Teaching Institute 2004-2005 Incoming Faculty Narrative
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In response to Dr. Aspan’s request for a reflective narrative on my first year experience at Saint Joseph’s, I want to briefly reflect upon a few aspects of this experience that were significant for me. My reflection will be a mix of personal observations and suggestions relating to 2005-2006 incoming faculty.

My very positive adjustment to Saint Joseph’s University was expedited by the extensive educational experience that I acquired prior to my arrival at SJU. However, the most significant factor that fostered my adjustment was the fact that what occurred during my first year was what I expected to occur. I was attracted to SJU because of the Jesuit mission and was gratified to see that the University actually “lives the mission” on a daily basis. As the occasional roadblocks, unexpected problems, and just plain bad luck wreaked havoc with my best laid plans, I found the University’s commitment to the mission a positive motivation for me to forge ahead and attempt to do good work. The fact that the mission is integrated within the organizational structure of the University, and mediates and informs all conversation, provides a generative continuity, which in my case proved to be an excellent motivator. Reflecting upon my orientation to SJU, I can see where this emphasis on mission was a reoccurring theme in the orientation activities, and I would highly recommend that this emphasis should be explicated at every opportunity.

Of course, one significant component of the professional transition experience is developing an understanding of the new institution’s culture and history. Different faculty will bring different prior experiences to their understanding of SJU culture; however, only through immersion in University life over time comes a functional understanding of how the University’s culture and history critically mediate and inform current relationships, issues, and conversation. To expedite this process of cultural understanding, I would suggest that during the orientation, faculty should be presented with a detailed explanation of the governing structure as it relates to university, college, department, and individual faculty. In addition, through formal presentation and informal conversation, the institutional history of SJU would facilitate an understanding of why certain decisions occur and how one can participate in that decision making process. Concerning decisions and culture, I also suggest that a presentation of current issues, initiatives, and conversations be made to new faculty during the orientation. Of course, in an exploration of culture and history, the University mission as it is manifested in contemporary conversation and issues would be a palpable presence. One activity that facilitated my understanding of the relationship between mission and culture was my personal study of the history, philosophy, and beliefs of the Society of Jesus. I personally believe that this study was a significant factor in my enculturation into the SJU community and in my own motivation to become an active member of this community.

The two most significant resources that I would promote to new faculty are the willingness of administration, faculty, and support staff to engage in supportive and frank conversation about any topic; and, the urban community in which we are embedded. The most important support mechanism was the receptiveness of everyone to talk with me as my needs surfaced. I really don’t attribute this to the size of the University but believe that it is an outcome of the collective internalization of the University mission. All of
those informal and sometimes short or lengthy conversations contributed to not only the expansion of my SJU knowledge base but more importantly my transition into the SJU community. In addition, the rich urban context that surrounds us offers unlimited opportunities for scholarly activity, service, and the promotion of social justice. My advice to new faculty will be to never hesitate to engage others in conversation, ask for help, and engage the Philadelphia environment that contextualizes our SJU experience. Perhaps, a short presentation of all the SJU urban initiatives could be part of the orientation process.

A more specific recommendation for meeting the needs of new faculty is to offer as much clarity as possible. My needs, like those of most new faculty, are not served by ambiguity. Of course, clarity can only be provided to the extent that the issue in question has been resolved and codified by the University. More specifically, when I talk about clarity, I am talking about two issues: rigor and engagement, and promotion and tenure.

The issue of rigor and engagement is an initiative that is in process, and therefore, at this time, may defy an attempt at clarity. However, eventually SJU needs to clearly articulate, with concrete examples and exemplars, how rigor and engagement are manifested in teaching (i.e., curriculum, instruction, and assessment), service, and scholarship. The obvious structures, which can continuously shape our growing understanding of rigor and engagement into a more precise understanding of these phenomena, are department mentoring systems, the ongoing orientation sessions, and the activities and conversations provided by the Teaching Institute. Collectively, these structures can mediate the ongoing conversation about what constitutes rigor and engagement at a preeminent university such as SJU. As the conversation about rigor and engagement coalesces into a collective definition, it will be essential that concrete examples be provided via the Teaching Institute, professional development workshops, and peer coaching. The understanding of rigor and engagement is especially important to new faculty because of their concern about promotion and tenure.

In the initial orientation activities that I experienced, my observation is that the greatest anxiety in new faculty occurred when promotion and tenure became the topic of discussion. My interpretation of this discussion was that faculty anxiety occurred due to the contradictory and ambiguous nature of the presentation of this topic. As the University struggles to define rigor and engagement in relation to how it is manifested in promotion and tenure, it is essential that a continuous focus should be on the development of a more precise definition of what is meant by rigor and engagement and how faculty can incorporate these definitions in the development of their tenure and promotion portfolios. Perhaps to offset some of the anxiety, the orientation presentation on promotion and tenure can include a general presentation followed by small group meetings with the faculty’s college and department.

In conclusion, my most difficult adjustment involved how campus parking mediated my daily schedule and activities. However, as the acquisition of Episcopal Academy moves to a positive resolution, I have faith that parking will become a non-issue.