

# **A Professional Life Cycle Perspective on Coaching College Teachers**

**Terry Mullins, Ph.D.**

Bryan School of Business and Economics  
University of North Carolina Greensboro

**M. Gale Blalock, Ph.D.**

Schroeder Family School of Business Administration  
University of Evansville

## **Abstract**

College and university administrators, primarily department heads, are responsible for hiring, developing and evaluating professors. One of the most challenging aspects of this role is assisting college professors in improving their classroom teaching. By examining this process from a professional life cycle perspective, the college administrator can develop strategies that match the needs of identifiable groups of faculty. The specific problems of each stage of the life cycle are identified and strategies for overcoming those challenges are discussed. Particular emphasis is given to the role of the administrator in creating the environment that allows teachers to improve their performance throughout their careers

## **Introduction**

University administrators, particularly department chairs and deans, have the primary responsibility for recruiting, hiring, developing, evaluating, rewarding and retaining effective faculty members. This complex responsibility is fraught with pitfalls, paradoxes and dilemmas. Most of the time, faculty members think that we administrators do this task badly. I tend to agree.

We fail most of the time, but not because of lack of effort or bad intentions. As administrative stewards of our faculty, we fail because the expectations for the "ideal faculty member" are so high and the leadership skills required to develop such a person are subtle and difficult to master. When we hire a new faculty member we hope that person will become a distinguished scholar, a brilliant teacher and a wise, cooperative colleague. In addition to the administrator's expectations, the new faculty member is likely to have some high expectation of her own. Newly minted PhDs frequently expect, or at least secretly hope, to make breakthrough discoveries that will result in intellectual immortality.

Usually, the lofty expectations of both the department chair and the newly hired professor are soon proven unrealistic. These disappointed expectations frequently lead to mutual disillusionment and, sometimes, bitterness. Within this unhappy context, the department chair must fashion a strategy for developing effective teachers.

## **The Paradox of Administrative Intervention**

Department chairs clearly have the responsibility for developing effective teachers, but the tools at their disposal are frequently inadequate to the task. In most colleges and universities, the department chair does often observe the faculty member's teaching. In some departments, an uninvited visit to a faculty member's class would be considered a violation of the professor's academic freedom. There are seldom resources for expensive faculty development programs or teaching interventions. Faculty members seldom welcome the department chair's advice on improving classroom performance.

Spencer (1992, cited in peer coaching article) found that faculty members rated the impact of administrative feedback on classroom behavior at less than 2%--a sobering statistic for any department head or dean who has attempted to counsel a faculty member who was having trouble in the classroom. Since most professors take their teaching very personally, they become defensive when their teaching is

evaluated or criticized. This response is more dramatic if the criticism comes from someone with considerable influence on promotion and tenure decisions.

The academic administrator may be in the best position to understand the quality of a professor's teaching, but in the worst position to provide the advice that could improve teaching performance. The administrator must play the dual roles of coach and judge. These roles are inherently in conflict and put both the professor and the administrator in a double bind. To accept the advice of a coach, the teacher must acknowledge that something is working as well as it might. If the person trying to play the role of coach is also the professor's formal supervisor, the teaching will be very reluctant to acknowledge that anything is amiss in the classroom or that change is needed.

The more pro-active the department chair becomes in trying to mentor or coach the faculty member's teaching, the more resistant to change to that person is likely to be. Unfortunately, this means that the harder the department chair tries, the worse the situation becomes. Paradoxically, a lighter touch might produce much better results than frontal attack on the problem. As administrators gain more experience they frequently become convinced professors seldom respond favorably to edict or decisive actions. Consequently, administrators are fond of saying "managing faculty is like herding cats."

## **The Professional Life Cycle of the Teaching Career**

A professor's teaching career moves through a life cycle, and the major challenges faced in the classroom are different in the different stages of the life cycle. For purposes of this paper, the teacher's life cycle is divided into three phases: early-, mid-, and late career. At the college and university level, these phases correspond roughly to the ranks of assistant professor, associate professor and professor. These designations are imprecise and somewhat arbitrary, but they do provide useful markers for creating responses to the challenges faced by teacher at different developmental stages in their careers.

### **Early Career**

Most college teachers grew into the teaching roles gradually. Most had their first opportunities to teach when they were in graduate school. They may have begun a teaching assistant, grading papers, preparing tests, and leading discussion sessions and occasionally substituting for the professor in the classroom. Over time the fledgling teacher may have had responsibility for one or two section of a low-level undergraduate class. Typically, the teaching assistant had little formal instruction in how to teach and less supervision or coaching. The emphasis in graduate school was on learning to become a scholar, not learning to become a teacher. Left to their own devices as graduate student, some of the teaching assistants became accomplished teachers; most did not.

Successful completion of the graduate school apprenticeship typically led to an appointment as an assistant professor. Assistant professors typically strive for promotion and tenure. In most colleges and universities the safest path to promotion and tenure is paved with high-quality refereed journal articles, adequate teaching, and a modicum of service to the discipline and institution.

This context may not seem hospitable for the novice teacher, but early career teachers bring great assets to classroom. First, they bring the enthusiasm for the discipline that is typical of those early in their careers. Second, they have a greater technical mastery of the discipline than they may have at any other stage of their careers. Third, they are likely to be highly motivated to demonstrate their competence as professors. Fourth, they are likely to be more energetic, less jaded and less cynical than at later stages of their careers.

Early career teachers also face some difficulties that those in later career have usually overcome. The novice teacher is not always well organized in terms of managing the logistics of how much material can be covered and which material needs the most emphasis. Second, beginning teachers may attempt to pack everything they learned in graduate school into the most elementary course in the curriculum. Third, the novice teacher may quickly baffle students if her or she is not a good judge of what is common

knowledge and what is highly esoteric knowledge. Fourth, the novice teacher often has trouble managing the logistics of testing, grading and getting materials back to students in a timely fashion.

### **Mid Career**

By the time one has become a tenured associate professor, he or she entered mid career. Mid career is typically the longest of the three phase and usually the most productive. The associate professor has the security that goes with tenure and can afford to undertake larger, more substantial scholarly projects. The associate professor often has a more control of the type and level of courses he or she will teach. Tenure also means that more novel teaching strategies can be explored and the cost of a blunder in the classroom is smaller. The success as a scholar and teacher that led to tenure frequently results in greater confidence in the classroom. If the mid career professor continues to experience excitement about the discipline, this enthusiasm can transfer to the classroom with very positive results. The greater maturing at mid career also gives the professor more influence as a mentor to others who may be considering attending graduate school.

In addition to these considerable strengths, the mid-career professor may struggle with a series of challenges. First, many mid-career professors worry that their accomplishments are not as great as they should be and that they have not progressed as quickly as they should have. If the mid-career professor responds to this frustration by redoubling efforts to publish scholarly research, teaching may be given short shrift. Second, the mid-career professor may be tempted to neglect teaching in favor of consulting or other off campus activities. Third, campus politics is often a distraction for many of those in the middle of their careers. Fourth, the inevitable disappointments and frustrations of academic life may lead some to become cynical by mid career. Fifth, mid-career teachers may not have as good a grasp of their disciplines and the related research methods as they once did. Sixth, they may not be as well versed with classroom technology and engaged teaching and learning styles as should be.

### **Late Career**

By the time one attains the rank of professor, he or she may be at the beginning of the late career. If one was fortunate enough to attain the rank of professor at a relatively early age, late career may be a decade or more away. For many, late career is the most satisfying time of their careers. They have attained a status that is respected and may have considerable control of their time, activities and teaching assignments. For high accomplished professors, this is time of mentoring not only their students but their colleagues as well. Senior professors are often able to focus their attention on those aspects of the job that interests them most. For those who are accomplished teachers still excited by their disciplines, their teaching may be better than ever.

Late career teachers frequently face a number of challenges. First, they may be seriously out-of-date in both the content and methodology of their disciplines. Second, they may not be conversant with the computer hardware and software that dominates the teaching of many disciplines. Third, they may have difficulty relating to younger students. Fourth, late career teachers may have lost interest in their discipline and their institutions. Fifth, late career teachers may have health problems that hamper their classroom performance.

## **A Three-Pronged Approaches to Improving Teaching**

The long list of problems outlined above goes a long way toward explaining why most administrators fail to develop outstanding teaching faculties. The challenges are many, complex and vary the career stage. Given the size of the problem, can administrators have a positive role in improving classroom teaching. The answer is a qualified "yes." These problems can be addressed at three different levels. First, the teacher, through personal initiative, has the greatest potential impact on improving his or her teaching effectiveness. In a study of teachers-of-the-year, McKay (1997) found that outstanding teachers tended to be "inner driven" and attempted to teach in accordance with their own values and beliefs. McKay's award-winning teachers were proactive in defining their roles as teachers and their expectations that their students could succeed.

Second, teachers can improve their performance through collaborative problem solving. Teachers can take a continuous improvement approach to their teaching, using their students as collaborative partners in improving the learning environment and learning outcomes. The teacher can poll students throughout the term to find out what works well and what needs to be enhanced. At the end of the term, the instructor can study the results of student rating of the course to discover things that need improvement. Written comments are even more helpful the quantitative measures for identifying change opportunities. In a study of peer coaching for teachers, Skinner (1996) found that peer coaches could have a much more positive impact on classroom teaching performance than the evaluations and suggestions of administrators. The peer coaching teams were usually dyads or triad that used a formative approach to help each other improve their teaching. This is a collaborative problem solving approach that can be sponsored by an administrator. In this case, the peer coaching process should not feed back into the formal evaluation process.

Third, administrators can create institutional support systems and interventions. The support system would include teaching and learning centers, funding for regular faculty development conferences and projects that focus on teaching. The institution can also celebrate excellent teaching in very public ways. Finally, administrators should link the institution's reward system to the quality of teaching performance.

### **Applying the Three-Pronged Approach to Life Cycle Problems**

The three-pronged approach to faculty development described above can be more useful if it is linked to the life cycle model of teaching careers. The faculty development strategies can be customized to the career stage of individual faculty members. A sample of the strategies appropriate to each stage of the life cycle model is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

#### **Examples of Teaching Improvement Strategies Linked to Life Cycle Stages**

	EARLY CAREER	MID-CAREER	LATE CAREER
Personal Initiatives	Timeliness of feedback to students Design of syllabus Classroom time use	Keeping up on content and methods of discipline Balance teaching with competing responsibilities and opportunities	Major updates on discipline and methods Keep abreast of the interests and concerns of students and their popular culture
Collaborations with Students and Colleagues	Formative Use of student ratings Asking students for feedback	Design of new courses Coordinate course to prevent gaps and overlaps	Work with younger colleagues to keep up-to-date on issues and methods
Institutional	Mentoring on Course Design and Logistics	Provide support for technological updates	Work with junior colleagues as a teaching mentor

Support and Interventions	Advice on Course Complexity and Difficulty	Provide faculty development workshops and travel	Monitor health and fitness issue that affect teaching performance
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If Table 1 were used for an academic department with a substantial number of faculty members, each cell in the table would as many as eight or ten strategies. This approach would allow the department chair to create a model for the continuous improvement of teaching that would encourage change without significant increase in the levels of defensiveness or resistance.

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