

# **Pathways to the Professoriate: Women Midlife Career Changers**

A Literature Review of Prior Career Experts to New Career Novices

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**Abstract:** The purpose of the study is to investigate the career transitions and strategies of women midlife career changers to the professoriate. As part of the study, the purpose of this paper is to discuss a completed literature review of adult transitions from prior career expert to new career novice.

Higher education is changing as so are faculty. Two changing faculty dimensions include increasing numbers of newer faculty with prior careers and women faculty. For example, in doctoral granting institutions, 20% of newer faculty ( $\leq 10$  years) are job or career changers to postsecondary education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). In addition, women faculty at higher education institutions have reached record-breaking numbers. From 1992 to 2011, women increased from 38% to 44% of faculty (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011; 2012a). Despite the narrowing gap, however, they continue to experience the professoriate differently than men, as evidenced by fewer assistant, associate, full, and tenured women professors and, on average, lower salaries (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012a; 2012b; 2012c). We know little about women's experiences during midlife career transition to the professoriate, including their transitions from prior career expert to new career novice and subsequent journeys to new career expert.

## **Conceptual Framework and Purpose**

Traditional theory may not explain the intersection and transitions of increasing numbers of faculty with prior careers and women faculty in examination of higher education careers. Situated in the adult development, career development, and expert to novice literature, this study's conceptual framework comprises an adult transition and career development model. Originally published in 1981, Schlossberg's (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012) adult transition model has evolved over the years and provides an examination framework. In the area of adult transitions, adult and career development converged during the last half of the previous century (Hansen, 2001). Responding to this convergence, Hansen (2001; 2011) created the integrative life planning model. The first part of the career development model, *integrative*, emphasizes the integration of body, mind, and spirit, and the second part, *life planning*, recognizes life's multiple and interrelated aspects and adults' responsibility to plan within the career development process.

The purpose of the study is to investigate the career transitions and strategies of women midlife career changers to the professoriate. As part of the study, the purpose of this paper is to discuss a completed literature review of adult transitions from prior career expert to new career novice and subsequent journey to new career expert. Based on the conceptual framework, a three-part research question guided the literature review: Within the context of expert to novice, what were prior career experts' (a) motivations, (b) supports, and (c) strategies as they transitioned to new career novice?

## Research Design

The study uses a qualitative phenomenological research design to understand the essence of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013)—women’s midlife career change to the professoriate. According to Moustakas (1994), transcendental or descriptive phenomenology focuses on describing lived experiences and includes three data collection sources: a literature review, the researcher’s Epoche, and participant interviews. This paper examines the first data collection source, a completed literature review, focused on the adult transitions of prior career experts to new career novices.

The literature review searched three databases—Academic Search Complete, ERIC, and Proquest Dissertations and Theses—and included three limiters: *full-text*, *scholarly* or *peer reviewed articles*, and *English*. For the first round, search terms for all fields included *expert* and *novice*. For the second round, search terms included *novice* in all fields, and *career* and *transition* or *change* in the abstract field. Using inclusion and exclusion criteria, I reviewed the original 690 article’s abstracts or manuscripts for relevancy. Inclusion criteria consisted of empirical studies discussing prior career experts and new career novice. Exclusion criteria consisted of non-studies, novices only, novice to expert, expert to novice without a career change, children and retirees’ transitions, young adults entering first careers, and, for future study, expert athletes.

The resulting 28 studies consolidated in the healthcare and primary or secondary teaching fields. Data analysis included reviewing the purpose and research questions (Merriam, 2009), organizing and reading the literature to identify findings, and using the coding process to aggregate findings into themes (Creswell, 2013).

## Findings

Midlife career changers experience transitions as they move from prior career expert to new career novice. An *expert* has or displays “special skill or knowledge derived from training or experience” (Merriam-Webster, 2013a, p. 1) and synonyms include such complimentary terms as *adroit*, *skillful*, *masterful*, and *practiced*. In contrast, a *novice* is a *beginner* and synonyms include such derogatory terms as *fledgling* and *rookie* (Merriam-Webster, 2013b). This section discusses prior career experts’ (a) motivations, (b) supports, and (c) strategies as they transition to new career novices in the healthcare and education literature, predominately including nurse practitioners to novice educators and expert professionals to novice primary or secondary teachers.

### **Motivations: Why did they change careers?**

Overall, this review’s literature cited several career change motivations; however, the healthcare literature identified only one motivation. According to Smith and Boyd (2012), contributing to student development highly motivated new healthcare lecturers in the UK. In contrast, the education literature offered numerous motivations. For example, Tigchelaar, Brouwer, and Korthagen (2008) found second-career teachers were motivated, in part, by their work experiences and made conscious choices to work with children. Similarly, Madfes (1989) concluded novice mathematics and science teachers’ were personally motivated to find a greater life purpose through meaningful and satisfying work, contributing to the public good and a new sense of fulfillment. Keith, a former systems analyst stated, “I wanted to, and felt a need to, get more involved interpersonally. I thought teaching would do that. I also felt that I wanted to make

more of a contribution of some kind” (p. 65). Furthermore, teaching’s intrinsic rewards outweighed the prior careers’ lucrative economic rewards. Last, Meloche (2006) found a vision for teaching and learning drove new elementary principals.

According to Haggard, Slostad, and Winterton (2006), teaching certification graduate students identified motivations through prior career comparisons: “Several study participants perceived teaching as more ‘exciting’ than previous careers, ‘more interactive’, an opportunity to be ‘creative, imaginative and flexible’ and ‘a calling and an art’ (p. 322). One student anticipated teaching as “wonderful, fun, and meaningful” (p. 322), while another hoped for more immediate feedback, less intimidation, and more confidence compared to a prior career.

### **Supports: What help was available?**

Based on the literature, mentors are a critical source of support and help, but the mentoring relationship is complex. In the healthcare literature, Buonocore (2009) and Schmitt (2003) respectively found career changers to nursing and case management desired, valued, and benefitted from experienced and knowledgeable mentors, such as instructors, professors, and staff. Jackson and Cleary (2011) studied the relationships between mid-career nursing doctoral students and their academic supervisors, concluding the relationship is complex, influenced by emotions and power. A successful mentoring relationship lasts three to seven years, requires resilience and endurance, and must withstand the doctoral process’s critique and pressure. Last, they identified support as a primary mentoring function, concluding mid-career students may require different types of support than younger students.

Similarly, in the education literature, second-career novice teachers valued relationships with supervisors and principals. According to Eifler (1997), non-traditional age student teachers were surprised by how much they valued mentoring. However, their relationships with supervising teachers and principals were complex, including benign, destructive, supportive, and mentoring. For example, supervising teachers and principals had higher expectations of older student teachers in pedagogy expertise, resulting in tensions and destructive relationships. Similarly, Pellettieri (2003) found, compared to first-career teachers, principals had different perceptions and higher expectations of second-career teachers and offered different types of supports; such supports aided teaching adaptation. Last, Maxwell (1994) concluded formal mentoring programs helped second-career mathematics teachers adapt to teaching.

### **Strategies: How did they cope?**

One expert turned novice described the transition as being a “deer in the headlights” (Buonocore, 2009, p. 66). According to the literature, new career novices employed several strategies to cope with their transitions, including peers, self-directed learning, and prior career skills. In the healthcare literature, for example, Buonocore determined peers eased novice nurses’ transition stress through camaraderie and friendship. Schoening (2009) and Graczkowski (2010) concluded nurse educators and clinical occupational therapists used peer mentoring as a coping strategy. In addition to reaching out to faculty and colleagues for mentoring and help, Mann (2013) found adjunct clinical nursing faculty relied on their personal characteristics to foster student relationships, ask questions, read, study, and learn. Similarly, Schoening (2009) and Graczkowski (2010) respectively concluded nurse educators and clinical occupational therapists employed self-directed information seeking as a strategy. Furthermore, Graczkowski (2010) discovered clinical occupational therapists read books and journals to pursue self-education. Last, Cangelosi, Crocker, and Sorrell (2009) found novice clinical nurse educators

embraced being a novice: Although described as “‘unsettling,’ ‘uncomfortable,’ and ‘causing mixed feelings,’ these participants did not see the role of novice as just a phase to endure. Rather, they viewed it as a journey to learn from and return to” (p. 369).

In the education literature, prior careers positively impacted novices’ new careers and provided supports. Mayotte (2001) found the prior careers of second-career teachers more positively than negatively influenced teaching adaptation and philosophies, and Maples (2004) concluded prior life and work experience positively impacted the ability of second-career teachers to transition to teaching. Eifler (1997) determined non-traditional age students drew on previous life experiences and demonstrated perseverance and flexibility. In an in-depth study, Williams (2010) concluded a range of prior career experiences contributed to a student teacher’s learning. Tigchelaar (2008) found career changers took responsibility for and went about learning in a focused way, utilized interaction competencies acquired elsewhere, and quickly and precisely determined their place in the school organization. Last, Grier (2012) uncovered novice STEM (i.e., science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) teachers used their prior career identities to engage their students in learning science.

### **Discussion**

Based on the findings, the experiences of prior career experts transitioning to new career novices touch several aspects of this study’s conceptual framework. Specific to motivations, Hansen’s (1997, 2011) integrative live planning model includes such critical tasks as *finding work that needs doing in changing global contexts* and *exploring spirituality and life purpose*. She encourages adults to identify relevant issues and work and links spirituality to life’s meaning and purpose. Using Hansen’s words, the new career novices were “yearning for something larger than oneself, a need to give back to society, contribute one’s talents toward community improvement, and achieve a sense of connectedness with others” (p. 21). Influenced by Schlossberg’s (1984) earlier adult transition model, Hansen (1997) considers the last critical task, *managing personal transitions and organizational change*, the most important.

Supports and strategies represent two of Schlossberg’s (Anderson et al., 2012) four potential resources employed during adult transitions. The *support* variable addresses the question, what help is available? Support factors include social support types such as intimate, family unit, friendship, network, and institution. As evidenced in the findings, the new career novices did not specifically discuss intimate or family supports, but did identify peers or friends, new networks, and mentors as a primary, but complex, support during their career transitions. The last variable, *strategies*, addresses the question, how does the person cope? Based on Pearlin and Schooler’s (1978) work, the model refers to three *controlling* coping responses. For example, the new career novices took optimistic action and exhibited self-reliance in *controlling the situation*, made positive comparisons to prior careers in *controlling the meaning*, and used self-assertion in *controlling the stress*. The model further includes three coping modes, *information seeking* and *direct action*, used by the new career novices, and *action inhibition*, not addressed in the literature.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

For theory, this study may expand the literature to include expert to novice transitions in addition to the more researched novice to expert transitions. For practice, the study has implication for adult educators, instructors, and trainers with new career novices in their classrooms and training rooms. Returning to women midlife career changers to the professoriate

as novices, this study has implications for their employment, faculty development, career satisfaction and retention, and performance in research, teaching, and service, leading to tenure and promotion. For college and university policy impacting new career novices, the study has implications for the marketing, admissions, advising, academic support, graduate student development, retention, and completion rates.

Prior career experts have unique experiences as they transition to new career novices. Additional research is warranted in order to better understand their career transition challenges, supports, and strategies. In turn, such understanding may shed light on the transitions and strategies of women's midlife career change to the professoriate.

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