How to select the best path after gaining tenure (essay)

Submitted by Kerry Ann Rockquemore on October 11, 2017 - 3:00am

This is the week! It’s time to choose your posttenure pathway. If you’ve been following this series, you’ve done a wide range of introspective work. You’ve been asking yourself: Who am I? How do I feel? And what do I love? You’ve also done the conceptual work of rethinking leadership, reimagining posttenure pathways and generating many different possibilities that emerge from a place of deep self-understanding.

Now that you’ve interviewed a wide range of role models to better understand the different pathways you are considering, it’s time to reflect on what you’ve learned from your conversations. Specifically, I encourage you to notice: 1) What did you learn that was as you expected? 2) What was different than you expected? 3) What new insights emerged from your conversations? and 4) How did these conversations leave you feeling about each possibility?

Collecting and analyzing data is exciting work, but we don’t want to get lost in that project. There must be an end point when you make a conscious and intentional choice about the next chapter of your career. Keep in mind that we’re not deciding the rest of your life or locking down the remainder of your career. I’m simply asking you to look at the options you generated from who you are and what you love. Consider what you learned from talking to people who are actively engaged in those possibilities. And then choose which you will pursue in the next chapter of your career (three to five years).

While there are many ways to decide on a pathway, I think it’s easiest to do if you have an analogy to guide your decision making. In our posttenure pathfinders program, we love to use food analogies to illustrate how to choose. It may seem like an odd way to choose a path, but many participants find it useful and easy to remember for future decision making.

**Deep dish: choosing one path.** One way to make a choice from many different possibilities is to choose one (and only one) as your primary area of focus and pour your best energy into that option. We refer to this as “deep dish” because it’s like ordering deep-dish pizza for dinner -- it’s big, heavy, extremely rich and delicious. For those reasons, you don’t typically need anything else to eat for that meal. It fills you up.

When faculty members with whom I’ve worked choose a single path as their focus, they typically
want to make fast progress toward a big goal that they are passionate about. And for them, it feels like a tremendous relief to have a single priority that they can use to guide everything from their personal strategic planning to their daily decision making. It provides a simple filtering question for incoming requests: Will this move me farther down my chosen path or will it distract me?

For example: I introduced you to a newly tenured faculty member, Jane, a few weeks ago. Jane was surprised to find that she understood herself as super teacher and that she loved transforming students' lives. When she mapped her possibilities, she came up with a wide array of exciting options. If Jane took a deep-dish approach, she would pick just one possibility (such as retooling her research agenda to focus on the scholarship of teaching and learning) from her many options to focus on for the next three years. As such, she would devote her most and best energy into the transition of her existing research agenda (which was feeling quite stale to her) and spend the next few years reading, researching, writing, generating funding and publishing in this area.

**Entrée with sides: one primary path with a few secondary paths.** Some faculty members working through this process have found themselves with one to three options that seem to be exciting possibilities and unable (or unwilling) to focus on just one path. As such, they decide to make one possibility their primary path and leave the other one or two options as side dishes. We imagine this as analogous to choosing a well-balanced meal, with a major protein, a side salad and veggies. In other words, faculty members taking this approach commit to focusing on one priority but want the flexibility to pursue (with less intensity and time) a few additional options as smaller accompaniments. It's most commonly chosen when there is a strong preference for one option, but interest in exploring several others.

If Jane chose the entrée with sides model, it would mean making a pivot in her research agenda as the primary focus of her posttenure pathway but choosing to also dabble in two other areas, such as starting a blog on college teaching and developing some specialized, teaching-specific workshops she could offer on other campuses. Her time investment in those different possibilities would be relative to their priority.

**Sample platter: choosing further exploration.** Some faculty members working through this process conclude that they want to devote a specific and limited time period to more systematically explore a small range of options. We call it the sample platter because they want to taste several different options. On the surface, this choice may look like indecision. However, it's quite the opposite: faculty who take a sample platter approach make an intentional plan to set aside a specific length of time (e.g., an academic year) to fully explore several alternatives in depth and set a specific date for making a decision. This is most often chosen by those who are experiential learners and those who want to choose their posttenure pathway at a slower pace.

If Jane chose the sample platter approach, she would plan out the rest of her year to explore a range of options. She might decide to attend conferences of several professional associations focusing on teaching and learning, and, while there, interview multiple faculty members who have held leadership roles to better understand what's involved in holding such a position. She might work out an agreement with her existing Center for Teaching Excellence, where she could be in residence for a semester to learn more about what they do and what opportunities exist for her. She might simultaneously design some beta tests of blogging, organize an online community,
learn how to work with a literary agent or draft a trade book proposal. These are all small experiments, intentionally designed to stick a toe in the water of multiple options with a clearly defined end point for decision making. Then on the designated end date of her year of sampling, she would commit to choosing her path from the perspective of experience.

As always, if you find yourself resistant to making a decision, it’s important to understand what is holding you back. Is it a technical error (i.e., you haven’t done any informational interviews so you have no data)? Is it a psychological obstacle (i.e., you’re afraid to make the wrong decision)? Or is it an external reality (i.e., something outside your control is precluding you from spending any time thinking about your future)? If you’re experiencing an external reality, it’s OK. Be compassionate with yourself and know that you can come back to this process at any time. But if you are not choosing due to a simple technical error or even a psychological obstacle, allow yourself to gently acknowledge what it is and then move around it by making a clear decision.

The Weekly Challenge

This week, I challenge you to:

- complete your role model interviews;
- reflect on what you learned from the conversations;
- consider the three different ways you can make a decision about your potential pathways;
- consciously and intentionally choose your posttenure pathway;
- walk around with that decision for a few days and see how you feel about it; and
- if you’re unwilling to choose, ask yourself why.

I know that it’s hard to choose from many exciting possibilities, but once you do and commit to that choice, we can begin the work of expanding your mentoring network to support your new path, focusing on any other additional elements needed to support this new chapter of your career, and planning for your future success.

Peace and possibilities,

Kerry Ann Rockquemore, Ph.D.

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