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Administrative Best Practices for Engaging New Faculty

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Administrative Best Practices for Engaging Millennial Faculty

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Administrative Best Practices for Engaging Millennial Faculty

Faculty development and new faculty orientations routinely focus on integrating faculty members into the culture of the institution. While it is necessary to consider ‘new’ faculty holistically, one segment of new faculty members is unfamiliar not just with their institutions, but the academy at large. Millennial faculty, a growing population of the professoriate, present unique challenges and benefits. Traditionally, Department Chairs have the most interaction with new faculty members at the department level. Because of the unique nature of millennial faculty members, identifying administrative best practices for engaging new, specifically millennial, faculty is a crucial leadership exercise.

Department Chairs, like other campus leaders, have a unique role. They must at one time be pro-university while simultaneously functioning as a faculty advocate. The department chair role is perhaps where engaging millennial faculty is most crucial. That is, decisions made at the department chair level establish the criteria for success for millennial faculty, expectations for participation in departmental activities, and professional development opportunities (and needs) that will enable millennial faculty to contribute productively.

First, some context surrounding this new faculty population. American millennials, those born between 1981-1996, according to Pew Research Center are a fascinating personality dichotomy. They are often viewed as lazy, entitled, and high maintenance, but they are also highly networked, appreciate life experiences (like travel opportunities), and are tech-savvy (Morreale & Staley, 2016). Millennials, or Generation Y, are uniquely suited to engage professional contexts in new ways, especially the new professoriate. "Millennials are socially and demographically defined as confident, connected, and agile; they use multiple modes of self-

expression, have good relationships with their parental figures, and are poised to be the most educated generation in American history" (Hosek & Titsworth, 2016, p. 357). This generation of young professionals recently surpassed Gen X as the largest segment of the U.S. workforce (Fry, 2015). Right now, most millennials in the professoriate are subsequently new faculty members. Therefore, institutions must think strategically about engaging Generation Y faculty members. As Millennials continue to transition to the higher education workforce, what is the impact, especially for leading and engaging this generation?

We know Millennials will challenge the status quo and often refuse to accept tradition as a valid excuse for present behavior. However, because Millennials are just now becoming fully immersed in higher education culture as faculty and staff, rather than as students, we do not yet know the ramifications of how the typically rigid, top-down model of the traditional university will respond to Millennials (Strawser & Carpenter, 2019). Therefore, it is important, generally, to understand how Millennials engage in a professional environment and then apply these behaviors specifically to higher education.

Despite differences in specifying a date range for Millennials, the year 2013, or even more generally the 2010-2015 window, represents the first wave of millennial faculty. It is too soon to dissect the long-term influence of millennial faculty on organizational culture, but we do know that millennial faculty members typically present a new way of thinking compared to past generations. Engaging millennial faculty requires intense planning, especially by Department Chairs regarding institutional technology use, faculty recruitment and development, as well as collaborative work and decision making (Kelly, 2009). Traditionally, Millennials want flexibility, collaboration, constant communication, particularly about results and achievement.

These traits and characteristics could have a positive influence on faculty, but the actual integration of Millennials into the higher education environment has invited complex questions.

Colleges and universities are advised to consider the implications of millennial faculty. New faculty job descriptions now emphasize collaboration and clearer directives in terms of roles and responsibilities, as well as institutional policies (Kelly, 2009). This new faculty generation may help create an environment where innovation and campus culture are developed through pillars of teamwork and communication. With that said, if the attempt to recruit, engage, and retain millennial faculty is not an institution-wide directive, then certain challenges may not be answered adequately, and the paradigm shift may be more burdensome, and less effective.

A career as a professor is uniquely suited to energize and simultaneously frustrate millennial faculty. Increased expectations, broadly, across research, teaching and service has become commonplace for institutions. In addition, increased technology expectations, renewed emphasis on teaching and learning strategy, community engagement opportunities, work in diverse collaborative groups, and advising pertaining to issues like student mental health, have become necessary expertise of college faculty. Millennials, those who expect immediate feedback, collaborative work, values-driven systems, and who use technology consistently in their daily lives, may appreciate this new professorial call. Yet, leading and engaging millennial faculty can still be difficult, given the common pathways for success across higher-education institutions. Common expectations of the professoriate include:

- Publishing or presenting original scholarship in peer-reviewed venues;
- Serving on campus, regional, or national committees;
- Contributing to or leading service-related committees; and
- Teaching undergraduate and graduate students in person and online.

It has long been the case that faculty members teach, research, and serve but, generally, the time and expertise expected to complete professorial tasks has become gradually more intense.

For the millennial faculty member, though, participation in these activities might look unique compared to previous generations. Millennial faculty members, for example, are achievement oriented, connected exponentially to the world at large and their institutions, yet are relatively sheltered, with some being unaware of the stated and unstated hierarchies of higher education. These characteristics lead one to consider other questions about engaging, leading, and ultimately mentoring millennial faculty.

There are four best practices that can lead to more effective leadership of millennial faculty:

- Establish productive and meaningful processes and practices for formal and informal feedback
- Design systems for acknowledging success (awards, etc.)
- Integrate technology into department workflows
- Provide structures that acknowledge and value collaboratively developed work (publications, presentations, research, committees, etc.)

By following these best practices, millennials may be more engaged and more prepared for the new professoriate.

As a start, chairs might consider reflecting on several questions as they consider the most productive strategies for mentoring millennial faculty:

- What departmental, college, or institutional conditions have I designed or contributed to in order to ensure the success of millennial faculty?

- How might traditional expectations of faculty success promote or inhibit millennial success?
- In what ways can I hone or develop practices that will be productive for millennial faculty?

In the end, a purposeful self-reflection (Cranford, 2020) can help chairs in all areas of leadership and especially as they help millennial faculty navigate the new professoriate. Applying the best practices mentioned above and asking reflective questions about leadership style and faculty preferences can help chairs, and other academic leaders, reach and engage millennial faculty.

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