

U-Turns, Pivots, and Gradual Arrivals: Navigating Midlife and Mid-Career in Academe's Changing Landscape

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Fifteen years after completing my PhD, I had a successful career in the writing department at Loyola where we had a major, minor, and interdisciplinary major; I had been promoted to full professor, published several books, articles and book chapters, and generally was doing well. I had been serving as the composition director at Loyola for over ten years. I liked my job and the work I did. I became the department chair, during a busy and challenging time, just as I approached fifty.

I was mid-career and midlife. Bored, unsettled, unmotivated. I enjoyed working with my undergrad students, but I was doing less of that as I got pulled into more administrative tasks. While sitting in meetings, reading scholarly journals, or attending conferences, I ping ponged between despair, anger, frustration, and boredom. How could I bear to survive fifteen more years until retirement, listening to the endless droning at meetings, completing the increasingly bureaucratic tasks required, or reading (and writing) what seemed like irrelevant articles?

Like most academics, I began searching for answers. I read academic advice columns, scanned books on creating a satisfying career post-tenure, read books on happiness, and read even more books on women at midlife. And I complained and whined with—or rather to—my friends and family. I kept reminding myself how lucky I was to have a great job and how much I had loved it. As unsettled as I felt, I kept trying to figure out why I felt this way and how to move beyond the funk.

What I discovered was reassuring in some ways. It wasn't really me! It was normal, typical, to feel this way at midlife and mid-career. And, if I could just wait it out, chances are I would feel better. I was experiencing what researchers call the "U-curve"—a well-documented phenomenon as

Jonathon Rauch explained in a 2014 *Atlantic* article. In the 1990s, according to Rauch, university researchers such as David Blanchflower and Andrew Oswald studied the relationship between work and happiness. They analyzed international surveys of life satisfaction and found a recurrent pattern in countries around the world, the U-curve: “Whatever sets of data you looked at,” Blanchflower told Rauch,

you got the same things: life satisfaction would decline with age for the first couple of decades of adulthood, bottom out somewhere in the 40s or early 50s, and then, until the very last years, increase with age, often (though not always) reaching a higher level than in young adulthood.

The pattern, reports Rauch, came to be known as the Happiness U-curve.

According to Barbara Bradley Hagerty, a journalist who recently published a book on midlife (*Life Reimagined: The Science, Art, and Opportunity of Midlife*), while many people do reach their 40s, 50s, and 60s “blissfully happy in their jobs,” many of us experience, “if not a mid-career crisis, at least mid-career ennui.” According to Gallup pollsters, explains Hagerty, only one-third of Baby Boomers and Gen Xers are engaged by their work. Jim Harter, Gallup’s chief scientist for workplace management and well-being, told Hagerty that about half of Boomer and Gen X employees fall in a second category that Gallup characterizes as “not engaged.” As Harter puts it, “They show up; they get their paycheck and do the minimum required.” One in five, Hagerty reports from her research, are in the category Gallup calls “actively disengaged,” which Harter describes as “a pretty desperate state.”

In the midst of my own midlife ennui, then, I find that I am not alone. Clearly, some of my disengagement may be due to generic midlife and mid-career experiences, but I felt that something else could be at happening for those of us who work in the academy. Colleagues at my institution and beyond are feeling unsettled, disengaged, dissatisfied with upper administration, and concerned about higher education more generally. Beth Bouquet, also at mid-career and midlife, reflected on career as part of her plenary talk at the 2015 CWPA Conference. She noted that recent changes at her institution, and in higher ed more generally, left her feeling disconnected. Bouquet’s sense of disconnection is not unusual. Results from the 2015 *Inside Higher Ed* Survey of College and University Faculty Workplace Engagement, a study by Gallup and *Inside Higher Ed*, indicated that “Overall, 34 percent of faculty members surveyed are engaged in their job, 52 percent are not engaged, and 14 percent are actively disengaged” (Jaschik and Lederman 7).

As I reviewed the results of the Gallup survey and others such as our institution's 2015 Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) survey results and thought about Bouquet's talk, I found some comfort in the notion that I was not the only one feeling disengaged. But this response was quickly followed by feelings of despair: What hope is there if many of my colleagues are feeling this way? What is different now than in the past?

Currently, there seems to be more going on than typical middle-aged faculty members' feelings of restlessness. Higher education itself is in the midst of an identity crisis sparked by external pressures linked to funding, costs, and economies. Tony Scott and Nancy Welch explain that funding cuts, added accountability mandates, erosion of tenure, increase in part-time faculty, and power moving away from faculty toward administration and governing boards have contributed "the shifting sands . . . beneath the feet of all academic workers" (5). Faculty are pushed to enact "new efficiency imperatives" and admonished "to make up for depleted budgets through entrepreneurial schemes, industry partnerships, and the repackaging of programs as revenue-generating streams" (5).

For those of us at mid-career, many of the changes—and even the conversations about them—are beyond what we experienced as college students and what most of us could have imagined when we started our careers. (As I have been revising this, for example, the faculty at Long Island University Brooklyn was preemptively locked out days before the start of classes with adjuncts and administrators hired to teach the classes. According to labor historians quoted in various news articles, this is the first time in American history that this has happened.)

Just as midlife, mid-career malaise is not specific to academics, the debates and changes happening in higher ed are not specifically targeted at those of us in Composition and Rhetoric. However, our experience can seem a little different from that experienced by peers in more traditional disciplines. As writing teachers and scholars, we are confronting the shifting sands of higher education within a field that is still trying to find firmer footing in the academy. Scott and Welch articulate how working in Composition and Rhetoric is different than in many other disciplines because we have always had to argue for "more resources, continually recalibrating to make do with less and pursuing a scholarly legitimacy that perpetually seems just over the next hill." Now it seems we are not alone in these efforts with "composition having served as canary in the coalmine for a wide-scale restructuring of higher education as a whole" (5).

Welch and Scott's analysis of the state of higher ed in general and in Composition and Rhetoric in particular, is, as a friend said, "apocalyptic,"

but it resonated with me, with my reading of the higher ed news and with my experiences in my own institution and in the profession more generally. While I found their analysis reassuring in some ways (much as I had found Bouquet's), I also found it pushing me further into the malaise. In our current age of austerity, Scott and Welch and the contributors to the volume advocate for us to become more aware of the political economies that are at work in the current climate and suggest, among other options, "collective resistance" (13), "principled disengagement" (15), and even more fully engaged-and-informed participation in the writing of the future of higher ed and our field (16).

Principled disengagement, however, is still disengagement. Resistance, collective or not, feels like a negative stance. The writing of the future of higher ed and our field does seem like a more positive act. I had been involved in many of these discussions and debates throughout my career, and I could get more engaged, but my experience did not make me think I would find more satisfaction or a renewed purpose pursuing that avenue.

Kerry Ann Rockquemore's advice, though not specific to Composition and Rhetoric, was more encouraging. In a series on academics negotiating mid-career, she recommends that to get unstuck, you should differentiate between what is in your control and what isn't, let go of negative emotions connected to individuals (and I would add institutions), and clarify your own definition of success. When I read her advice, before my sense of mid-career ennui had taken root, it seemed helpful and not so difficult to follow her weekly challenges and suggestions. But as I stalled and sputtered, the advice didn't get me moving forward.

I needed some productive ways to move through the feelings of disengagement to set me up for that U-turn to happiness. Hagerty's research offered some hope. While not specific to academe, higher ed faculty, including compositionists, share many similarities with workers around the globe who find themselves facing mid-career and midlife in rapidly changing industries and work environments. As Hagerty explains, the "mid-career slump cuts across industries and income levels," with "college-educated employees report[ing] greater unhappiness than do those who stopped at high school. Highly educated people," according to researchers, "may have higher expectations and may therefore find career disappointments more bitter."

Lowering expectations, then, might help, but that seems like admitting defeat. Hagerty, however, doesn't suggest lowering expectations. To deal with the slump, she notes—as did Rauch—that research shows "you may be able to outwait your malaise" since most people seem to come out of it without doing anything specific. I wasn't sure that would necessarily be the case, given the current climate of higher education in general and

at my particular institution. If you “want to thrive” instead of just getting through the ennui, Hagerty notes, a new purpose and a new challenge may be what you need. She reports that “a career shift can be good for cognition, well-being, and even longevity.” The shift doesn’t have to mean quitting a job or leaving one profession for something new. It might mean pivoting in your current organization—say taking on a new role or a different kind of position. You might stay in the same profession but try a new institution or organization. In any case, Hagerty says the experts urge us to be proactive and to take on new challenges or try something new—even if it fails—because it will be helpful in the long term.

What could these new challenges be for me? For us as compositionists? How can we resist the feeling of despair we may feel when we experience the reimagining of our institutions, our field, or the very notion of higher education?

As I look around at colleagues who have managed to successfully maneuver through the U-curve, I find that many seem to have followed the advice to pivot, whether consciously or not. Some have moved to different institutions, sometimes in new positions but always with new challenges. In Composition and Rhetoric, unlike in many disciplines, we have more flexibility in moving once we reach tenure. Some have moved into new positions within their own institution, such as taking on a position in the dean’s office or leading a center in teaching or research. As Composition and Rhetoric professionals, many of us have many years of administrative experience so making that move may be easier than for colleagues in other disciplines. A few have taken on more leadership roles in the professional organizations. Others have repositioned themselves in terms of their own scholarship, retooling in a different area within Composition and Rhetoric or collaborating in new ways or with new people. The luxury of tenure and promotion is that you can make these changes, and because our field is by nature inter/multidisciplinary, there are many opportunities to reconceive your scholarship. Some have looked outside of work to find more meaningful engagement or a healthier balance so work is less depleting (although not less engaging) by establishing practices such as yoga or meditation. One friend used the process recommended in the *Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up* to sort out her office and help her clarify her professional life.

To make these changes successfully, colleagues took time to reflect and prepare. Many tried several different strategies before landing in a good place. The idea of pivoting seems to undermine the effort involved in changing course. When I think of a pivot, I think of a basketball play: a quick turning, with one foot rooted to a spot. The pivot foot cannot move or slide, and if it does, a travelling violation occurs. The pivot can be used to redirect the ball or misdirect an opponent. The one making the pivot often

stays in place as the ball and play moves on. If I imagine myself pivoting, I see myself spinning back and forth, searching for somewhere to go or someone to pass to with defenders trying to block my way.

Maybe pivot isn't the best metaphor for me . . . Laura Micciche's metaphor of hypermiling offers an alternative way to think about getting unstuck. It emphasizes moving forward more deliberately, slowly, not a quick turning in place. For all of us who find ourselves midlife and mid-career in a fast-paced, shifting landscape, purposefully slowing down, giving serious attention "to the arts of productive stillness, resource preservation, and slowness—what is called 'gradual arrival' in the hypermiling movement" (74) can stop frantic spinning and keep us moving forward through the U-curve as we look for our next destination.

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