What happens to professors in the long decades between tenure and retirement? Much of the literature on faculty development either neglects or is critical of mid- and late-career academics — perceiving them to be in professional decline and beset by the pressures of service, teaching, and mentoring.

Although academe seems particularly eager to hear stories of “deadwood” and burned-out scholars, we’ve found that the characterizations of midcareer malaise do not square with our own experiences as faculty members or with the many stories we’ve heard of peers who have successfully written new chapters in their posttenure lives.

Colleges and universities depend heavily on the labor and experience of tenured faculty members but seldom pair that reliance with any specific support that sustains or helps expand their abilities and interests. Rather than presuming something is lacking, institutions should be looking for better ways to value and encourage mid- or late-career colleagues.

Yes, each of us has witnessed colleagues experiencing fallow periods in their scholarship, but we’ve also seen them in new stages of growth. As qualitative sociologists, we wanted to understand: What animated their best work? What helped them to feel (and stay) motivated? And what got in the way of them being their best teacher-scholar-citizen selves?

Our curiosity led us to a mixed-methods study of posttenure faculty at our three institutions: Kenyon College, DePauw University, and Grinnell College. In a survey of 239 faculty members — and interviews with 56 in 2015 and 2016 — we asked about what a good day looks like for them, how they spend their time versus how they would like to, and which needs seemed particular to this stage of their careers.

Our first finding emerged even before we began analyzing the data: People are tired of the deadwood stereotype. We received a surprising amount of gratitude and appreciation for focusing some attention on faculty disengagement is often the result of institutional practices.
what inspircs tenured professors. As one wrote in response, "Thanks for not doing another survey that seems to suggest posttenure faculty should be working harder."

that leave professors feeling expendable or invisible.

Second, across our three institutions, faculty members expressed a degree of commitment to undergraduate education and mentoring that was startlingly fresh and consistent. Whether their career was in its 10th or 30th year, the vast majority of faculty members described the classroom as a place that still inspired them. Asked to compare their actual work day with an "ideal" one, most respondents emphatically stated that the 50 percent of their time spent on teaching and mentoring was not an investment they wished to minimize.

Discrepancies between typical and preferred work responsibilities emerged, however, with regard to their scholarship and service. Many wanted to double the time for their creative endeavors and eliminate the "meaningless service" that weighed down their efforts to be involved in substantive ways on their campuses and in the outside world.

Finally, and perhaps most important, we were struck by how many faculty members emphasized their nonmaterial needs. Although the faculty members we surveyed and interviewed did desire more time and more money, the majority wanted something else in addition — recognition and a sense of belonging. They said they were energized by acknowledgment of their work from a peer, a provost, or a dean. Respondents sought a synergy between their personal contributions to the campus and their institution’s needs.

To be seen, valued, and included was a critical aspect of their career satisfaction and affected the degree of connection they felt to their campuses.

We found tenured professors to be very committed to their work. However, we also learned that far from feeling too advanced for mentoring or beyond the need for infusions of new challenges or competencies, they were in fact eager for both.

As one full professor shared, there is an overlooked "psychology of this stage of life … where the opportunity for some kind of self-transformation is so important. It’s very easy to get locked in your box … but it’s also confining. Anything that institutions can do to make it clear to people that they could emerge from their little boxes would be helpful."

The implications for our campuses are clear.

- If you are not offering any specific programming to help mid- and late-career faculty continue developing as professionals, you should be. Although posttenure professors are the foundation of much of the continuing life of any institution, they need care and tending, too.
- Tap into the collective knowledge of posttenure faculty and show some curiosity about the posttenure years as a time for a range of transformations, new chapters, and twists and turns. Through peer mentoring, for example, professors can share those various
Overcoming Post-Tenure Paralysis

By Kerry Ann Rockquemore

It's not uncommon for midcareer faculty members to feel stuck. But you've got so many options! The trick is just finding the path that's right for you.

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