

AIMEE LAPOINTE TEROSKY AND KERRYANN O'MEARA

## Assuming Agency

# The Power of Strategy and Networks

PERSPECTIVES

AT THE START OF EACH SEMESTER, a faculty member in information science identifies relationships he might develop with colleagues on- and off-campus to achieve specific work goals. A professor of women's studies and health carefully structures her day to ensure it is focused on her most important career priorities. A faculty member in education confronts bias against family caregiving, while a faculty member in urban planning develops new curricular and grant strategies to facilitate her community engagement. What do these faculty have in common? They are assuming agency in their work lives, a key aspect of faculty professional growth. In this article, we discuss some manifestations of agency in the

faculty career and the potential importance

of its role in faculty career development.

We define faculty professional growth as a change occurring in a person throughout his or her career and life that allows him or her to bring new and diverse knowledge, skills, values, and professional orientation to his or her work. This definition positions faculty growth as ongoing and in a constant state of becoming. To help ground faculty professional growth in practice, we developed a framework that explores four of its key aspects: learning, agency, professional relationships, and commitment. These four aspects grew out of a literature review of the academic profession, hundreds of interviews and observations of faculty, and interviews with directors of faculty development centers. In our interviews and observations, we noticed that learning, agency, professional relationships, and commitments were areas that greatly supported faculty growth but were often not explicitly discussed in the literature (O'Meara, Terosky, and Neumann 2008). In subsequent talks and presentations on our work,

AIMEE LAPOINTE TEROSKY is assistant professor of educational leadership at Saint Joseph's University, and KERRYANN O'MEARA is associate professor of higher education at the University of Maryland College Park.

**What does assuming agency look like in the faculty career?**

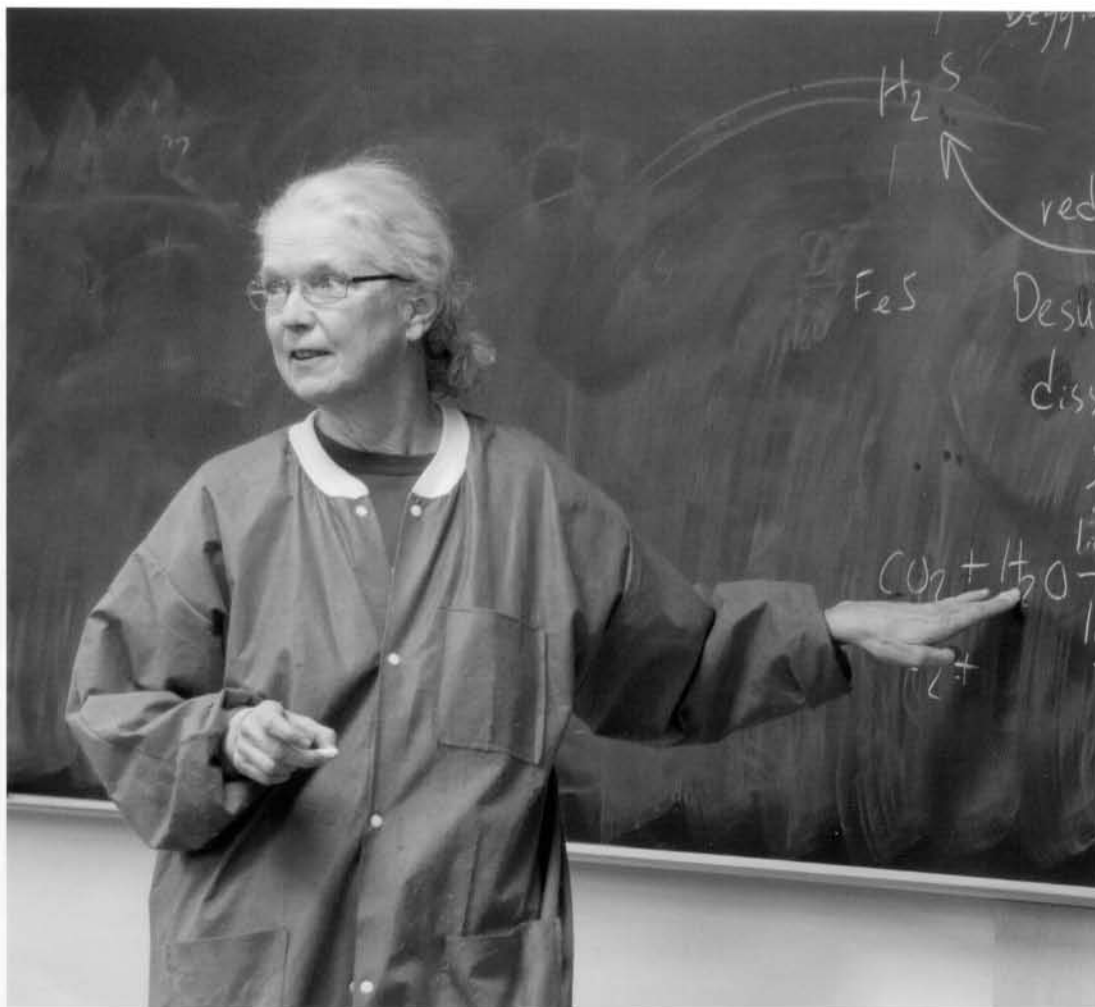


# in the Professional Lives of Faculty



St. Joseph's University

Luther College



the concept of agency has drawn particular attention because of its usefulness in thinking about how faculty manage their careers.

To define “agency,” we borrow from sociological traditions holding that individuals can and do influence their own life trajectories in intentional ways (Clausen 1991; Elder 1994; Lerner and Busch-Fossnagel 1981; Marshall 2000). In other words, our use of “agency” assumes that “all human beings have free will” to garner power and to create “work contexts conducive to the development of their thought over time” (Elder 1994, 964–65; see also Neumann, Terosky and Schell 2006). Within the context of faculty careers, we apply the word “agency” to questions of how faculty members can structure their own careers in ways that foster meaningful work, effective contributions, and professional passions.

What does assuming agency look like in the faculty career? Based on our case-study data of hundreds of faculty members in various

institutional types and career stages, we detected two key patterns of how some of these individual faculty members successfully assumed agency in crafting their careers: (1) creating structures intentionally to manage one’s priorities, and (2) developing beneficial relationships to foster one’s goals. In the following section, we provide examples of faculty members who represent these patterns. We acknowledge that “some individuals . . . are more effective than others in making positive events happen in the course of their development” (Clausen 1991, 810), and we believe that these examples—of faculty who are effective at making positive events happen in their careers—might be helpful to other faculty members who are striving to assume agency in their own work.

#### **Creating structures to manage priorities**

Agency is more than effective time management, although efficient use of time certainly assists. Agency is about prioritizing what really

matters in one's work and life; it's about reflecting on what drove a person into the professorial career or his or her discipline, determining one's potential contributions through his or her expertise, and then acting intentionally in one's career trajectory. Without the proper structures in place, however, a faculty member cannot manage his or her career in ways that promotes his or her priorities.

Several participants in our recent studies effectively created structures to manage their careers in ways that focused on priorities. One participant, Linda, a full professor of women's studies and health, follows a "quadrant approach" to structuring her time. According to the quadrant approach, which was introduced by Steven Covey, the author of several mainstream life-coaching books, one's personal and professional activities fall into four quadrants based on level of importance and urgency. Covey (1990) argues that people should strive to maximize their time in Quadrant II, which represents activities that are important, but not urgent. In short, Quadrant II consists of reflection, planning, and learning modalities—the very "stuff" needed to successfully assume agency. At midcareer, Linda struggled with the additional responsibilities of directing a women's health institute. By consulting colleagues from her professional field and turning to faculty mentors, she devised a new career structure that allowed her to carve out space for reflection and planning.

As a result, Linda designates the first third of every day on Quadrant II activities, such as reading in her field, reflecting on her teaching, planning her research and engagement activities, and determining resources to further her commitments and contributions (i.e., faculty development programs, partnerships with community organizations, fundraisers, etc.). Following her morning of Quadrant II activities, Linda then turns to more tangible activities such as attending meetings, answering emails, setting up logistics, and managing coursework. In the evening, Linda returns home and focuses on her personal life, leaving her computer and e-mail at the office. By prioritizing her Quadrant II activities and creating a disciplined approach to managing her career, Linda demonstrates one way to assume

**Participants in our studies commonly sought out and nurtured supportive relationships that foster their goals**

agency. Her success as a teacher and engaged scholar—as marked by respectable publication rates, glowing student evaluations, and positive contributions to community organizations—demonstrates her ability to effectively influence her professional (and personal)

life trajectory. Rather than allow the directorship position and its subsequent responsibilities determine her path, Linda, instead, assumed agency and paved her own route.

Lucy is an assistant professor of urban planning at a research university. She is also a community-engaged scholar, someone who connects her teaching and research to public issues. Shortly after arriving at her university, Lucy developed strategic partnerships with local nonprofit organizations, integrated service learning into her course curriculum, and engaged in action research on social issues; all of these activities received little support from the university's infrastructure. Colleagues in Lucy's department warned her that community-oriented service, research, and teaching might hinder her tenure bid. Despite the warnings, Lucy continued to follow this path because she decided that she would rather not be an academic than "give up on this type of work." While dedicating herself to being a community-engaged scholar, she also decided to structure her work in ways that would benefit her department, namely, by linking undergraduate and graduate requirements to particular social needs in the community and by winning major grants to support her action research and community partnerships. Although the outcome of her tenure bid has not yet been determined, Lucy feels more committed to her work than ever before because she is being true to her passion for using scholarship to promote social change.

**Developing supportive relationships**

Professors are often depicted as "lone rangers" working in isolated silos. The current realities of higher education, in fact, advance this notion of "lone rangers" as workloads/teaching loads increase and contingent positions rise. Studies show that developing supportive relationships is one of the key factors to improved faculty satisfaction (Hagedorn 2000). Moreover, networks often provide support for faculty in

their work, which, in turn, assists faculty in assuming agency in their careers.

Participants in our studies commonly sought out and nurtured supportive relationships that foster their goals. John, an associate professor of information science, manifests how a faculty member can build his capacity for agency by surrounding himself with networks that aid his growth. Prior to each semester, John proactively develops a plan for “skill-building” (e.g., how to use the e-mail system, how to create videos for classroom use) and “thinking-building” (e.g., how to approach a new line of research, strategies for balancing responsibilities) by reviewing the professional development offerings of his department and the faculty development center and determining which sessions will best support his teaching, research, and service endeavors. Besides learning valuable skills at these sessions, he actively networks with the other faculty attendees, administrators, and support staff members so that he develops “webs of support.” At these

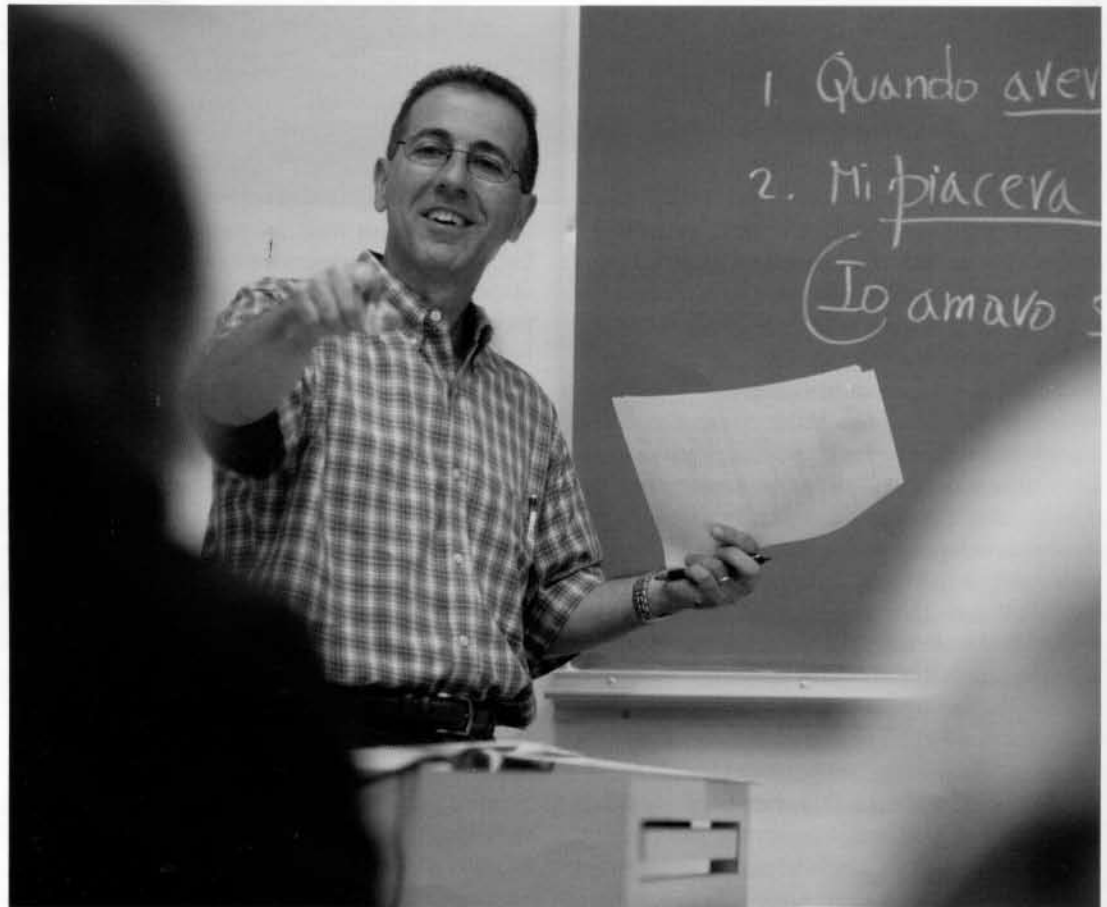
**Both individuals  
and academic  
environments  
benefit from the  
experience of agency**

sessions, he openly discusses his career plans and “throws out into the universe” his hopes for his work. John finds, in turn, that people are thrilled to assist him in his work. Before devising

this strategy, he avoided attending such sessions or events because he felt strapped for time. He now believes that every hour spent in a valuable “skill-building” or “thinking-building” session is gained back fourfold. By acting intentionally about his faculty development and using this forum as a means for developing supportive relationships, John demonstrates agency in action.

Latisha, an associate professor of Education, found out at the last minute from a colleague about an impromptu committee meeting the following day. When she explained that her husband was traveling and she could not secure childcare at such late notice, her colleague responded that he did not want to hear any “mommy excuses.” In a raised voice, he berated her in front of students and colleagues, questioning her dedication to the committee.

University of Maryland  
College Park





In the past, Latisha would have been greatly embarrassed and perhaps tried to find emergency childcare; however, she now participates in a faculty group aimed at changing the campus climate for work-family balance. Through her participation in this group, she has gained a sense of agency from their support and wisdom. As a response to her colleague, she confronted him on his tone and treatment of her and demanded an apology for his unprofessional behavior. Although she knew her confrontation would not necessarily improve his behavior, she felt grateful that this group of supportive colleagues had given her the wherewithal to stand up for herself and try to change the culture for others. Several colleagues who overheard both exchanges stopped Latisha that week and expressed gratitude for how she had handled the situation.

### Conclusion

We have highlighted two strategies taken by faculty as part of assuming agency in their professional lives—strategic career management efforts and the development of relationships and networks. There were many other factors that assisted our faculty members in assuming agency. Factors such as having tenure, utilizing a teaching and learning center, working with a supportive community partner, and holding significant social capital in a department, among other factors, no doubt played important roles. As such, these two strategies by themselves are by no means cure-alls for overloaded plates, discrimination, or lack of resources. In each case, the individual faculty member's well-being and the quality of his or her work environment was improved as a result of assuming agency. Even when there is backlash from colleagues or when a reward system rejects the faculty member's priorities, both individuals and academic environments benefit from the experience of agency. As such it is a critical area for future research and professional learning. □

To respond to this article, e-mail [liberaled@aacu.org](mailto:liberaled@aacu.org), with the authors' names on the subject line.

### REFERENCES

Clausen, J. 1991. "Adolescent Competence and the Shaping of the Life Course." *American Journal of Sociology* 96 (4): 805-842.

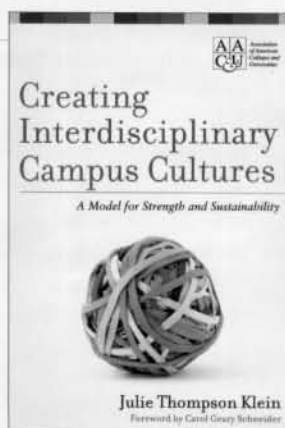
- Covey, S. 1990. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*. New York: Free Press.
- Elder, G. H. 1994. "Time, Human Agency, and Social Change: Perspectives on the Life Course." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 57 (1): 4-15.
- Hagedorn, L. S. 2000. *What Contributes to Job Satisfaction among Faculty and Staff?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lerner, R., and N. Busch-Rossnagel. 1981. "Individuals as Procedures of Their Development: Conceptual and Empirical Bases." In *Individuals as Producers of Their Development: A Life-Span Perspective*, edited by R. Lerner & N. Busch-Rossnagel, 1-36. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Meara, K., A. L. Terosky, and A. Neumann. 2008. *Faculty Careers and Work Lives: A Professional Growth Perspective*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Marshall, V. 2000. "Agency, Structure, and the Life Course in the Era of Reflexive Modernization." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Washington, DC.
- Neumann, A., A. L. Terosky, and J. Schell. 2006. "Agents of Learning: Strategies for Assuming Agency, for Learning, in Tenured Faculty Careers." In *The Balancing Act: Gendered Perspectives in Faculty Roles and Work Lives*, edited by S. J. Bracken, J. K. Allen, and D. R. Dean, 91-120. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

## From Jossey-Bass

# Creating Interdisciplinary Campus Cultures:

A Model for Strength and Sustainability

By Julie Thompson Klein



With increased interest in interdisciplinarity across the academy and funding agencies, the focus of this book is of heightened importance. It provides a systematic approach grounded in a conceptual framework and a portfolio of pragmatic strategies.

Co-published by AAC&U and Jossey-Bass publishers.  
Available from Jossey-Bass:  
[www.josseybass.com/WileyCDA](http://www.josseybass.com/WileyCDA)