Ongoing planning for life after tenure (essay)

Submitted by Kerry Ann Rockquemore on November 1, 2017 - 3:00am

We’ve been through an important process over the past nine weeks of this column series. I designed it to help those of you who are newly tenured engage in an intentional process of transitioning into your new role on your campus. Making a positive transition to associate professor requires consciously choosing a posttenure pathway instead of unconsciously continuing to work just like you did while you were on the tenure track.

If you’ve been following along, you have: 1) paused for self-reflection (asking “Who am I?” “What do I love?” and “How do I feel?”), 2) re-examined your assumptions about posttenure pathways, campus leadership and your mind-sets toward work, 3) mapped a wide range of potential posttenure pathways, 4) interviewed role models, 5) chosen your path, and 6) rebuilt your mentoring network to support your chosen pathway. There’s only one step left in the process: reconsidering how you plan for success.

How Is Planning Different Before and After Tenure?

It was vitally important for you as a tenure-track faculty member to engage in strategic planning because you were working on a ticking time clock to exceed externally imposed expectations for promotion and tenure on your campus. That involved setting specific research and writing goals and putting all your energy toward meeting those goals. Tenure-track faculty often describe the intense energy they bring to meeting research goals as “hustling,” “pushing” or “grinding.” No matter how it’s described, it involves a highly focused drive to set research and writing goals, map the steps to meet those goals, and execute tasks every day.

But once you are awarded tenure and promotion, that energy changes. You are no longer driven by the need to meet externally imposed standards. Now, you get to be internally driven by who you are and what you love. So instead of constantly grinding to meet your campus’s standards, you can shift into the energy of alignment with your own goals.

This type of energy feels radically different. I think of it as a shift from constantly pushing to make things happen (which implies relentless strained effort and exertion) to trusting that you are doing what you planned to do and allowing opportunities to be attracted to you. That energetic shift is possible when you’ve done the work of self-reflection and chosen a path that is aligned with your gifts and talents.

The change in time pressure, your motivational drive and the energy you bring to work means that how you plan will also evolve. It’s still important to start each term with a strategic plan for your writing and personal health. But posttenure planning involves a
nuanced evolution of that strategy. In other words, keep on creating a semester plan and engaging in a weekly planning meeting. Yet I also encourage you to add three important questions each week that are specific to your posttenure pathway.

What Is Your Next Best Move?

No matter what path you’ve chosen posttenure (whether it’s deep dish, entrée and sides, or sample platter) you’ve probably selected some things that are big and exciting and you may currently be unclear how they will happen. For example, you may have chosen to become a public intellectual, administrator or institutional change agent. You have identified role models and can envision how it will look for you to fulfill that role. However, how you will get from where you are now to where you want to go remains fuzzy. That’s perfectly normal.

Strategic planning is great for concrete goals (i.e., “complete grant proposal”) where you know exactly what projects need to take place and what tasks need to be done week to week. However, when you’re moving toward a bigger version of yourself (i.e., “I want to be a public intellectual”), it’s much less concrete, predictable and applicable to traditional planning processes.

The tendency when we’re not sure how to get from where we are today to who we want to be in the future is to not plan at all. But I’m suggesting that you don’t need to know every goal, project and task that will take place on your posttenure pathway. For now, you just need to know what your next best move is each week -- and then do it. It’s often simple: read something, call or email somebody, or try something new. And by consistently making your next best move each week, you can trust that the next steps will be revealed.

What Distractions Can You Eliminate?

Moving down your posttenure pathway requires space and time for learning, evolving and letting new opportunities emerge. That means choosing to work at a different pace than the breakneck, balls-out way you worked during your tenure-track years. In order to make that space to learn, grow and evolve, you will need to eliminate distractions. And let me be clear, I consider “distractions” any work that does not need to be done by you, is unrelated to your posttenure pathway, drains your time and energy, and keeps you in a frenzied energetic state day after day.

The reason eliminating distractions is so important is because creating a meaningful life for yourself after gaining tenure will be as much about what you choose to do as what you choose not to do. That may mean managing your perfectionism and control issues, learning to delegate and say no, and reclaiming your time. Unless you use your agency to select your path and reset the pace of your work, you will quickly find yourself overcommitted, working all the time and frantically busy supporting others at the expense of your own progress.

While that may sound selfish to some people, keep in mind that the purpose of identifying your posttenure pathway is so that you can determine your greatest contribution in this new stage of your career. Most of you have selected pathways that will serve and benefit a large number of people on your campus and beyond it. So let me clear: it is not selfish to eliminate distractions. It is what must be done to clear the space for your next-level growth. And that is more beneficial to the collective good than you running frantically about your campus doing busywork.

What Enrollment Conversations Do You Need to Have?
Making forward progress toward your posttenure pathway will require you to regularly have conversations that enroll others in your vision. That means you will need to get comfortable letting people know who you are, where you’re going, why and what’s in it for them. This isn’t a one-time formal discussion with your department head or dean. These are ongoing casual conversations with people who have the knowledge, resources and connections that can accelerate your movement along your chosen path (i.e., colleagues, friends, alumni, donors, etc.).

When I’m moving in a new direction, I want to have one enrollment conversation every week. And all that means is that when I’m planning my week, I ask myself, who can I connect with this week? And if I draw a blank, then I commit to having a spontaneous enrollment conversation with someone unexpected who comes across my path. In other words, I trust the universe to bring people into my life who can support me. I commit to recognizing those opportunities when they arise and speaking powerfully about my new direction. And I remain open to the magic of possibilities that occur in random connections.

Pushing yourself to consistently articulate your vision does three important things: 1) it will force you to get sharper, clearer and quicker in your delivery, 2) it will inevitably lead to connections and resources you cannot currently imagine, and 3) if you say what you want enough times to enough people (and hear them take it seriously and offer to help you), you will create your new pathway by speaking it into reality.

The Weekly Challenge

The great news is that I’m not asking you to learn and implement some time and labor-intensive new version of planning. I’m asking you to continue creating a semester plan and planning every week, and simply add one five-minute process at the end. Close your eyes, take a few deep breaths and ask your inner wisdom what you should do in the upcoming week. Specifically:

- What’s my next best move?
- What can I eliminate?
- Whom do I need to enroll in my vision this week?

And I also encourage you this week to do the following things.

- Sit with the possibility that doing less can lead to greater impact.
- Explore your internal story about why you feel the need to keep working harder, faster and longer hours.
- Ask yourself: Is this story supporting me?
- Consider what’s keeping you from shifting your energy, slowing your pace and focusing on your posttenure pathway.

You don’t have to believe me -- just try it for a few weeks and see what opens up for you when you shift from grinding to meet externally imposed goals to slowing down the pace of your work and allowing yourself to open up to the support that’s available to you.

I must admit that I love coaching newly tenured faculty members through the NCFDD’s Posttenure Pathfinders Program [13]. But since I can’t work with everyone directly, I’m thankful for the opportunity to share the process of transitioning from tenure-track to tenured faculty member with Inside Higher Ed readers. I know that intentionally choosing a path and moving forward on it will change who you are, how you work and the impact you have on your campus.
Peace and possibilities,

Kerry Ann Rockquemore, Ph.D.

Founder, National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity


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