

New Challenges, New Priorities:
The Experience of Generation X Faculty

A Study for the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education

by

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Introduction

This study explores how Generation X (born 1964-1980) faculty are approaching their jobs, long-term careers, and work-life balance, and examines if and how the generational “clashes” reportedly arising in the workforce are being manifested in the academic environment. The study was designed to complement and build upon the COACHE Tenure-Track Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey by using qualitative interviews to explore many of the same themes in greater depth with a limited number of participants, and provide insights into how those themes play out in the day-to-day lives of individual faculty members. While the survey provides a snapshot of how tenure-track faculty are feeling about their current job situation, this study examines the broader context of faculty members’ long-term careers, and the interplay between their work and non-work lives.

Like all COACHE initiatives, the overall purpose of this study is to inform institutional policy and practice. To date, much of the information about Generation X faculty and generational differences in academia is anecdotal; by conducting systematic research that explores the priorities, attitudes, and behaviors of the new generation of faculty, we will better understand the true generational picture in academia, and be able to recommend effective policies and practices to help institutions recruit and retain top Generation X faculty, manage generational differences, and ultimately, maintain a satisfied and productive faculty workforce.

Methodology

The study consisted of sixteen interviews with faculty and administrators at three COACHE institutions in the mid-Atlantic region – one small private liberal arts college, one private master’s institution, and one large public research university. All of the faculty interviewed were members of Generation X. Because the administrator interviews focused on institutional policy and practice, it was not required that the participants be Generation X’ers themselves; however, by chance, all but one were in fact members of Generation X. Faculty in a variety of disciplines were interviewed, including English, chemistry, business, law, engineering, medicine, theater, and education. The posts held by administrators interviewed included Provost, Vice Provost, Associate Dean, and Department Chair. Of the sixteen participants, six were male and ten were female. Two were African American, and two grew up outside the U.S.

As is the case with most qualitative research, the generalizability of the findings of this study is limited due to small sample size – both in terms of individuals and institutions. However, exploring in-depth the experience of individuals often yields new insights and perspectives that would be difficult to capture using other research methods. This study is no exception; a number of interesting – and in some cases, unexpected – themes emerged in the course of the interviews, as well as new perspectives on previously identified themes and issues. The findings of the study are summarized and supported by participant quotes in the following sections; in keeping with the overall purpose of the COACHE project, the report concludes with data-based recommendations to institutions for effective policies and practices to support Generation X faculty and create a positive and productive work environment for faculty members of all generations.

Clash or No Clash: How Different Generations Are Getting Along

While participants noted that there are differences between Generation X faculty and their colleagues of different generations, very few characterized those differences as “clashes.”

Contrary to what is often reported in the popular press about inter-generational relationships in the workplace, almost universally, the faculty in this study reported that they do not perceive a clash among different generations of faculty. For example, one participant noted:

“I don’t perceive a clash. I think maybe because academia is just so staid – a professor is a professor is a professor, regardless of how old they are. Some of them have just been at it longer than others. So you don’t get into this, ‘What’s wrong with you? When I was your age I was focused on getting the next promotion.’ Here, there is no transitioning from one job role to the other, so we’re all focused on doing the same things.”

Participants did, however, note that they perceive inter-generational differences among faculty; in particular, in the level of formality of interactions with students as well as comfort with technology. Comments included:

“[Gen X] is much less formal. When people in their fifties started out, there was much more distance between faculty and students. If you were meeting with a student, it was for strictly academics and business purposes. You had your meeting, the student left, and that was that. [In contrast, my colleague] down the hall (born in 1966) has always got students in his office. He plays tennis with them. It’s just a completely different relationship, and me being even younger, I just see myself even more blurring the distinction between the high and mighty professor, and the lowly students, so to speak. I see us as all being in this together.”

“[There’s] no big generational clash that I can think of, maybe just some people more comfortable with technology than others. Some people might appear inflexible, and they’re older, but I think their inflexibility isn’t really a matter of ‘I’m not comfortable with change.’ It’s a matter of, ‘I’m really good at what I do. This is how I teach [my subject] and frankly, it’s perfect.’”

Two other generational differences noted by participants—greater focus by Gen X’ers on interdisciplinarity and their emphasis on cooperation versus competition with colleagues—are explored in detail in subsequent sections.

There are some notable intra-generational differences between early and late Gen X’ers.

A number of older Gen X faculty – born in the late 1960’s – commented that they perceive differences between themselves and their younger Gen X colleagues. For example:

“It seems like the early Gen X’ers – in the first five years or so – we are more in line with the people before us in that we are happy to work very hard. We’re happy to stay as long as it [takes] to take care of the patients. We were extremely prepared when we went into the operating room, or onto the wards, and it really has taken a dramatic turn since I finished up [my training].”

“[Sometimes you hear late X’ers] referred to as the “Me Generation” – people born in the mid-’70s, or early ‘80s. Whether it’s the fact that for many of their families both parents worked, and there wasn’t much time, so the kids were maybe a little bit more spoiled...or whether it’s TV programs, or music, or entertainment, or whatever that’s pushing the envelope...it’s more and more about whatever makes them feel good. Short-term happiness is what’s important, not long-term happiness or working hard.”

Along similar lines, while the younger X’ers often cited interacting with students as one of the highlights of their jobs, older X’s reported more frustrations with their Generation Y students. Their complaints about students mirrored their frustrations with their younger Gen X colleagues. For example:

“I think today’s generation of students has changed; undergrads today really don’t want to learn. They just want you to tell them what they have to know, how to pass the test, and be done with it. When I started [college], people really had this fundamental desire to learn. And it was evident when you would give homework assignments...[now] the kids just complain about the amount of work. When I was a student, professors gave us homework and we did it. We complained to ourselves about it, but we would never go to class and say, ‘Why did you give us eight problems when you could have just given us one.’”

In sum, while Gen X faculty clearly perceive some differences – both inter- and intra-generational – between themselves and their colleagues, only a few reported significant tension as a result, and even fewer cited actual clashes. In general, faculty generations seem to be getting along reasonably well – at least from the Gen X perspective.

When It’s Right, It’s Right: Long-term Career Plans and Thoughts on Tenure

Very few of the Gen X faculty interviewed have plans to leave their current institutions.

A common perception of Generation X’ers in general is that they lack commitment to their jobs and employers, and are constantly seeking “the next best thing.” As one Baby Boomer administrator noted:

“My understanding of the generation 20 years younger than I am, and this includes my children – is that they can expect to change jobs seven to ten

times during their careers. So, one of the differences that I see is a willingness of faculty and other professionals to look at a tenure track appointment, or a tenured appointment as, perhaps, a stepping stone – as something that doesn't necessarily represent a permanent commitment.”

However, when asked about the likelihood that Gen Xers will leave their current institutions in the next five years, we get a very different picture of propensity for job-hopping. A large majority (13 of the 16 participants) reported that they are very unlikely to leave their current positions, and that they have no plans to do so – within the next five years, or in many cases, ever. Comments included:

“[The likelihood that I'll leave this institution in the next five years is] virtually zero...something very dramatic would have to happen. Somebody would have to offer me an immediate tenured position at a more prestigious institution that's in a location that my wife and I can both be employed. That won't happen. We're both doing jobs we like that are in the same city that have a reasonable sense of security, so it's hard for me to believe how a scenario would arise to change that.”

“[The likelihood that I'll leave in the next five years] is extremely low. I've had two [other] schools approach me this year, and I'm not inclined to go anywhere. I'm homegrown from this school, and I've enjoyed watching it change – there's something about me that says, 'Go little horse, go.'”

Among the three participants who stated that they are likely to leave their present jobs, two were administrators seeking higher-level positions that they felt it would not be possible to attain at their current institutions. The third was a faculty member hoping to secure an academic position in another country for personal and family reasons. All three, however, noted firmly that while their current position may not be their last, they are not interested in job-hopping indefinitely. A statement by one faculty member nicely summarized the overall sentiment of the participants: “I want some stability. I want a place to call home. I want to put some deep roots in, and fully invest, and commit, and serve a community.”

Flexibility, variety of activities, freedom, and autonomy are the aspects of their jobs that Gen X faculty value most. Constant demands and an overwhelming workload are their main complaints.

Faculty were remarkably consistent in their assessments of the pros and cons of their jobs – regardless of institution type, discipline, etc. Their comments on this topic included:

“I like the freedom – that is probably the best thing, to come and go when I want. I would say the best things are freedom and flexibility.”

“[What I like best is] the balance. It's a classic teacher-scholar model, and for me it was important in the job I took that every aspect of it be something where your efforts would be rewarded.”

“I think [what's hard is] just the constant demands, right?...the sheer work-

load, and the number of hats that you wear. I'm like most academics – I'm not a multi-tasker – I'm a focuser. I'm really, really good at focusing, but there are millions of different sorts of things to keep track of.”

“[The job permeates] every pore. And that's why we pick it – because we love it enough to go through the ridiculous hoops you have to go through to get it done. But it's still just exhausting.”

Not surprisingly given that so few of the faculty interviewed said they are planning to leave their current jobs, participants noted that while the workload presents challenges, the pros of their jobs outweigh the cons – in many cases by a long shot. Overall satisfaction levels among the X'ers interviewed were generally quite high.

Geography and spouse/partner job opportunities are top priorities for Gen X'ers.

Those faculty who are considering job changes – and other faculty when asked why they had changed jobs previously or when pressed on what might ultimately compel them to change jobs in the future – almost universally cited geographical considerations, including the availability of jobs for spouses/partners. For example:

“I am a native of [this state], so any time opportunities in [this area] popped up, it's appealing to me. I missed more things when I was [at my previous institution in another state] than I do [here] just because I couldn't go home every weekend. Now I have better balance than I did.”

“I have no complaints about this job – I just wish it was somewhere else. My husband works in a job that is relatively portable, and he's amenable to moving. He doesn't like [this city], which is another factor, as I get pressure from him about not liking it here. [But] the job market [in the country we're hoping to move to] is even tighter than the American job market – I was extremely lucky to get this job, so I don't know.”

Notably, none of the faculty interviewed mentioned any factors directly involving their jobs themselves (e.g. better pay, an offer from a more prestigious institution, more research support etc.), again revealing X'ers' relative contentment with their work and shedding light on their overall priorities.

When it comes to tenure, Gen X faculty are mildly positive about the concept, and not too stressed about the process.

Tenure – the concept generally as well as the process itself – is both unique to the higher education context, and is one of the aspects of academia that often elicits the strongest reactions, from insiders and outsiders alike. The feelings of the Gen X'ers interviewed for this study, however, were surprisingly mild – both in terms of the concept of tenure itself and the process of attaining it. In terms of the concept, and the importance of tenure to the academic enterprise, although a couple of faculty stated that they feel tenure is unnecessary, or even detrimental to academia (the classic “deadwood” argument was raised), most participants' opinions could be described as mildly positive. For example:

“I think that on the whole – like I think about many things in academics – on the whole, it’s like democracy – it basically works, right? There are a lot of casualties – there are a lot of bad things to say about it, but any other solutions, I don’t see. I do still think that it’s very important to have a kind of intellectual freedom, and I think there’s a rough justice in it. It doesn’t always work. It’s sometimes incredibly unfair, sometimes not administrated well. I mean, really, it is like how I feel about the democratic process. I believe in it. I think it’s the best. I can’t think of a better way of doing it.”

Gen X faculty opinions on the tenure process were similarly mild; most seemed not to find it overly stressful. For example:

“I know that the process my colleague just went through for six years was fair and she just got tenure. I think generally she felt empowered, although she was anxious. I don’t know why people get too stressed; when I get there, I’m not going to be too stressed about it.”

“I’m going to let my work – I hope this doesn’t sound too pretentious – I’m just going to let my actions speak, be myself, work hard, do things that make sense. It’s kind of like what I tell my students: Don’t worry about the grade, just do the work, it will take care of itself. I know it sounds Zen, and like ‘go make the path by walking.’ Maybe that’s my Gen X influence, I don’t know – I just know that that’s the way I’ll approach it.”

In sum, once all the factors they are looking for in a job – including geography and career opportunities for their spouses – align, X’er faculty have no intention of going anywhere. While the heavy workload and other aspects of academic jobs may inspire some complaints, the faculty interviewed were clear that the pros strongly outweigh the cons. Tenure, though not a perfect concept, is generally viewed positively because it ensures X’ers will be able to stay where they are. In short, for Generation X faculty, when it’s right, it’s right; they appear to know a good thing when they see it, and have no intention of letting it go once they have it.

Defining Excellence: Quality Over Quantity, Efficiency, and “Diminishing Returns”

Gen X faculty are extremely committed to excellence in their work.

Another common perception of Gen X is that it is the “slacker” generation, and that X’ers are not interested in working hard or excelling in their careers. The experiences and attitudes of the Gen X’ers interviewed for this study firmly contradict this characterization; though participants were not asked explicitly about their sense of professional responsibility and commitment to excellence in their work, comments made throughout the interviews indicated clearly how they feel. For example:

“If I’m given a course to teach, I’m going to do my absolute best at it. And I enjoy doing research – I still am fundamentally attracted to discovering new things as a scientist.”

“[Ultimately,] I want to get to [the] full professor [level], and I want to be able to enjoy that status, and to be able to contribute to my [academic] universe... and seeing it move forward. I do perceive that it is my responsibility as a full professor to make sure that I keep the line going, that everything I like continues, and that we address the challenges as they come forward and figure out ways to deal with them.”

X'ers value quality over quantity in their work, and prioritize efficiency.

While Gen X faculty indicated in no uncertain terms that they are committed to excellence in their work, their definitions of “excellence” may vary from those of their older colleagues. First, a key component of the X'er definition of excellence is “quality over quantity,” which a number of participants noted is a departure from the definition held by faculty of previous generations. For example:

“One thing that I would say the ‘old guard’ was responsible for is not being able to say no. There was a moment [a while ago when] we had 50-some majors [in our department], [many of whom] were just floating out there. Everyone was doing everything, and the person who was driving the ship was doing everything. But I think the ‘new guard’ is saying [that] less is more.”

A number of faculty specifically noted their desire to focus on quality over quantity in terms of research and publications; rather than simply accumulating publications as fast as possible, their preference – when feasible within the policy and cultural frameworks of their institutions and disciplines – is to spend time focusing on their most interesting and significant research, and aim for publication in top-flight journals.

Similarly, a second piece of the Gen X definition of excellence is efficiency. X'er faculty are not concerned with “face time” – for themselves or for their colleagues. For them, spending 16 hours a day in their office does not equate with being an “excellent” faculty member or being committed to one's work. On the contrary, faculty members' comments suggest that they see doing so as a sign that they are not using their time effectively and productively – a weakness, rather than a strength, and something to improve upon. Participants noted:

“My biggest concern going forward is that I want to be able to be good at my job but work 8:00 to 6:00 five days a week...at this stage I'm not efficient enough...going forward, that's my biggest challenge. My biggest fear [is] not being able to do that, and that would be the only thing that would maybe get me out of academics. I want to do good work. I want to succeed, but I don't want to work 18 hours a day.”

“In terms of organizational culture, there is a tendency [in academia] to talk too much about wonderful initiatives, and save the discussion about the resources that would be needed to make them happen until the end. Then you find out, oh, by the way, there are no resources available – so why did you waste all the time talking about it in the first place? So, there can be kind of a time wasting process that goes on in academia – you have to get

used to that.”

“I’m assuming faculty members are like this [elsewhere too] – we can beat some thing to death – to death! I have been at meetings where we have talked for 45 minutes about how we’re going to talk about the issue – just teeing it up! I feel like there’s something in me that might not be a perfect match [to this culture], in that I’m pretty mission-oriented and this group of people isn’t...it’s more process-oriented...forget the mission. And I’m like, “Can we just make a decision and move on?” And the answer is, ‘No, we can’t.’ I just [want to] say, ‘Someone please, please excuse me from this meeting or do something!’”

It was a business faculty member who, using the language of his own discipline, perhaps best encapsulated the X’er philosophy of quality, efficiency, and excellence; when his comments and the idea of “diminishing returns” were relayed to participants in subsequent interviews, many agreed with his assessment:

“I would make a distinction between excellence and in some areas, and kind of optimizing your life. We all respond to the incentives that we’re given, so to my mind, if there’s a certain benefit to doing research, and you’ve done enough to maximize the benefit that you’re going to get from it, and there are other areas where you could allocate your time, where you could get more benefit, either in the form of money or recognition or whatever it might be – fun – that if you start allocating more time to, say, research beyond what it takes to max out your reward at the expense of allocating time towards something else, then you’ve sub-optimized. You’re pursuing excellence in an area for no return, and you’re giving up something where you could get a return.”

“There’s really nothing to be gained by closing your door and working until 11:00 o’clock at night, other than the tenure hurdle that is somewhere out there. If you want to pole vault over it, you go right ahead, but no one here is going to back up the Brinks truck and start dumping all this cash on you, simply because you’ve decided to work like you have three jobs. So that’s the approach I take – sometimes you have to know when there’s this point of diminishing return, where if I keep pounding at this one front, then yes, I may nail it, but at the same time, it will then for a very high cost in other areas.”

Forget the Joneses: Mentoring, Non-Competitiveness, and Collegiality

Being mentored is generally very important to Gen X faculty. Serving as a mentor for others is an even greater priority.

Almost all of the participants in this study reported having had a mentor at some point in their careers. Many, in fact, reported that they had (and continue to have) multiple mentors for different purposes. As one participant noted:

“I have got a whole bunch of [mentors]. Connecting with people is one of the things that I think I do pretty well. So I have got faculty members from undergrad that still mentor me about certain things. And what I have discovered is you have different mentors for different reasons. So right now [I have] a cadre of people that I talk to on a fairly regular basis.”

Participants also detailed the characteristics of their relationships with their mentors; in many cases, they noted that those relationships are informal, and often two-directional. For example:

“I have had people, not just one person. When I run into little problems, there are certain people I go to. I don’t know if I would call them mentors. I would just call them good friends. If I have a problem in a certain area, I would choose this person; if I have a problem in this [other] area, I would choose that person.”

“Mentoring is really big for me, and I can’t imagine a time when I wouldn’t have [them]. And they come in all persuasions. I’ve got a guy at [another institution] who is a full professor in [my field] – I am like ‘you are my mentor,’ and he is like, “No, really, you are mentoring me.” So it is a two-way street.”

Though most participants reported having received mentoring, there was a handful who either had not sought mentoring, or had difficulty finding someone to serve that role for them. Regardless of whether they themselves had been mentored, however, all participants noted that they are committed to serving as a mentor for others; more than one participant stated that they feel a “sense of responsibility” to do so as they advance in their careers. In terms of their “mentees,” a number of participants mentioned mentoring students, but many noted that because they are still in the early stages of their careers, they are just now starting to mentor their younger faculty colleagues. Reflective of their own relationships with mentors, a number of participants noted that their relationships with “mentees” are often informal. Comments included:

“Informally, I give advice. We mentor students about how you navigate in life, and how you make big choices, and things like that. And as a “career switcher,” I can give people perspective there, too. But for the most part until I’m tenured, it’s just – I can give you my thoughts, but I don’t even know how it’s going to work out for me yet.”

“I don’t know that I am...prominent enough, but I know that I had this job when friends of mine from grad school were still looking for work, and they leaned on me a lot for job application help and stuff like that. So, I did...I don’t know if that would be mentoring. It’s just sort of sharing what experience I have [but] I don’t really have enough experience to be somebody’s, like, ‘capital M’ mentor.”

Some of the administrators interviewed noted that their institutions have recently implemented – or have plans to implement – formal mentoring programs. Faculty were generally supportive of these efforts, though some expressed skepticism about whether mentoring relationships could/should be “imposed” rather than allowed to develop organically. As one participant stated, “Formal mentoring sounds a little heavy.”

Gen X faculty value collegiality, and eschew competition with colleagues.

Consistent with their enthusiasm for mentoring, another trait among Gen X faculty is non-competitiveness, and a desire to support, rather than compete with, their colleagues. Participants noted:

“One thing I find about myself, and I think it’s probably true for the generation, is I’m very ambitious. I’m not especially competitive. In fact, it’s sometimes painful for me to have something that somebody [else] doesn’t have. And I think that that’s probably true [for many of us] – we’re all very ambitious, but not competitive, and that’s a really new combination.”

“I have a long history of not worrying about whether or not I get rewarded for my accomplishments. I’m not a super competitive person...People who work at [more prestigious institutions than mine] are like, ‘Well, I guess that’s an okay job but you don’t write very many papers.’ I’m sure I don’t, but I write good ones. So, if you want to look down your nose at that, I don’t care.”

The fact that Generation X faculty may be less interested in comparing themselves to their peers does not mean that they are apathetic toward their colleagues or that they want to work in their own little bubbles. On the contrary, as their comments about their commitment to mentoring colleagues confirm, X’ers, in fact, want to see their colleagues succeed. Importantly, they are taking steps to make sure this happens, and are effecting concrete cultural change as a result. The experience of one participant provides a compelling example:

“When I came [here], [a particular colleague] and I quickly forged a bond, in part, because everyone else was tenured except for us. We [started] reading each other’s stuff – and I don’t mean just like, ‘Yes, it’s great,’ I mean tearing it apart. ‘Here’s everything I can think of, hope some of it’s helpful,’ repeatedly. You know, the sixth time, ‘Is the introduction better?’ We found that that really worked for us. My second [article] placement landed [in a very prestigious journal]; his first placement landed at [another very prestigious journal].”

And that's when we went, "Oh, this is how you do it! This is how." It was more just kind of us, you know, being the two little kids – we might as well show each other our work. But we quickly figured out that that's how you do it, and so the two hires that came after us, we did it with both of them. [We said,] "We don't know, but this is our experience, and we'd be happy to do it for you." And very quickly it became our culture, so it's very ingrained now."

In sum, rather than concerning themselves with "keeping up with the Joneses," X'er faculty, it seems, are more interested in making sure that both they and the Joneses – and all of their colleagues – are productive and successful in their careers. Collegiality has long been an espoused faculty value in academia; through the powerful combination of non-competitiveness and genuine support for their colleagues, X'ers seem to be taking this value to heart and perhaps taking it to a new level – much to the benefit of their students, disciplines, and academia as a whole.

Interdisciplinarity – One Way or Another

Gen X'ers value interdisciplinary work, but the type of interdisciplinary work they engage in varies.

The importance of interdisciplinary work has become an increasingly common theme on many college and university campuses, and has begun to receive substantial attention in the higher education literature. The faculty interviewed in this study confirmed loud and clear that interdisciplinarity is a significant priority for them, with a number noting that this is a change from previous generations; for example, one participant commented: "I think there's a greater support for reaching out to colleagues across disciplines. My sense is that it is generational – that's how a lot of people are trained now."

However, the types of interdisciplinary work Gen X'ers engage in, and how they incorporate it into their careers, vary significantly. In research, some X'ers work with colleagues in other fields on collaborative projects, while others incorporate perspectives and methods from a variety of fields into work they do on their own. Similarly, in teaching, some participants cited examples of team teaching, while others work to incorporate different perspectives into their own classes. Many faculty noted that they participate in interdisciplinary projects in the service realm, e.g. on institution-wide committees, as well as in their communities. Examples of participants' interdisciplinary work include:

"It's something that I never would have envisioned doing. I'm a [scientist]. I met [a colleague who is in a related but separate field] who wanted to do a particular experiment, but he didn't know how to do it and I didn't really know how to do it, either, but I thought we could figure it out. And that just launched us off onto a nice interdisciplinary project, looking at [a topic that's of interest to both of us]. It's an ongoing interdisciplinary project that has just been wonderful for me in terms of grant funding – not publications yet, but hopefully we'll get there."

"My undergraduate degree is in [a totally different field from the one I teach in now]. My way of thinking and the work that I like to do is always a bit interdisciplinary. I don't think I'm out there blowing my horn saying I'm

doing avant-garde interdisciplinary work, but certainly at a liberal arts college, you have a lot of room in how you teach and what you teach to be interdisciplinary.”

“As a scholar, I’m most interested in real world people knowing what I’m doing, so I do a lot of collaborative work with companies and the [a medical school in the area]. The fact that I’m working with them gives me a sense of kind of professional belonging, whereas simply teaching doesn’t get you that same sensation.”

X’ers believe that interdisciplinary work is generally becoming more accepted in academia, but its acceptability varies by field and institution.

In addition to answering questions about their own experiences with interdisciplinarity, participants were asked to what extent they thought interdisciplinary work was “accepted” in their fields and at their institutions. Participant responses addressed the acceptance of interdisciplinarity in four inter-related realms: research funding, publication, the tenure process, and institutional support, policies, and culture. The overall consensus was that progress is being made in each of these areas, but there is still much room for improvement. Some of the major funding agencies, for example, are prioritizing interdisciplinary research, and institutions are including interdisciplinarity in their strategic plans and are beginning to implement concrete policies to support it. The extent to which such work is accepted by publishers varies somewhat by field, as does its impact on the tenure decisions of individual faculty members. As Generation X faculty progress in their careers and come to comprise a larger and larger proportion of tenure committees, senior administrators, and journal editors, it is likely that support for interdisciplinary work will continue to grow, and that such work will ultimately become a key priority for much of academia.

Work-life Balance

Gen X faculty feel very harried in trying to balance their work and family lives.

The fact that work-life balance is an important issue for the participants in this study is unlikely to come as a surprise; perhaps more than any other characterization of Generation X, the priority they place on work-life balance has been a focus of research and articles in the popular press. The experiences of the individual faculty in this study very clearly confirm that work-life balance is indeed a key priority for academic X’ers; comments included, for example:

“My whole career starting from the age of 21 has been a shift and a correction towards more and more balance, and a continual set of decisions to choose quality of life over money and stature.”

“I see my life completely as a series of decisions saying I choose my time, my peace, my happiness, over some other things – not completely, but to a large extent.”

While achieving and maintaining work-life balance is something X’er faculty value greatly, it is also one of their greatest challenges. Literally all of the participants noted at least some aspect of their current work-life balance situation that they wished to change; as one participant sur-

mised, “I think that that’s a common denominator for all of us.”

Overall faculty feel harried; as one participant noted, they feel like they are “running, running, running” all the time. The feeling was universal regardless of institution type, discipline, and tenure status. Comments included:

“I think I work really hard and that my wife works very hard, too, probably too hard. I’m on call every fourth night, every fourth weekend. And we both – once we’re done and get the kids in bed and they go to sleep around 8:30, we’re both at our desks in front of computers, and then we stay up late, often, and work on stuff. So [we] probably work too much.”

“[The pace] is something that stresses me out more than anything, because I am trying to do everything here. Every single night this week I’ve had some sort of meeting at 4:30 or 5:30 or 6:30 or 8:30. Right now, when the interview is done I’m going to go get my daughter, and I’m going to go get my son, and I’m going to come back here. My daughter, I’m going to send to the library, and my son I’m going to have here working on his [school project,] while I go across the way to a lecture. But that’s insane, right? That’s just an insane way to live your day, right?”

Although all faculty interviewed struggle with work-life balance, it is harder for parents and dual career couples.

Though work-life balance challenges are a universal experience for the faculty interviewed in this study, it is the parents among the participants who seem to encounter the greatest difficulty in this realm. A number of participants commented on how things have changed since they had children – for example:

“To be honest, having a kid completely changes everything. [My colleague] down the hall, who’s in my generation, he’s also a tenured professor. His wife is a physician. Doctors don’t exactly have easy lives, either, but they don’t have any children. Their lives are still basically completely free. He does his work here, goes home and watches television all night. When you have children it’s just a non-stop – there’s always something to be done. You relish the [time] when they spend 15 minutes [playing] with toys.”

Male and female participants alike noted the challenges of parenting; a number commented that because both they and their spouses work, they share parenting responsibilities. Nonetheless, nearly all participants agreed that the childcare responsibilities fall more heavily on mothers than on fathers, and therefore, the work-life balance challenge is more difficult for faculty moms than dads. Comments along these lines included:

“My wife [is] in some ways [the primary caregiver]. I mean, I am hands-on, I am involved – except when I’ve been pulled away by the things I need to do here [at work], that are different than her job. Many, many days I’m not home during ‘bed-byes,’ as we call it.”

“I totally believe in equality, but I also don’t think we’re the same, and so that’s one thing – the biological imperatives that have come up in watching my children and me, it’s just different. I try to [help], but definitely the burden...the greater burden...[is on the] Mommies.”

X’er faculty members’ strategies for dealing with work-life balance vary considerably, but they do not expect institutions to “fix” the situation for them.

Perhaps the best way to describe faculty members’ strategies for managing work-life balance is that they “cobble it together.” Participants were asked to describe their daily routines, and how they make it work. No two of these were the same; in many cases, no two days were even the same for individual participants. For some faculty, the key to balance is avoiding “spillover,” i.e. maintaining separation between their work and non-work lives. As one faculty member commented:

“I love my boundaries, and I know that makes me older than I actually am. I have a cell phone, and it’s a pay-as-you-go cell phone, and I don’t give just anybody the number. I have it only in case of emergencies. My husband has a computer at home, and I have a laptop that I use in my office. But I tend not to bring it home, and I tend not to read e-mail from home. I’m low-tech precisely because when I’m off, I really love being off.”

Conversely, for other faculty, it is by integrating their work and non-work lives that they feel best able to maintain balance. For example:

“One of the reasons we picked the house we did is I needed a study, and my husband needed a study, and because our kids are the ages they are, that study didn’t have to be like out in the back yard, or something. If you have a two-year-old, then it’s a completely different thing. My study’s upstairs right next to the bedroom, so my children can feel that even though I’m working at night, I’m right there with them.”

In addition to discussing their personal strategies for finding and maintaining work-life balance, participants were asked about ways institutions might support faculty in doing so. On this topic, the Baby Boomer administrator noted that he perceived X’er faculty as expecting their institutions to help them find solutions:

“[I think there is] perhaps a difference in expectation from Gen-X faculty about what the institution should provide [in terms of support for work-life balance]. That there is an expectation that an institution like ours should be addressing those needs somewhat. That wasn’t the case of people of my generation. It certainly wasn’t for my parents’ generation.”

For the most part, however, the comments from faculty participants did not, in fact, confirm this impression. One participant’s comments were representative of overall sentiment:

“I think work-life balance is something that you need to know for yourself, what balance works for you and what you want to do, and then find the organization that provides it. Not all do.”

Though in general they do not expect their institutions to solve the work-life balance equation for them, participants did offer some suggestions for how their institutions might support them. Virtually all of these addressed parenting issues; chief among them were designing and – perhaps most importantly – effectively implementing family-friendly policies such as “stop the clock” provisions in the tenure code, ensuring that work schedules are conducive to child-care responsibilities, and providing on-site childcare, though faculty have a realistic understanding of the budget and space constraints that may prevent institutions from accomplishing this.

Despite the challenges, most X'er faculty would not change much about their current work-life situations.

Despite their crazed schedules and long days, and regardless of support they received from their institutions, and their perceptions of how successful they have been in achieving balance, faculty are generally comfortable with the decisions they made both personally and professionally:

“Have there been some tradeoffs? Yes. I am 43. I don't have kids. Did I want to have kids? Yes, I wanted to have kids. I wasn't going to have them by myself – that was just a personal choice. So there have been some tradeoffs. Do I have any regrets about it? No. I am really happy, and I am enjoying life, and I have been places I would have never gone – not that I never thought I would go, but I have been places that I didn't know how I was going to get there.”

“I think there's always this fantasy for academics that if we could figure out the teaching schedule – Is it Tuesday and Thursday? Is it maybe Monday, Wednesday, Friday? – that we would be able to – that these blocks of time would open up. But they never do. I've watched my father, who's also a professor and I watched him spend his entire life waiting for the next article to be done, and I'm trying to figure out how not to do that.”

“I think the other thing that we're seeing in terms of his generation and my generation is that...a marriage can sustain one sort of super-star career – like one big career at Yale or Harvard or whatever – but not two. And certainly not two with kids, right? My husband and I have settled for two mid-range careers. We're both doing the things that we really, really like. It is a much happier recipe for a marriage than my father's generation. I mean, he did that whole 'Research One' thing, and he paid dearly for it. I mean, he's a wonderful guy. I think the world of him, but I looked [at the choices he made, and] I think [the way my husband and I are doing it] makes for better marriages.”

In sum, though most of the faculty interviewed would like to make some adjustments to their work-life balance, and many would certainly appreciate additional support, they are, at the end of the day, making it work – and for the most part, they are happy with how it is all turning out.

The Quest for Community

Gen X faculty lack a sense of community, and are struggling to find it.

One of the advantages of qualitative research is that it allows for and facilitates the emergence of new themes and issues in the course of data collection and analysis. It was in the second interview of the study that the subject of community was raised explicitly by a participant, in response to a catch-all “Is there anything else you would like to tell me?” question at the end of the interview. The participant’s in-depth and lengthy response indicated clearly that this was an issue that has affected him deeply, into which he has put significant thought. His reflections included:

“I think this goes well beyond faculty. I think there’s actually a deep craving for community among my generation, but less of [a feeling of community] than there has ever been in any previous generation. And I don’t really know why. I’m not a sociologist. I’m sure there are people who have thought about this, and I don’t think this is just my experience, but I have observed older people both in the community I live in, and at [my institution] who have much deeper relationships with each other, and I don’t think it’s just from being on the faculty for a long time. I think those relationships developed and have [been] sustained over the years, and I don’t see those – I don’t see in my case any such relationships slowly ramping up, if you know what I mean?”

“I wouldn’t even think anymore of calling a colleague at home unless it were a dire emergency. You wouldn’t think of ringing your next-door neighbor’s doorbell anymore. That sense of informal community – that was still present when I was a kid growing up. That sense of informal community is gone, and not much has come in to replace it.”

This participant’s feelings about the issue were so strong that it seemed important to follow up on the topic in subsequent interviews. Doing so revealed that almost all of the other participants had similar experiences, and similarly strong feelings, as well as much to say on the issue. Their comments reflected considerable sadness and anxiety about this lack, and a sense of helplessness in terms of figuring out what to do about it. Examples of comments along these lines included:

“I try to cultivate [community]. I’m failing miserably at it, but I know what it is and what it...I have little glimpses of what it could look like, and I’ve got examples, and models, or people, or relationships that are beginning to feel like it, but there are a lot of things that conspire against it all the time.”

“I think that work community is a strong value for me, and I do have ties here. I do. But you’d think I’d have more, since I’ve been here for a long time. And I’m not great – I’ve actually asked myself is it because my plate is just so full? Or if I’m just a bad person and recluse? But I also think that I don’t do a good job of keeping up with friends in other places. If you’re not in my little world, you’re not in my little world.”

In terms of explaining why community is so elusive for them, participants suggested a number of factors. These included busy schedules, as well as geographic factors such as moving away from family and one's "roots," and living in a large city rather than a smaller community. Comments included:

"I think everybody wants to sort of feel like they're part of a community. I tried to start a young [faculty] group when I came here – there were eight or so faculty members in my department that had been on staff less than five years, and so I tried to get that going. But they were so busy running around with their [own] stuff, it never really materialized."

"A lot of academics are not living where their roots are – you go to where the jobs are. We have no family in [this city]. It feels like everyone we know outside of [my institution] has lived in [this city] their entire life. Their parents lived [here] their entire life, and don't understand why anyone would move here or move from here."

"[At my previous institution, there] was a very good social community because it is a small town. Everybody lives near each other, and you can't go to the grocery store without seeing everybody. So I really liked... the social network. I knew [my colleagues'] families and they knew mine, their kids knew mine, their spouses knew mine. It was great. Here we don't have that. The [city] is so big. [My colleagues and I] could literally [live] 40 miles from each other, so we don't have that sense of everybody knows everybody, and you are good friends with their spouses like you are with them. We don't have that here, whereas I did [in my previous community] because it was so close knit."

While faculty by and large agreed that finding community is indeed a considerable challenge, a number are trying to do so – with varying degree of success. Their efforts include:

"Well, any time you pick up and relocate you're a fish out of water. Our first outreach was simply to the neighbors...and [through] our church [which] was another great way to plug into a community. We also started volunteering...my wife is the Brownie Scout leader. And very quickly things will come together to the point where you've got too much community, and you're like, "Stop calling me!" I think when people feel isolated it's probably reflective of the fact that they are not balancing their priorities properly. You spend 14 hours a day locked in your office writing papers and grading papers, then you can't expect to walk out the door and see a sea of friends waiting for you."

"I [have] tried to get [together] a group of African American women [in my field] – we see each other at conferences, and I'm like "let's go to the beach for a week." So we tried this year and it didn't quite work out, but I think it at least gets the idea planted. Now folks [have] started saying, "Are we doing the beach next year? That was a great idea. We are bummed we didn't do that." So we are trying to be supportive.

"I think something that changed our thinking was when [a prominent col-

league of ours] died [recently]. A lot of us knew her – I had a picture of [her] on my shelf. She was a mentor for me. One of the things that I’ve heard [these same colleagues] talk about is that if we had only known [she was sick,] we would have gone [to see her]. If she [had] called us, we would have gone. So some of my “sister friends” [in this group] are like, ‘We don’t want to end up in a situation where somebody has to say ‘we wish we would have known.’ So we touch base with each other on a fairly regular basis, and we rejuvenate.”

The quest for community may be the “essence of X.”

Generation X has been characterized in many ways; as the data in this study indicate, some of those characterizations are accurate, and others less so. But it is perhaps the lack of community, and X’ers’ attempts to find it, that truly define the generation, providing a unifying theme for their experiences, and encapsulating what has changed for them from previous generations. There can be no doubt that Generation X is more mobile than previous generations; as was the case for many of the participants in this study, however, moving around means moving away from family, and from one’s roots, which in the past often served as the basis for community. Because academics often must go where the job is, this is perhaps more common for X’er faculty than for their peers in other professions. Even once they have landed geographically, work-life balance is a serious challenge; the ever-increasing demands of work often leave faculty with little time and energy to build the relationships and connections necessary to establish a sense of community – particularly when combined with having to balance dual careers and childcare responsibilities.

While not unexpected given these circumstances, the lack of community is clearly very painful. In many of the interviews in this study, the anxiety and sadness around this issue were palpable, and many of the participants seemed almost desperate to ameliorate it. Viewed in this light, many of Gen X faculty members’ motivations and priorities discussed in the preceding sections suddenly make sense. X’ers focus on efficiency in their work in order to leave time for non-work activities and connecting with their personal communities. No matter how efficient they are in their work, however, work-life balance is an on-going struggle, so faculty seek interdisciplinary projects that allow them to expand their networks and build relationships in the context of their jobs – essentially, they are multi-tasking with work and community-building. Similarly, rather than attempting to compete with colleagues, they are focused on building relationships, and supporting and mentoring one another in order to further enhance their professional communities. For the most part, Gen X faculty favor tenure – not because it is a stepping stone to bigger and better jobs, but because it ensures that they will be able to stay put for the long haul, allowing them to establish long-term relationships with colleagues and others in their professional and personal communities.

When asked about his thoughts on the importance of community, one participant noted, “It’s huge, isn’t it?” If the experiences of the faculty and administrators interviewed in this study are any indication, that comment pretty much sums it up. Community – the lack of it and the quest to find it – provides a compelling storyline for Generation X. It is a unifying theme in their experiences, and may well hold the key to truly understanding X’ers, their career and personal choices and motivations, and ultimately, to answering the elusive question of what Generation X is all about. In short, community, more than any stereotype or characterization, may well be the essence of X.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Overall, if the sample in this study reflects the experience of their generation more widely, for the most part X'er faculty are happy and satisfied in their careers; for them, the pros of academic life outweigh the cons, and they do not see a great need for their institutions to step in to alleviate the “cons” with policy or other changes. Nonetheless, trends in the data, as well as direct comments by participants, suggest some policy and practical steps that institutions might take to provide the best possible support for X'er faculty and their work. These include:

- * Prioritize interdisciplinarity by providing opportunities for faculty to engage in multiple types of interdisciplinary work, across research, teaching, and administrative realms. Ensure that policies are enacted to support this type of work, and that financial implications are addressed, e.g. by making sure faculty get full “credit” for interdisciplinary courses that are team-taught, altering tenure policies to encourage and reward interdisciplinary research, etc. If the experiences of faculty in this study are indicative, and funding agencies are prioritizing interdisciplinary projects, doing so at the institutional level is likely to have positive financial results down the road.
- * More generally in terms of reward systems, evaluate current policies, particularly those dealing with tenure and promotion, to determine if they prioritize quality or quantity, and begin to modify them as necessary. Also review policies through the lens of X'ers aversion to competition, and eliminate policies that are designed to or result in competition among faculty members.
- * Explore the possibility of creating formal mentoring programs on campus, and engage X'er faculty to determine the parameters, e.g. who should be involved, what issues and topics should be targeted, etc. Encourage and reward informal mentorship by creating websites with tools and suggestions for mentors, publicizing mentoring efforts and sponsoring discussion groups.
- * Support a wide range of strategies for work-life balance, addressing both the needs of those who seek integration of their work and personal lives, and those who worry about “spillover” and try to keep the two realms separate. For example, ensuring that faculty have easy access to institution networks on their home computers is key for the former, while making sure not to schedule important faculty meetings after 5:00 pm addresses the needs of the latter.
- * To address the community issue, create as many opportunities for interaction among faculty members as possible – formal and informal, work- and non-work-based. Sports events, art fairs, book discussion groups, lecture series, and theater and musical performances were all mentioned by participants as opportunities they appreciate. Although schedules do not allow them to attend all such events – or even many of them – faculty appreciate that they are available, and do feel more connected to their institutions and colleagues as a result.

Certainly, not all of these suggestions can be easily implemented at every institution. Aside from the not-insignificant issue of funding, a number of these initiatives call for cultural and organizational changes that cannot be accomplished overnight. Many of the suggested changes will occur naturally as X'ers progress through their careers, and assume leadership positions at their institutions; as that happens, their priorities will come to the fore to shape policy, practice,

and organizational culture. X'ers recognize and understand this, but in the meantime, any efforts to spur such changes are likely to have a positive impact in terms Generation X faculty satisfaction, which will bring about even greater commitment and productivity as X'ers progress through their careers – making such efforts, undeniably, a worthwhile investment in the long run.

Regardless of context and circumstances, an easy first step for any institution is simply to begin a dialogue with and among Generation X faculty. A number of participants in this study mentioned how “therapeutic” they found their interviews; the length this report and the richness of the participant comments cited clearly show that X'er faculty have a lot to talk about with other X'ers. Hosting lunch discussion groups, or sponsoring a half-day workshop, is likely to begin a conversation that will help Generation X faculty find and support each other, will illuminate Generation X faculty experiences and issues in the specific institutional context, and will help guide future policy and programming efforts.

The Bottom Line: X'ers Are Good News for Academia

It is always nice to be the bearer of good news – and it is safe to say that the findings of this study bode well for the academic profession and for higher education in general. Academia clearly will be in good hands as Generation X faculty inherit the reins from their Baby Boomer predecessors. Overall, X'ers are very committed to their jobs and institutions, and to excelling as teachers, researchers, and administrators. They value interdisciplinarity in all its forms, forge collaborations and mentoring relationships, and work hard to support their colleagues – the essence of collegiality. They are figuring out ways to make work-life balance work for themselves and their families, and perhaps more than anything else, are seeking to build community in all realms of their lives. There can be no doubt that students, institutions, and future generations of faculty will benefit as a result, and that higher education will emerge stronger and all the more effective as Generation X faculty members' careers unfold over the coming years and decades.

About the author

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