

Supporting Early Career Faculty

Over the next year I will focus several of my columns on strengthening and expanding opportunities for professional development in geography. This is an area in which I have been working for over a decade, focusing especially on early-career faculty and graduate students pursuing academic careers. But, as I will discuss in future columns, there is an equally great need to improve support for geographers moving into non-academic careers, as well as for department leaders and for mid-career and senior faculty.

For geographers moving into academic careers, I think there are two reasons for improving support. First, as was noted in a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, many faculty arrive in their first jobs "without feeling that they were effectively prepared in graduate school for such key duties as teaching undergraduates and conducting research." Feeling overwhelmed by a first job is not unique to academic life, but research seems to indicate that the mismatch between training and job responsibilities is frequently greater among academics than for other comparable professionals. This is because many newly appointed professors find themselves facing challenges in teaching, research, and service that were never addressed explicitly in their graduate training. Added to these stresses are the difficulties of balancing professional life with personal and family responsibilities. Equally important, many new faculty take positions at colleges and universities with very different missions from those where they earned their degrees, in departments with far different expectations and responsibilities. New hires can, as a result, face a steep learning curve as they settle in to their new academic homes.

Second, a "hidden curriculum" is embedded in most graduate training—unspoken norms, rules, and assumptions needed for success. In many professions, mastering this type of implicit or tacit knowledge is often

an important rite of passage. But though there is nothing intrinsically wrong with such a hidden curriculum, it can too easily lead to inequalities and inequities. This is because factors like where a person studies, the advisor picked, or the department of a person's first job can have a substantial affect on their career if tacit knowledge is offered or withheld based upon personal characteristics irrelevant to scholarly and scientific achievement. Issues of gender, sexuality, age, family status, nationality, race, and ethnicity can too easily privilege or disadvantage access to the hidden curriculum. I believe that bringing the hidden curriculum of academic life into the open is a key step in enfranchising a greater diversity of geographers, attracting a wider variety of students, and opening the discipline to a broader array of voices.

There are many elements of the hidden curriculum, such as managing time, developing collegial relations, balancing professional and personal responsibilities, navigating the job search, preparing for reviews, advising and mentoring students, and planning career options. Some of these issues are addressed in graduate school, but the emphasis of doctoral education is, of course, research, writing and publishing. Even then, big questions remain for many faculty when they take their first jobs. Where should they publish; what are the grant and publishing expectations of their programs; how should they respond to reviews and interact with editors, how should they address ethical conflicts arising from research and writing; or how can they get the most out of the grant funding they receive? Some of the most stressful issues are those revolving around course planning, curriculum development, and teaching which usually aren't covered in great detail

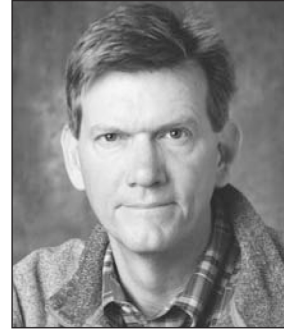
in graduate curricula. But research seems to indicate that, when new hires are offered help in these areas, not only do they do a better job in the classroom, they are more productive in all areas of their professional lives. Without help, early career faculty sometimes encounter problems for which

they aren't prepared—without realizing that solutions and assistance are often readily available. Such feelings of isolation amplify the stress and anxiety of the first years of a college job.

I am not suggesting that all of these topics should somehow be magically introduced into our graduate curriculum.

Instead, I advocate a more

systematic, community-based approach to supporting early career faculty: one that attempts to make professional development a more intrinsic and routine component of the life of our departments and discipline. This would, of course, entail introducing some of these topics in graduate school, but it would involve also raising them explicitly with new staff; discussing them in faculty meetings; and making them the subject of brownbag lunches, seminars, and colloquia—as is now done in some departments. It also implies helping graduate students and early career faculty build mentoring and support networks—also known as "communities of practice"—inside and outside their programs. And professional development should continue to be woven into our annual and regional meetings, as has been happening over the past decade. Just as our meetings are a key means of advancing geography's research frontiers, they should also be places for focusing on the many other elements of professional practice that are essential to our work. ■



Foote

Ken Foote
k.foote@colorado.edu

AAG Marble-Boyle Award nominations are now being accepted. See page 32 for details.