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Career Transition to Non-Tenure-Line Faculty: Midlife Women's Challenges, Supports, and Strategies

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Abstract: Numbers of new faculty with prior careers, women faculty, and non-tenure-line faculty are increasing. This study investigated the career transitions and strategies of women midlife career changers to non-tenure-line faculty.

Keywords: career transition, career change, midlife, faculty, higher education

Higher education faculty characteristics are changing with implications for teaching, research, and service (Aud et al, 2013; National Center for Education Statistics, 2004, 2015). Three such changing faculty characteristics include increasing numbers of career changers to higher education, women faculty, and non-tenure-line faculty (NCES, 2004, 2015). As the number of tenure-track and tenured faculty positions decrease, the number of non-tenure-line (also referred to as non-tenure-track, fixed term, limited term, contract, clinical, and academic professional) positions increase, often carrying the academic rank of lecturer or instructor and occasionally visiting professor. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), over one-third of full-time faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions is non-tenure-line, including 42% of all women faculty compared to 32% of men.

Traditional adult development and career development theories studied White men and may not fully apply to people of color and women (Alfred, 2001; Ross-Gordon, 1999) and explain the complexity of multiple careers (Baruch, 2004). The purpose of this study was to investigate the career transitions and strategies of women midlife career changers to non-tenure-line faculty. This paper highlights the study's conceptual framework, research design, findings and discussion, as well as implications and future research.

Conceptual Framework

Schlossberg's (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012) adult transition model and Hansen's (1997, 2011) integrated life planning (ILP; a career development) model comprised the conceptual framework. Schlossberg's adult transition model provided a framework for general transition analysis. According to Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg (2012), adult transitions are often stressful and challenging yet present growth opportunities. Schlossberg's adult transition model provides a three-part framework to analyze adult transition—approaching transitions, potential resources, and a resources strengthening process. Since the model broadly focuses on transition, this study also used a career development model.

According to Hansen (1997, 2011), adult development and career development converged in the late 1900s, broadening the concepts of *career* and *career development*. In response, she organized six critical tasks for career development and decision-making into the ILP model: finding work that needs doing in changing global contexts; attending to our physical, mental, and emotional health; connecting family and work; valuing pluralism and inclusivity; exploring spirituality and life purpose; and managing personal transitions and organizational

change. In addition to this two-model conceptual framework, a phenomenological research design guided the study.

Research Design

Phenomenology focuses on describing the essence of a lived phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994) and supported studying multiple individuals who shared the common lived experience of midlife career transition to non-tenure-line faculty. Three research questions guided the study: what (a) challenges and (b) supports do midlife women experience during career transition; (c) and what strategies do midlife women use to manage career transition?

Using criterion, snowball, and convenience sampling (Creswell, 2013), this study identified eight participants meeting the inclusion criteria: non-tenure-line women faculty, in adult education or related fields at four-year institutions, who self-identified as career changers to the professoriate while age 35 to 60 years. To maintain confidentiality, this paper excludes a traditional participant table in favor of general characteristics. Participants affiliated with seven small-to-large institutions located in the Midwest, East, and South and included white women and women of color; single, married, partnered, and divorced women; as well as five mothers and one grandmother. As undergraduate and master's students, participants studied business; counseling; adult, childhood, health, and religious education; English and other languages; human resource development; as well as natural and social sciences. At time of study, two participants were still pursuing their doctorate and some participants were also program- or department-level administrators. Excluding one outlying participant and shared administration roles, full-time-equivalent faculty responsibilities included 60-85% teaching, 0-20% research, and 15-20% service.

In preparation for data collection, I investigated and bracketed the essence of my experience as a midlife woman who transitioned to tenure-track faculty using Moustakas' (1994) Epoché process to release judgments and focus on participant experiences. Data collection comprised conducting, recording, and transcribing semi-structured interviews, consisting of open-ended questions, and providing the opportunity for member-checking by participants.

Data analysis used Moustakas' (1994) methods of phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. Accordingly, phenomenological reduction leads to textural descriptions (the *what*) and methods included bracketing in the Epoché process, horizontalization or unitizing, using an Excel spreadsheet and ATLAS.ti qualitative research software to code meaning units, and further clustering invariant units into themes. Similarly, imaginative variation leads to structural descriptions (the *how*) and methods included systematic varying of the structural and underlying textural meanings, recognizing the underlying themes accounting for the phenomenon's emergence, and searching for participant exemplifications. Last, I synthesized the textural and structural descriptions to identify meanings and the essence, resulting in the findings.

Findings and Discussion

This study found a midlife career transition process to non-tenure-line faculty and related challenges, supports, and strategies to navigate. In addition, this section highlights participant voices about one challenge and one support with related strategy.

Career Transition Process and Challenges

Prior to pursuing doctoral degrees, all participants held a variety of jobs with one common element—teaching experience—and while pursuing, all but one worked in higher education (see Figure 1). Triggered by dissatisfaction with current job, need for increased

income and/or flexibility to care for family, or a call to teach, participants began a process of career transition with varying beginnings. In addition to pursuing a doctoral degree, participants worked part- or full-time as adjuncts, administrators, adult educators, graduate assistants, and even non-tenure-line faculty. Often urged by tenured mentors and advisors, those who graduated (two in progress) pursued tenure-track faculty positions. However, upon graduating or within a year, all participants secured non-tenure-faculty positions. At time of study, participants were split on whether the career transition process was complete and whether they planned to remain non-tenure-line or seek a tenure-track faculty position.

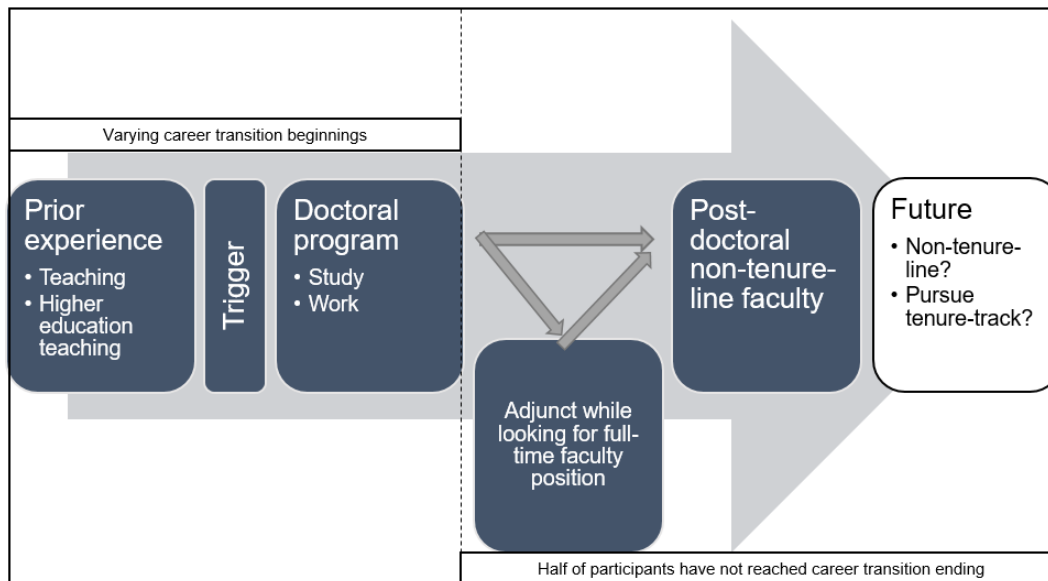


Figure 1. Women’s midlife career transition to non-tenure-line faculty.

During the career transition process, participants experienced seven major challenges (see Figure 2). As doctoral students and new faculty, participants asked, “Can I do it?” and some continued to ask the question about securing a tenure-track position. They also reported three challenges similar to a prior study of tenure-track and tenured faculty—impacted relationships, required relocation, and difficulty finding (first) tenure-track position (Cherrstrom, 2015). In both studies, the midlife career transition impacted not only the changer but those around her. In contrast, current participants chose not to relocate, thus limiting position opportunities, and no participants secured tenure-track faculty positions. Participants spoke most passionately about the challenge of being non-tenure-line faculty in a tenure-track/tenured world (see Table 1 for their voices). They also struggled with time management, for example, balancing heavy teaching loads with administrative responsibilities, research, and/or writing. Lastly, participants reported age as a challenge, appearing too young for credibility or feeling too old or “aged-out” from seeking a tenure-track position. The career transition process and related challenges illustrate the non-linear, diverse, challenging, and in many cases, ongoing nature of women’s midlife career transition (Anderson et al., 2012; Greenhaus, Callanan, & Godshalk, 2010; Hansen, 1997, 2011). During the challenging career transition process, participants benefited from supports and practiced strategies to navigate.

Career Transition Supports and Strategies

Participants identified three major supports—teaching, flexibility, and people (see Figure 2). All participants brought prior teaching experience to the transition and reported “loving” or being “passionate” about teaching. Such love and passion, combined with pride and positive feedback, fueled participants during difficult times (see Table 2). Participants also recognized flexibility as a support for themselves and others, such as children and aging parents. Love of teaching and flexibility illustrate Hansen’s (1997, 2011) career-related critical tasks of finding work that needs doing, attending to well-being, connecting family and work, and exploring life purpose. Similar to the prior tenure-track and tenured study (Cherrstrom, 2015), participants also identified people as supports—advisors and mentors, colleagues and peers, as well as parents and partners. However, only two participants in the current study referenced God and church. Motulsky (2010) found relationships assist midlife women in overcoming career transition barriers, especially relationships with experts, colleagues, and friends. Furthermore, midlife women with such *professional* relationships experienced fewer and dealt more effectively with career transition challenges.

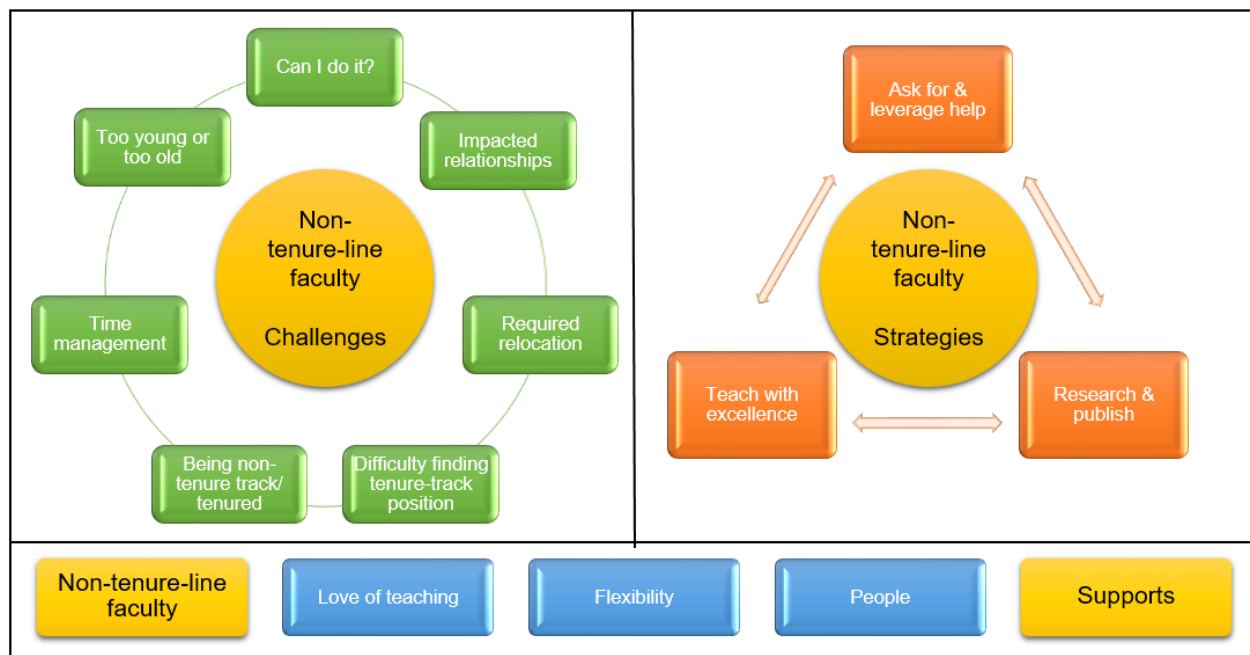


Figure 2. Women’s challenges, supports, and strategies to navigate midlife career transition to non-tenure-line faculty.

Table 1. Participant Voices: Being Non-Tenure-Track/Tenured (challenge)

Participant	Salient Quote
Differentiator	<i>I view myself as a strong teacher, but when you’re not tenure-track, there is a pecking differentiator that sometimes rears its ugly head.</i>
Inferiority	<i>Although I felt respected by my colleagues, the institution treats you differently as a non-tenured colleague and you feel your difference, not just difference but an inferiority.</i>
Tenure-track position went to a new hire	<i>I had to step in and be a colleague with someone who took my job . . . We talk a lot about how I’m treated [non-tenure-line] compared to the way she’s treated [tenure-track].</i>

Asked to leave meetings	<i>There are little things, like being asked to leave a meeting because you're not voting.</i>
Want to be valued	<i>I want to be valued as highly as someone can be valued. I want to be part of, build, and improve the university community. But as a non-tenure-line faculty member, I feel like my input is less valuable. Or less valued, that's what I mean.</i>

Lastly, participants identified and purposefully practiced three major strategies—ask for and leverage help, teach with excellence, as well as research and publish. All participants leveraged mentor or advisor help and asked others, often colleagues and peers, for help. Such help also included asking questions and for formative feedback. Williams (2010) recommended mentors recognize and validate career changers' prior experiences and cautioned novice competency does not preclude needed support and encouragement. The second and third strategies related to job performance, security, and opportunity. Participants' love of and passion for teaching, a support, complimented their second strategy—teach with excellence for job performance and as much security as possible (see Table 2). Third, they strove to, and in many cases accomplished, research and publishing, mostly in the form of conference presentations and proceedings but also book chapters, books, and peer-reviewed journal articles. Participants pursued research as job security and to examine areas of interest, help colleagues publish, and develop or maintain a competitive CV for future tenure-track faculty positions. As one participant stated, "Everything I do is strategic . . . I'm as bullet-proof and prepared as possible." Collectively, these findings—a process and related challenges, support, and strategies—offer implications and prompt further research.

Table 2. *Participant Voices: Love Teaching (support) and Teach with Excellence (strategy)*

Participant	Salient Quote
Love	<i>I love teaching, I love it.</i>
Passion and heart	<i>This is where my passion and my heart is . . . Student evaluations fuel me, when I read "This is the direction I should be going." "This is the major I should be in." "You've cleared up some self-doubt." . . . That makes a difference!</i>
Why the professoriate?	<i>. . . the teaching and interaction with students. Knowing the difference in my life . . . and encouraging students.</i>
Complete	<i>When I was not in the classroom, I felt incomplete.</i>
Knowing students	<i>That made a big difference . . . makes me feel like I'm doing my job, knowing students and trying to support them better.</i>
Pride	<i>I take a lot of pride in my teaching . . . and I have contributed to research.</i>

Implications and Future Research

According to Ryan, Healy, and Sullivan (2012) and NCES (2013), understanding changing faculty and roles has implications for higher education's future, including effective teaching for student learning, innovative research resulting in economic growth, and service contributing to society. This study offers implications for theory, practice, and policy. For theory, the study contributes to the literature with its focus on women, midlife, career transition, higher education, and the intersection of growing numbers of career changers to higher education, women faculty, and non-tenure-line faculty.

For practice, the study has implications for midlife women transitioning to the professoriate, their faculty position searches, institution selection, challenge awareness, process navigation, and strategy execution. For practice and related higher education policy, this study

has implications for graduate student advising, programing, and preparation as future family as well as faculty search committees, hiring, development, and promotion.

Future research opportunities include studying women midlife career changers over time, expanding the study to other disciplines and men, and interventions including, but not limited, to mentoring and coaching. Such research will support the faculty success of midlife career changers to higher education who, through research, teaching, and service, benefit students, colleagues, institutions, and society.

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