White men, as though the pattern had been exposed to more intense lighting. These women not only felt isolated and likely to fail; their decision to react with toughness suggests that they could see no hope of improvement or flourishing in academic careers.

This identification of early turning points suggests practical, economical ways of preventing them and the time for doing so. Moreover, these findings suggest that crucial events generally differ for men and women. An example of an early turning point for women illustrates a timely intervention: once we appreciate the special pressures experienced by women in response to student demands for entertainment and easy grading, we could begin to shape our instructional development programs for new faculty to deal with this and other immediate needs (as opposed to more typical emphases such as encouraging newcomers to deemphasize lecturing in favor of discussions). If we cannot help our new hires find classroom comfort and acceptance, plans to train them in cooperative learning strategies may be idealistic.

**What Can Early Career Maps of Exemplary Women and Minorities Tell Us?** We may be able to learn the most about how to prevent negative turning points by studying the protocols of exemplary new faculty. A glance at the modal pattern of crucial events for thirty-one new faculty labeled as quick starters (Boice, 1992c) shows why. For these new faculty (whose chairpeople judged them clear successes in terms of teaching, writing, and collegiality), gender or race made little difference in first impressions. The earliest crucial event was almost always occasioned by coming to campus with a social network and with mentoring already in place. The actual turning point came when these new hires recognized that success on campus had been essentially prearranged: these new hires, because of prior social connections and memberships in extended groups of researchers with similar interests and academic heritages, were assured collaborations and friendships on their new campuses as a matter of course. This realization was not, however, something publicly discussed or apparent to less-advantaged newcomers.

Beyond this first turning point for exemplars, though, success patterns again reflected predictable gender differences. Women, on the one hand, were more affected by affiliative experiences—for example, finding comfort with teaching and acceptance from students led them to believe that they had chosen the right careers. And they, more than exemplary males, reported the conscious decision to treat problems as useful challenges (for example, unsophisticated undergraduates were seen as individuals who would respond with special gratitude to opportunities for apprenticeships with their professors; fatigue was seen as a reminder to make time for exercise). Men, as before, experienced events connected with competitive success as pivotal: their second turning point was a matter of gaining acceptance for an important grant or manuscript that provided them status and resources. Their third crucial experience was the opportunity to become consultants or committee members in ventures that took them away from campus and gave them financial security and prestige. Here, at least, the Old Boy network continued to work along traditional lines.

There are, I believe, two main messages in these chartings of quick starters. One reinforces the notion that negative turning points can be prevented. Nothing, evidently, will help ensure a strong start more than prearranged networks of support and mentoring. Yet few campuses have implemented programs to provide such networks, despite their practicality, low cost, and desirability. The second point is that we would have to stretch our resources very little to provide more consistently positive experiences during the hiring process. In my ongoing studies of women and minorities who leave academe for other careers, I find repeated confirmation of this observation. For instance, once they see the comparatively humane and supportive initiations offered in corporate settings, women and minorities marvel that they originally opted for the social Darwinism of academe.

### **Obstacles and Implications**

What will keep us from acting to prevent the rapid and irreversible marginalization depicted here? One thing may be the seeming sexism and racism in traditional demands for faring well in the professoriate. I find that women and minorities understandably wonder about the worth of mimicking White male values such as competitive publishing. They ask, "Wouldn't it make more sense to count presentations of research at conferences that allow for face-to-face interaction as much as publication in exclusionary and male-dominated journals?"

A second obstacle is the great fly wheel of tradition. Exum (1983), as a Black and a gay, saw that academe, because it aims for societal and not economic goals, moves very slowly and conservatively. He recognized that senior White men who set policies see themselves as enlightened protectors of intellectual standards, and are therefore likely to respond indignantly to suggestions that they move too slowly in recruiting and retaining women and minorities into optimal careers.

The third obstacle is the habit of not looking in the right places for interventions, of not considering that we could redirect the course of many faculty careers away from marginalization with but a few civil and inexpensive changes. We should, in my view, be most optimistic about prospects of overcoming inertia in this dimension given its apparent simplicity.

In the end, though, preventing the early turning points that derail the careers of our nontraditional newcomers will be neither simple nor inexpensive. Making the environment to which women and minorities adjust healthier and fairer could necessitate changing the academy itself. It would mean building supports, no matter how uncomplicated in themselves, where almost anyone who qualifies for entry into the professoriate would likely thrive. The result would be a democratization that could challenge the most cherished of traditions: above all else, academe values demonstrations of brilliance that occur with little obvious effort or assistance. The real question may concern our willingness to pay the price for equality of opportunity—that is, a tempered definition of excellence, one less tied to unaided demonstrations of individual brilliance and to elitist practices that disable professors who need affiliation and coaching to succeed.

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