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Gen X Meets Theory X: What New Scholars Want

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Cathy A. Trower

"If they can't understand that I want a kick-ass career and a kick-ass life, then I don't want to work here," sums up how many Generation X'ers (born between 1965 and 1980) view their workplace, according to Lancaster and Stillman (2002, p. 107). Further, "Why does it matter when I come and go, as long as I get the work done?" (p. 114). As a group, Gen X'ers are willing to work hard but want to decide when, where, and how. As this generation enters the professoriate in large numbers, some academic institutions may be wondering what hit them. Gen X has met Theory X (a metaphor for a 1960's workplace) and it is not a pretty sight.

In 2003 we conducted a study measuring the importance of 19 job factors to recent graduates of doctoral degree programs. The top five were: 1) institutional support for research; 2) time for family/personal obligations; 3) quality of the department; 4) teaching load; and 5) flexibility of the work schedule. This is a big change; it's difficult to imagine my father saying he needed time for family and a flexible work schedule.

Part of the difference is not just generational but also due to the faculty no longer being comprised almost entirely of white males. Women historically place significantly more importance on flexibility of work schedules, family/personal obligations, employment opportunities for a spouse or partner, and location of the institution. Traditionally, men are more concerned with the opportunity for recognition, quality of the department and institution, caliber of colleagues and the opportunity to work with leaders in the field, and the quality of students. Within the student population, those of color placed significantly more importance than whites on institutional support for research, the match between one's research interests and those of others in the department, the opportunity to work with leaders in the field, and future job security.

Ultimately, our research showed that the primary considerations of recent graduates when choosing a job were: 1) finding a situation in which they could do meaningful work and strike a balance between teaching and research that suits them; 2) quality of living conditions, e.g., affordability of housing, commute, good K-12 schools, community feeling and safety, and job opportunities for spouse or partner; and 3) balance between work and home life.

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Beyond choices about where to work – in or out of the academy, and if inside it, at which institution – today's young scholars are questioning many of the traditional views that have shaped academic employment policy over the years. Some of the key differences appear below.

Table 1. Traditional Versus New Views of Academic Employment Policy

Traditional View	*New View*
Secrecy assures quality.	*Transparency assures equity.*
Merit is an empirically determined, objective concept.	*Merit is a socially constructed, subjective concept.*
Competition improves performance.	*Collaboration improves outcomes.*
Research should be organized around disciplines.	*Research should be organized around problems.*
Research is the coin of the realm.	*Excellent teaching and service are crucial.*
A life of the mind first and foremost.	*A life of both the mind and the heart are essential to health and happiness.*
Faculty thrive on autonomy.	*Faculty have a collective responsibility.*

The Study of New Scholars pilot survey (see Table 2)—now being rolled out nationally as The Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE; see tables at bottom)—confirmed some prior research and taught us more about the incoming faculty.

Table 2. Study of New Scholars Pilot Sites

Universities	**Colleges**
Brown University	Carleton College
Duke University	Morehouse College
University of Arizona	Mount Holyoke College
University of California-Berkeley	Oberlin College
University of Illinois	Sarah Lawrence College
University of Washington	Smith College

New scholars want precisely what older scholars wanted when they started working: reasonable performance expectations, clear tenure policies and fair practices, equity, professional development support, protected time, effective mentoring, colleagueship, and balance between work and home. The

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difference is that today's scholars have more complicated lives than did many of their predecessors, so achieving these goals—especially the latter—is more difficult. The job aspects with the greatest impact on these new scholars include tenure, workload, professional development, workplace culture, and the mentoring responsibility of department chairs.

Tenure

While tenure and the tenure process are much debated, there has been little progress made toward modification of this outdated system of employment. I do not advocate the abolishment of tenure; however, a substantial overhaul is in order. New scholars want:

- Clarity of tenure process, criteria, standards, and the body of evidence required.
- Clarity of expectations for scholarship, teaching, advising, colleagueship, and campus citizenship.
- Reasonable performance expectations.
- Tenure decisions solely based on performance, excluding factors such as demographics or politics.
- Consistency of expectations and messages from the senior faculty and administration.

This is not rocket science; academic institutions should be able to provide policies and practices that minimize the tortuous aspects of the tenure-track. There will always be some anxiety surrounding the probationary period, but logical measures can minimize the ordeal. While some people thrive under pressure, lessened anxiety generally results in better performance overall.

Nature of Work and Workload

New scholars want to know how they are expected to spend their time, to maximize their chances of achieving tenure. What is the appropriate mix of research, teaching, and service? Which committees count, and which can one decline? What are appropriate outlets for publication? What is the amount of outside funding required? How good a teacher do I need to be? How many courses and students will I have? Who will help me with pedagogy and teaching techniques? These are all appropriate questions for which academic administrators should have answers.

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Professional Development

Resources for one's professional development come in many forms, including financial and emotional support. Formal and informal mentoring/coaching and periodic performance reviews are crucial to success. Junior faculty seek assurance that the senior faculty find their work engaging and are supportive of their research. Fostering collaborations between senior and junior colleagues is very important early in one's career. A department chair and dean who take an interest can be instrumental. Many junior faculty also want professional assistance with grant writing and teaching. Research leave and upper limits on service obligations are most welcome; in certain situations, they are necessary for the achievement of tenure.

Climate, Culture, and Collegiality

As mentioned at the outset, new scholars want more out of a job than a paycheck; they perhaps require more than their predecessors in terms of workplace climate. They seek respect and want to be welcomed and valued. Many new faculty coming out of collaborative and diverse graduate programs want the same from the workplace, gauging departmental openness, politics, fairness, and the behavior of other faculty. Whereas prior generations saw a collegial environment as "nice" to have, the incoming generation sees it as a "must" have. Numerous faculty we spoke with said they accepted lower pay and sometimes lower prestige to work where they felt they fit, and where the senior faculty and administration took an interest in them and were committed to their satisfaction and success.

Department Chairs

The chair plays a pivotal role in shaping the culture within a department for all faculty, but we believe this may be especially important for junior faculty. Chairs need to scrutinize carefully current policies and practices, with an eye to academic culture. What kind of workplace do we have? What kind of workplace will best serve the faculty and the students? What do junior and senior faculty respectively need and want from work?

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The chair's job is to make sure that his or her faculty are as productive as possible. Productive faculty are satisfied faculty, and satisfied faculty require a few essential elements in the workplace: "life-friendly" policies (not everyone wants a family, but everyone wants a life); transparency; consistency surrounding tenure; flexibility; equity; mentoring; and opportunities for collaboration.

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Callout One

Study of New Scholars Pilot Sites

Universities	Colleges
Brown University	Carleton College
Duke University	Morehouse College
University of Arizona	Mount Holyoke College
University of California, Berkeley	Oberlin College
University of Illinois	Sarah Lawrence College
University of Washington	Smith College

Callout Two

Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education
This list is current at the time of publication.

Arizona State University	Macalester College
Auburn University	North Carolina State University*
Barnard College	Northeastern University
Brown University	Oberlin College
Carleton College	Ohio State University
Clemson University	Stanford University
Dartmouth College	Texas Tech University
Davidson College	Tufts University
Denison College	University at Albany, SUNY
Duke University (2006)	University of Arizona
Franklin & Marshall College	University of California, LA
Grinnell College (2006)	University of Illinois
Hamilton College	University of Kansas
Hampshire College	University of Memphis
Harvard University	University of Minnesota
Indiana University	UNC, Chapel Hill*
Iowa State University	University of Virginia
Kansas State University	Yale University
Kenyon College	

- The University of North Carolina System has enrolled.

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