Moon-Seo, S. K. & Seo, J. (2024). Exploring lessons from retired college professors.
Educational Research: Theory and Practice, 35(2), 31-36.

Exploring Lessons from Retired College Professors

Sara K. Moon-Seo and Jin Seo

Rogers State University USA

Abstract: *This study explored the experiences of retired faculty members in higher education through semi-structured interviews. As a qualitative study, researchers conducted interviews with retired faculty members regarding their joyful moments, challenges, and strategies for overcoming obstacles in academia. The study also examined the advice retired professors offered to new faculty members and the potential qualifications for success in academia.*

Keywords: retired faculty members, success in academia, challenges, lessons, higher education

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Working as a faculty member in higher education can be both challenging and rewarding. Faculty members find satisfaction in their roles and experience a sense of fulfillment when their students acquire new knowledge and succeed in their careers. Researchers suggest that retired faculty members can continue to have a significant influence on new faculty members and students by sharing valuable insights gained through their dedication to academia and the wisdom acquired from their collaborative relationships with colleagues and administrators (Mendez, 2019). Retirement is not a one-time event but rather a dynamic process that involves a gradual transition from full-time work. It is a process of change that affects various aspects of an individual's life (Aldiabat et al., 2021). Retired professors can maintain connections with their colleagues, provide valuable insights based on their experiences, and continue to mentor students and offer advice (Cahill et al., 2021). They can actively participate in various aspects of their previous academic work and offer valuable guidance to newly hired faculty members regarding their careers in higher education by sharing their experiences in teaching, research, and service (Tollefson-Hall, 2013).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Although the transition to retirement in academia offers meaningful aspects for both retired and current faculty members, there is limited research exploring the specific topic of lessons from retired faculty experiences. By conducting interviews with retired faculty members, researchers aim to gain valuable lessons and advice from their experiences, which can directly benefit current faculty members in higher education.

METHODOLOGY

After receiving IRB approval, the researchers collected data from a college located in a Southwestern city in the United Stated. A qualitative research method was used with semi-structured interviews for data collection. The researchers recruited retired faculty members by

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sara K. Moon-Seo, E-mail: kmoon@rsu.edu

sending email invitations, seeking their willingness to share their experiences in higher education. Prior to the interviews, all participants responded to short-answer demographic questions. The data collected from the interviews were analyzed using open coding (Berg & Lune, 2012). Data collection is ongoing, with six participants (3 male and 3 female) who identified as White having participated in the study so far. The participants' ages range from 55 to 75, with an average of 35 years of experience working in higher education.

First, each researcher thoroughly reviewed participants' interview scripts based on the research questions, attempting to identify common or unique categories related to their journey in higher education. Subsequently, the researchers held multiple meetings with frequent email communications until they reached a consensus on common categories extracted from the recorded interviews. Once common categories were established, researchers read and synthesized them into themes through consensus (Berg & Lune, 2012).

The researchers used the following questions as a springboard to explore various aspects of the retired faculty members' experiences in higher education: 1) How would you describe your work experiences in higher education? 2) Can you recall any joyful moments during your time working in higher education, and what contributed to your happiness? 3) Can you identify any challenging experiences while working in higher education, and if so, how did you manage to overcome them? 4) As a retired faculty member, what advice or mentorship would you like to offer to new or current faculty members? 5) What do you consider the most valuable element for achieving success as a faculty member in higher education? 6) If you could go back to the beginning of your career in higher education, is there anything you would like to try or avoid in your career? 7) As an optional request, would you be willing to provide 1-2 photos that symbolize your journey as a faculty member in higher education? Please refrain from taking photos of any individuals (including yourself) or any places where an expectation of privacy is anticipated.

FINDINGS

Six themes emerged from the interviews with retired faculty members regarding their experiences in higher education, in response to the research questions. While these faculty members had diverse experiences, including both positive and challenging moments in their careers, commonalities also surfaced.

First, retired faculty members described their work experience as being changed, challenged, enjoyable and rewarding. Their roles as faculty members in higher education helped them develop and grow as better teachers, mentors, and persons.

> The higher education environment has changed. I used a chalkboard, overhead projector and smart board…technological changes have been immense…you know the artificial intelligence is coming into play. I think that will be very challenging for professors to deal with in regard to their students, but I would say overall I've had a very positive experience in higher education. (Susan, female professor)

Susan expressed her feeling of how education environment has rapidly changed due to technology. Her teaching careers started using chalkboard to the current use of Artificial Intelligence (AI). She seems more reluctant to use a new tool, AI in her classroom thinking possible negativity of using it such as not creating their own writing and simply asking AI write students'

papers. However, AI could benefit for instructors providing essential resources: creating visual representations, proofreading documents, or providing basic knowledge for subjects (Hill, 2023).

Second, retired faculty members mentioned joyful moments associated with the personal impact of their teaching on students' success, such as students going into professions or careers and returning to express gratitude, often saying "Thank you!" Additionally, some students contributed to creating a joyful and happy classroom environment, often providing laughter from the instructor.

> When the kids got it, when they understood what you were talking about. You'd work and you'd work, and they'd frown, and they'd frown. And all at once had hit them and you could tell it. That was a lot of joy. Good learning makes a teacher happy. (Donna, female professor)

Third, retired faculty members identified several challenges they faced, including balancing teaching and administration, coping with financial hardships, engaging with students in the classroom, and building relationships with colleagues. Recognizing individual differences while achieving for a common goal: assisting students was highlighted. The retired faculty members emphasized that working with other faculty members in non-confrontational ways would be the most effective approach.

> Balancing administration and teaching at the same time is always a challenge: what they want you to do in the classroom and what you can do in the classroom are two different things, and it almost feels like you have a disconnect. (Donna, female professor)

> There are challenges in a lot of different ways. There are people challenges, people that you work with. Let's start with that challenge. You have to look at yourself as well as them. Try to understand what's going on and then find non-confrontational ways to deal with it. With knowing that everybody has the same common goal of helping the students and it's hard because your ego gets involved. Sometimes in challenging experiences with students, sometimes despite your best efforts, you have to flunk them. (Serratia, female professor)

Fourth, faculty members stressed the significance of fostering strong relationships with colleagues, prioritizing students in all situations, and establishing connections with faculty members both within and outside of the institution. Furthermore, they highlighted the importance of flexibility in managing one's semester, particularly when dealing with last-minute changes.

> Stay sincere to your students; they will bring you joy and heartbreak. (Fred, male professor)

> Make students your priority over everything, because if you're not here for the students, then you're not here for the right reason. It's not about you. It's not about your degree. It's not about anything…your clothes you wear, the make-up you were. It's not about any of that. It's all about the kids and it's they're the most

> important things…make them your priority. You'll always love your job because the kids are delightful. They'll bring you joy and heartbreak and all the things that come with that. (Donna, female professor)

Donna's advice of students' first attitude with sincerity supports Maslow's hierarchy of human motivation. Students will thrive when they feel safe and secure in a school environment with supportive and caring relationships between instructors and themselves. Additionally, these psychological needs will lead them to reach their full potential to achieve their goals with confidence and resilience in higher education (Abbas, 2020).

Fifth, faculty members underscored vulnerability as one of the most valuable elements in higher education. Furthermore, they emphasized the importance of staying current with teaching trends and adopting their curriculum to reflect these updates. Most importantly, faculty members should have a strong commitment to being present on campus, offering additional office hours, engaging in research, and serving both students and the university.

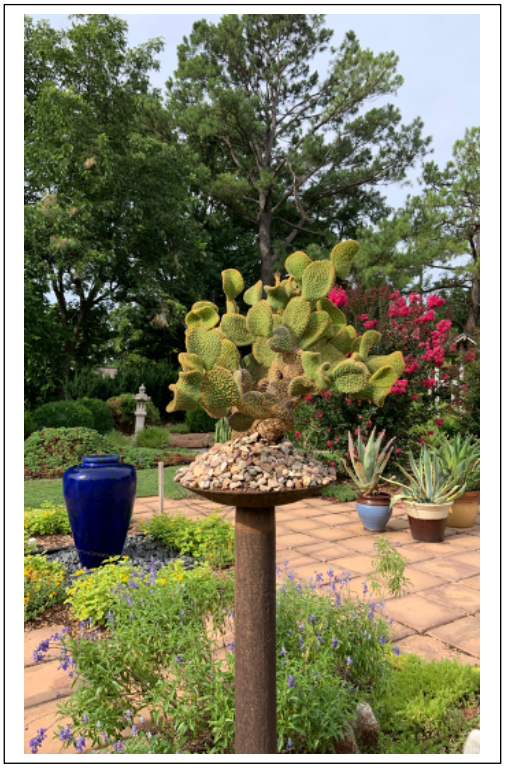
> Allow others to give us feedback…allow others to give us criticism, input, direction, and mentoring then that's what allows us to grow professionally faster. But that's hard. It is hard for us allow other people the right to give us that kind of feedback, right? (Mark, male professor)

> Desire to be there. You're not going to get paid enough to be there. Your time is going to be extended far beyond what you're willing to give. You'll be asked to do things when you'd rather just go home and sleep. It's the only way we know to really get students raised up from where we get them up to performing as professionals in their field. (Serratia, female professor).

Lastly, although most faculty members expressed little desire to change what they have done for themselves and students, one participant mentioned a specific interest in exploring more interactive teaching methods to enhance student engagement and their achievement if given the opportunity to make a change. Cooperative group learning will help not only for students but also instructors preventing burnout in the classroom. For example, an instructor brings a topic for the lesson dividing students into small groups and lets students work together with a specific guideline.

> After group discussion, students present their works as a group presentation or Jigsaw puzzle method. Group discussion, positive feedback, face-to-face group interaction, and team projects may enhance their social skills and self-confidence, making classroom learning interactive (Yu, 2019).

> I wish I could have made my class more interactive at the beginning stage of my teaching. Now that I'm nearing the end of my career, I did eventually learn how to do that, but I wish that had been more the case early on. (Susan, female professor)



She also shared a photo of her educational faculty journey in higher education stating: "This photo represents to me my faculty journey as I've navigated different pathways, technologies, and a variety of students along the way. Some of the paths have been rough, and students (like different kinds of plants) must be treated differently in order for them to strive. The garden (the faculty journey) was harder to manage in some years, but I'd like to think I became a better 'gardener' as more experience was gained."

EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

Faculty members' close relationships with their colleagues, a sense of belongingness to the University, and their overall well-being are crucial factors that can significantly influence their success as scholars in academia and their effectiveness as mentors for students in higher education. Newly hired professors and current faculty members can greatly benefit from the insights and wisdom shared by retired faculty members, who can provide valuable guidance on how to find joy in their work, navigate challenging situations, overcoming conflicts, and thrive in their careers within higher education. Through reflective interviews, this study aims to uncover both common and unique experiences among faculty members in higher education. The findings identify joyful moments, strategies for overcoming challenges, the importance of providing mentorship for new faculty members, effective teaching attitudes, and successful strategies. The study also provides insights into maintaining an ideal faculty member role in higher education. The final goal is to translate these insightful findings into actionable recommendations and advice that can directly benefit and enhance the professional journeys of current faculty members.

LIMITATION

The study had six white participants. More diverse participants may have introduced additional perspectives and aspects of retired faculty members' lessons and views, which could impact the insights provided to the current faculty members and students in higher education.

REFERENCES

Abbas, J. (2020). Service quality in higher education institutions: qualitative evidence from the students' perspectives using Maslow hierarchy of needs. *International Journal of Quality and Service Sciences*, *12*(3), 371–384. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJQSS-02-2020-0016

Aldiabat, K. M., Alsrayheen, E., Navenec, C.-L. L., Russell, C. A.-, & Qadire, M. A. (2021). An enjoyable retirement: Lessons learned from retired nursing professors. *Central European Journal of Nursing & Midwifery*, *12*(2), 315–324. https://doi.org/10.15452/CEJNM.2021.12.0001

Berg, B. & Lune, H. (2012) *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*, (8th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Cahill, M., Galvin, R., & Pettigrew, J. (2021). The retirement experiences of women academics: A qualitative, descriptive study. *Educational Gerontology, 47*. 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1080/03601277.2021.1929266

Hill, R. (2023). AI as Fad or AI as Lasting? Priorities for College Faculty Instructional Development for Generative Artificial Intelligence. *Irish Journal of Technology Enhanced Learning*, *7*(2), 136–145. https://doi.org/10.22554/ijtel.v7i2.154

Mendez, S. L., Conley, V. M., Tygret, J., Gerhardt, R., & Haynes, C. (2019). Encore: Retired faculty as mentors, *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, 51*(3), 59-61, https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2019.1606612

Tollefson-Hall, K., Pfeiler-Wunder, A., Hsieh, K., & Henry, C. (2013). Speaking from experience: Advice to junior faculty for navigating the tenure-track, *Journal of Faculty Development, 27*(3), 44-48.

Yu, Y. (2019). The Research on Cooperative Learning in English Reading Teaching in College. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies, 9*(6), 678-687. https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.0906.10