Adult Education Quarterly
2020, Vol. 70(1) 44–63

DOI: 10.1177/0741713619867077
journals.sagepub.com/home/aeq
SAGE

Women's Midlife Career Transition to Tenured/ Tenure-Track Faculty in Adult Education

Catherine A. Cherrstrom[1] and Mary V. Alfred[2]

Abstract

Faculty characteristics are changing, and traditional theories may not account for the intersection of increasing numbers of women faculty and career changers to higher education in examining faculty development. Using a conceptual framework composed of adult transition and career development models, this phenomenological study investigated the career transition and strategies of women midlife career changers to the professoriate. Findings included a midlife career transition process and related challenges, supports, and strategies to navigate the process with implications for theory and practice.

Keywords

adult transition, midlife career transition, women faculty, higher education, adult education

Faculty characteristics are changing, including increasing numbers of women faculty and career changers to higher education (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2003, 2004, 2017). Understanding such changes is essential, as faculty teach students, conduct innovative research, and perform service (NCES, n.d.; Ryan, Healy, & Sullivan, 2012). According to the NCES (2003, 2017), men continue to outnumber women faculty, but the gap is narrowing. Yet women represent only 42% of tenured full-time faculty, 45% of associate professors, and 32% of full professors (NCES, 2016, 2017). These statistics illuminate the increasing number of women faculty but continued lower representation at tenured professorial ranks.

Based on studies including faculty's prior employment, NCES (2004) reported increasing numbers of career changers to the faculty (Finkelstein, Seal, & Schuster,

[1]Texas State University, San Marcos, TX, USA
[2]Texas A&M University, College Station, TX, USA

Corresponding Author:
Catherine A. Cherrstrom, Texas State University, 601 University Drive, San Marcos, TX 78666-4684, USA.
Email: cac424@txstate.edu

1998). Higher education institutions seek midlife career changers, with their depth and variety of experience, to replace retiring faculty members and meet professional schools' accreditation requirements, most commonly in the applied fields of education, human services, business, and management (Crane, O'Hern, & Lawler, 2009). When hired, however, institutions often treat midlife career changers the same as traditional new faculty, raising questions about career transition pathways and experiences; unique issues, concerns, and challenges; prior experience as a strength or barrier; and assumptions regarding their ability to make a successful transition (Crane et al., 2009). These questions have implications for faculty as well as their institutions, colleagues, and students.

The field of adult education (AE) also reflects increasing numbers of women faculty and career changers. In a 1995 survey, Peterson and Provo (1998) found AE and human resource development faculty consisted of 62% men but noted a trend of women filling faculty positions vacated by retiring men. In a 2013 survey, Tisdell, Wright, and Taylor (2016) reported AE faculty in North America had demographically shifted to 63% women. Despite the shift, survey results indicated men continue to outrank women, as evidenced by 43% of men at full professor rank compared with 23% of women. With regard to midlife career changers, Tisdell et al. (2016) observed today's AE doctoral students bring prior workforce experience to the classroom. Survey results support the likelihood of prior career experience as most participants were *late career* based on age but *early* or *midcareer* based on years of service. Increasing numbers of women and midlife career changers are researching, teaching, and performing service as AE faculty.

Traditional adult and career development theories may not explain the multidirectional context of multiple careers (Baruch, 2004). Midlife career changers face unique challenges not always encountered by younger career changers and more acutely experience common challenges (Newman, 1995). Although the literature includes studies of midlife career changers to primary and secondary education, we know little about midlife career transition to higher education and AE faculty. The purpose of this study was to investigate the career transition and strategies of women midlife career changers to the professoriate. Participants comprised women midlife career changers to the AE, or closely related, professoriate while age 35 to 60 years. Three research questions guided the studies: What is the career transition process? What challenges and supports do midlife women experience during career transition? What strategies do midlife women use to manage career transition? This article highlights relevant literature, presents the conceptual framework, methodology, findings, and discusses the findings followed by implications and future research.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Three bodies of literature situated the study: adult development, career development, and expert to novice transition. The conceptual framework comprised an adult transition model paired with a career development model.

Development in Adults, Career, and Novice to Experts

Traditional adult development theories provide a foundation for understanding, but do not universally apply to all individuals. After examining theoretical models of gender development and gender's impact on adult development, Ross-Gordon (1999) concluded women have different behavior, interests, and attitudes than men, reflected in our social structures and norms. These differences manifest themselves across cultures, influencing the behaviors, interests, and attitudes deemed appropriate for men and women. In a literature review of women's psychosocial development, Caffarella and Olson (1993) identified four themes unique to women: diverse experiences, relationships central to self-concept, interplaying and important roles, and role discontinuity and change rather than linear pathways. In an analysis of development theory, Gergen (1990) concluded traditional theories "cannot do justice to babies born to mothers of 40, grandmothers enrolled in graduate school, and women with multiple careers and relational histories" (p. 486). Individuals are unique and, based on life experiences, will experience adult development and transition in unique ways.

Similar to adult development theory, some question the relevance of traditional career development theories to women and non-White populations. In a study, Alfred (2001) found culture and identity influence faculty women of color's career development and questioned the appropriateness of traditional theories for women and people of color. In *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, Bierema (1998) synthesized an issue focused on women's career development, finding such development complex, diverse, changing, different, and contextual. In the issue, Inman (1998) recommended women be aware of work context, take charge of their career development, and strategically plan careers. Along with adult and career development, the expert to novice transition literature situated the study.

Although the literature includes novice to expert models (e.g., Dreyfus, 2004), we know little about the transition from prior career expert to new novice faculty and subsequent journey to faculty expert. The limited literature offers some insight into the novice to expert transition within primary and secondary education, as evidenced in the following qualitative studies. In a study of mature teacher trainees, George and Maguire (1998) found sexism, ageism, and exclusion, such as prior experiences viewed as a disadvantage as well as age and maturity viewed as liabilities. Ironically, as older women participants studied learning theories promoting recognition and validation of students' prior experience and knowledge, faculty failed to do so, and participants felt patronized, undervalued, and invisible. In a case study of novice teachers, Mayotte (2003) posited career changers to teaching bring valuable experience and skills but may not recognize or easily transfer such skills to the new teaching career. In an in-depth study with one career changer to teaching, Williams (2010) found career changers "face particular dilemmas and challenges as they struggle with the tensions posed by being both experienced and accomplished in their prior career experts, and novice in teacher education" (p. 640). Mayotte and Williams cautioned educators and mentors not to assume a novice's competency

level precludes the need for support and encouragement. Together, the three bodies of literature and conceptual framework guided the study.

Adult Transition and Career Development Framework

The conceptual framework comprised Schlossberg's adult transition model (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012) and Hansen's (1997, 2011) integrative life planning (ILP) model. The former model provides a framework to analyze and understand adult transitions. According to Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg (2012), potential transition resources comprise variables, referred to as the four S's: situation, self, support, and strategies. The *situation* variable addresses, what is happening? Situation factors consist of the transition's characteristics, including trigger, timing, control, role change, duration, prior experience with the same transition type, and assessment. The *self* variable addresses, to whom is it happening? Self factors consist of personal demographics and psychological resources. The *support* variable addresses, what help is available? Factors include social support types such as intimate, family unit, friendship, network, and institution. The last variable, *strategies*, addresses, how does the person cope? Factors comprise coping responses. Some people use the same strategies for every transition, while others more effectively vary strategies based on the situation (Anderson et al., 2012). Since the model addresses all types of adult transitions, we also used a career development model.

According to Swanson and Holton (2009), Hansen's ILP career development model "draws upon psychology, sociology, economics, multiculturalism, and constructivism and takes a holistic approach by encouraging people to connect various aspects of life" (p. 106). Hansen (1997, 2011) described *integrative* as emphasizing body, mind, and spirit integration and *life planning* as recognizing life's multiple and interrelated aspects and adults' responsibility to plan their career development. She organized ILP into six critical tasks for career development and decision making: finding work that needs doing in changing global contexts; attending to our physical, mental, and emotional health; connecting family and work; valuing pluralism and inclusivity; exploring spirituality and life purpose; and managing personal transitions and organization change. Complementing each other, the two models formed the conceptual framework and guided the study along with the methodology.

Methodology

Phenomenology focuses on understanding the essence of a lived phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2017) and supports studying multiple individuals who shared a common lived experience (Moustakas, 1994). In this phenomenological study, participants provided perspectives about the essence of their midlife career transition to the professoriate. Inclusion criteria comprised women, tenure-track or tenured faculty, in AE or related fields, at minimum 4-year institutions, who self-identified as career changers to the professoriate, while age 35 to 60 years. We used purposeful

and convenience sampling to identify potential participants and snowball sampling to expand the pool.

To prepare for data collection, we followed Moustakas' (1994) Epoché process to investigate and bracket the essence of our experience as aspiring and accomplished women midlife career changers to the professoriate. Phenomenological data collection typically consists of a long or multiple interview(s); therefore, we conducted, recorded, and transcribed two semistructured interviews with each participant. Guided by the conceptual framework, the interview protocol included open-ended questions about the experience of the phenomena.

Data analysis followed Moustakas' (1994) methods, including phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. After participants had an opportunity to member check the transcriptions, we reviewed the data for understanding. Data analysis began with phenomenological reduction's five tasks: bracketing, horizonalization, delimiting to invariant horizons, and clustering the invariant constituents into themes, resulting in individual textural descriptions. Data analysis continued with imaginative variation's five tasks: systematic varying of the structural meanings underlying the textural meaning, recognizing the underlying themes accounting for the phenomenon's emergence, and searching for exemplifications, resulting in individual structural descriptions. In the final data analysis step, we integrated the fundamental textural and structural descriptions into a comprehensive statement of the essences of the phenomenon. For research quality, the study used four validation strategies (Creswell & Poth, 2017): clarifying research bias; member checking; peer review of analysis and findings; and rich, thick description in findings.

Findings

The findings begin with aggregated participant description and use pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. They continue with a career transition process and related challenges, supports, and strategies (see Figure 1) and feature participant voices.

Participants and the Career Transition Process

Eight midlife women participated in the study, and their pseudonyms indicate relative progress in career transition to the professoriate. At time of study, participants evenly divided between tenure-track assistant professors (Anna, Barbara, Christine, and Debra), tenured associate professors (Elizabeth, Frances, and Gail), and a full professor (Hannah). They affiliated with five doctoral- and two masters-granting institution, four in the South, three in the Midwest, and one in the Northeast. Participants comprised six White women and two women of color. At time of study, ages included as follows: two participants 40 to 44 years, two 45 to 49 years, one 50 to 54 years, two 60 to 64 years, and one 65 to 69 years. They included White women, women of color, five married women, and four mothers, including one grandmother.

Participants described midlife career transition as the culmination of prior life, educational, and work experiences. Although not traditional linear pathways, they generally

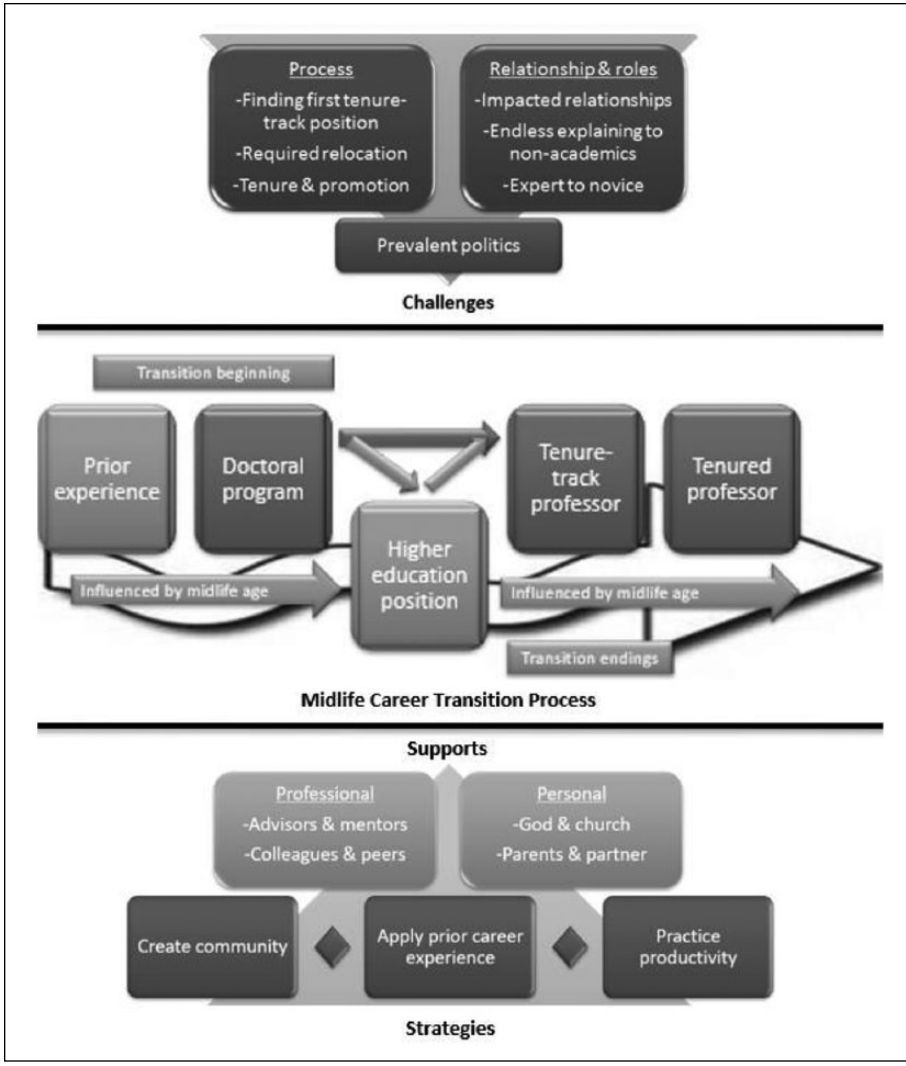

Figure 1. Women's midlife career transition process to tenured/tenure-track faculty and related challenges, supports, and strategies.

described experiences constructing a career transition process, bringing varied prior education and work experience from business, nonprofits, and education sectors. Half the participants perceived age as a negative influence, using terms like "late to the game" and being older as "a strike against you," and expressed past and current concerns about midlife related to being hired into and advancing in the professoriate. Many, however, also reported associated experience informed research, teaching, and service. Varying transition beginnings occurred as early as before doctoral programs and

as late as program end. Endings also varied from tenure-track position to tenured position to no ending for one tenure-track participant still aspiring to a tenured position. During the process, participants faced several challenges.

Career Transition Challenges

Women transitioning to faculty roles in midlife more acutely experienced common challenges and faced unique challenges related to the process, relationships and role expectations, and prevalent politics.

Process-Related Challenges. Three process-related challenges comprised finding first tenure-track position, required relocation, and tenure and promotion.

Finding first tenure-track position. After spending years aspiring to and preparing for the professoriate, participants struggled during the search process and finding their first tenure-track position. Some participants initially did not secure tenure-track faculty positions and experienced feelings of failure in not meeting societal, advisor, mentor, family, friend, and self's expectations. According to Barbara,

> There's an unconscious grooming that you'll aspire to be a tier-one professor. . . . It's never explicitly said, an unspoken kind of thing. So anything else? I experienced it as failure when I wasn't getting tier-one interviews. . . . Then, I ended up . . . doing this administrative thing with a title no one understood. . . . It almost felt like this isn't what I trained for, even though I was doing faculty development, curriculum design, all these things I had been trained for. I started conceptualizing that as my postdoc, and that helped me.

All participants experienced the search process as long, challenging, and risky; several required help from mentors and advisors to navigate the process.

Required relocation. Participants eventually moved to new institutions for tenure-track faculty positions, requiring seven to relocate. Required relocation presented logistical, relational, personal, and professional challenges. For example, participants bought and sold homes and managed complex moves often affecting numerous relationships. As Frances described, they faced newcomer status in every situation:

> I was a newcomer everywhere I turned. I was a newcomer walking into a store. I was a newcomer walking into a church. I was a newcomer walking into my classroom. I was a newcomer walking into my department, my college, whatever. Lots of energy goes to being new, especially if you don't have a significant other. You don't have a space where you can go and not be new.

While all relocating faculty experience challenges, faculty transitioning from a previously established career found the move and loss of prior personal and professional life a major challenge.

Tenure and promotion. All participants referred to tenure and promotion throughout interviews, comparing the experience with "a marathon," "jumping through hoops," and "juggling glass balls." Due to the unclear process and uncertain outcomes, nontenured participants consistently referenced *if* they make tenure. Several participants described teaching and service as "barriers" to required research, struggling to prioritize research over teaching and questioning their identities as teachers. Skills developed in prior careers led to increased time spent on service, as happened to Anna: "I was sucked into all of these service things. When you transition, and you're not 25, they're using all these skills. But guess what? I'm not writing!" Debra cautioned the stakes are high: "At the end of this tenure process, if you're not tenured, you have a year to get out." In addition to these process-related challenges, participants experienced relationship- and role-related challenges.

Relationship- and Role-Related Challenges. Managing demands of the professoriate challenged personal and family relationships while participants struggled to explain faculty expectations and the transition process to nonacademics.

Impacted relationships. Participants grappled to balance the professoriate with relationships and roles, often resulting in conflict between the personal and professional lifeworld. Anna shared her husband's feelings:

> "If I didn't love you that much, I would have walked away long time ago. . . . You know what? I have become your friend. I'm a chauffeur to our son. That's all. You come to bed; you are tired. You wake up; you talk about [work associates]." He is right; this job consumes me. . . . He is saying, "Your job is first, your son is second, then it's me."

Familial relationship challenges included marital pressures and concerns, spouses and partners experiencing unemployment and sacrificing careers, and guilt about lack of time for spouses and partners, children, and extended family members.

Endless explaining to nonacademics. Participants reported endless explaining to nonacademics throughout transition. Embedded in many explanations, participants attempted to justify their midlife career change and explain new identities or roles, often while simultaneously constructing such identities and learning such roles. Seeking understanding and support, participants often felt misunderstood, especially related to constant writing and publishing demands. According to Gail, "some people will think they understand what you do or, at least, they really believe they understand, and they really don't." Citing frequent faculty divorce, Christine recommended warning students, especially women, to talk to significant others about the professoriate and its expectations. Educating others about the unfamiliar field of AE further compounded the complexity of endlessly explaining to nonacademics.

Expert to novice transition. Unique to changing careers in midlife, all participants experienced the challenge of expert to novice transition. Ironically, the field of AE values prior experience, but within the context of the professoriate, participants felt their

prior career experience unrecognized and undervalued. Frances identified the expert to novice transition as "the most difficult thing":

> The rhetoric says we welcome everyone to the table. [However,] especially if you're going to be a faculty member in the field of adult education, that's not the reality of the higher education culture, those two cultures clash. Understand that higher education is going to discount your previous experience, because it's not higher education.

Transitioning from prior careers, several participants lost power, authority, contacts, budgets, and resources. According to Christine, "You come in as a peon, as an assistant professor, who has no power. You can't get anything done." Starting over at the bottom of the career trajectory in midlife is especially challenging in letting go of prior career identities to embrace a new professorial identity. Moreover, institutional politics compounded their challenges.

Prevalent Politics. To varying degrees, all participants spoke of politics as prevalent and complex, especially related to tenure and promotion. Most often centered on power, relationships, and resources, many felt unprepared to deal with such politics. According to Debra,

> Nothing can prepare you for what a bizarre realm the professoriate is . . . at the intersection of heightened bureaucracy, extreme politics, egos, and good intentions. All those things, coming together, and money issues make academia complex.

Some participants perceived female gender and/or midlife age as particular challenges in higher education's political environment, which tends to be traditional, hierarchical and, at the extreme, uncivil. Such extreme prompted Elizabeth to question her role: "I was beaten and bullied, abused, and I saw leadership so weak. Then I was so disgusted, 'I am leaving academia. I cannot be in this kind of environment.'" To navigate the political landscape, Barbara suggested a course and forming alliances:

> There needs to be a PhD class that says how to deal with politics, how to observe politics, how to tread lightly, how to navigate that piece of the context of this job. Because it's not just about sitting and interacting with my students. It's about advocating for my program, my students, and myself in a way that is assertive, but not aggressive, and building alliances that don't come across as Survivor alliances, but are critically important.

While participants experienced many challenges, in various combinations and at varying times, they also benefited from supports.

Career Transition Supports

Participants identified four major midlife career transition supports. All relational, professional supports comprised advisors and mentors as well as colleagues and peers, and personal supports comprised God and church as well as parents and partner.

Advisors and Mentors. All participants identified advisors and mentors, especially dissertation advisors and chairs, as critically important during transition. As AE students and new faculty, most advisors and mentors provided emotional and practical support, including encouragement, affirmation, and opportunities to teach and publish. Some advisors, such as Christine's, extended mentoring beyond school, as graduates took on faculty roles at new institutions:

> I still have [my advisor] on speed dial. She was very supportive. I would call her and talk through all kinds of things . . . work issues and things that would come up and applying for new jobs and just everything. She was an incredible support, just there, a listening ear. Her advice is always sound. I knew if I did what [she] told me, I'd be okay.

While generally supportive, advisors and mentors varied in expertise, experience, interests, and available time, and for one participant, provided little support.

Colleagues and Peers. Colleagues and peers also provided support during transition. Several participants spoke of deep relationships formed in AE doctoral programs that grew as they became new faculty at new institutions, keeping in touch and sharing information and best practices. Other relationships began at new institutions, helping each other teach, publish, and navigate tenure and promotion. Gail found others like her for support:

> Some of them were just starting out as professors, too, so we were able to share stories, share experiences, so that was really helpful. . . . Having colleagues in the field who get it certainly makes a difference. They can help you through the process, through the transition to the professoriate.

Additional relationships spanned institutional boundaries, for example, beginning as conference acquaintances and evolving to collaborative research and writing colleagues.

God and Church. Half the participants mentioned *God or church*. They invoked God as guide or strength throughout the process, for example, when deciding to leave a prior career, earn a graduate degree, and pursue the professoriate. Gail described God's constant support,

> I just feel that whatever God has placed me in, He's place me there for a reason. I just feel he is going to give me the tools and resources I am going to need to be successful in that position.

Barbara found journaling major decisions helpful and prayerful and felt God watching over her and opening doors. Some participants found support in church communities, especially after required relocations to new towns.

Parents and Partner. Participants valued familial support during transition, especially parents and partner. Participants felt unconditionally supported by parents, despite not

always understanding midlife career transition to the professoriate. Some parents provided practical support (e.g., child care and transportation) during their daughter's graduate studies, later lost due to required relocation for first tenure-track position. Nonsingle participants also recognized their partner's support, including sacrificing careers to support the participant's faculty career, such as Anna's husband:

> My husband has always been 100% supportive. He quit his job to take care of the baby, so I could finish my work. I don't know too many people, in this society, who have that, because there are people who have their hard drives erased by their husbands . . . I don't think you can do this unless you have a partner who is supportive, or you get divorced.

This study's relational supports helped participants transition along with specific strategies.

Career Transition Strategies

Participants identified three major strategies to navigate the transition process to the AE professoriate: create community, apply prior career experience, and practice productivity.

Create Community. Participants took deliberate action to create community. In graduate school, students shared experiences and information and provided mutual support. After joining the professoriate, however, new faculty did not always find support in their departments, so looked elsewhere. Frances described how she created community:

> There were four people who started at the same time . . . I literally created a community of practice. When it got time for our fourth-year dossier, [we] met and exchanged all the information [we] knew and could gather.

Participants also created community by joining on-campus women's faculty organizations, meeting people for coffee, and networking at conferences and in the field.

Apply Prior Career Experience. Unique to career changers, participants strove to apply prior career experience in their new context of higher education. They applied such experience to research, teaching, service, and working with students and colleagues. Hannah reflected on how prior career experience informed her new faculty career:

> The major professions I've been part of involved teaching and counseling. . . . Those just fold-in so neatly into the professoriate. There are changes obviously; the context is very different. The teaching demands are way more explicit and intense. The counseling is advising, which certainly involves doing what you need to do for the student to help them make it through the program. But it's way more than that. There's real continuity there and sort of a logical progression. It's like taking the same interests and abilities that I have and developing them in different contexts.

Prior career experience added authentic practice to teaching, influenced research agendas, and provided skills to advise students and work with diverse people.

Practice Productivity. Participants strove to practice productivity through activities and relationships. Most strategies focused on successfully navigating tenure and promotion. Examples included studying formal and informal tenure and promotion requirements, honing a research focus, prioritizing research and writing, strategically targeting journals for publication, and coordinating with colleagues to minimize teaching preparations. Participants leveraged collaborative writing practices, varying first and second authorships, to increase publishing productivity, as Anna explained to another new faculty member,

> We need to have a strategy, right? You need to have 10 publications by the time you're [up for promotion and tenure]. . . . I should have at least 3 soloed and one original study. . . . I conceptualize these, every year, and I do two together each spring. You're first author on one, and I'm first author on the other one. . . . That's just what we're going to do.

Midlife career women used strategies and supports to navigate challenges during career transition, which we now discuss.

Discussion of Findings

This study investigated the career transition and strategies of women midlife career changers to the AE professoriate. Here we discuss the midlife career transition process, relationships and roles, expert to novice transition, prevalent politics, and navigation strategies.

Midlife Career Transition Process

In contrast to traditional faculty, who directly progress from undergraduate to graduate studies and enter the professoriate, this study's midlife participants described nontraditional, nonlinear, and off-time pathways to the AE professoriate. Crane et al. (2009) raised the question, what do we need to consider regarding nontraditional paths to the professoriate? Midlife career changers face unique transition challenges and more acutely face common ones compared with younger counterparts (Newman, 1995). Social time underlies society's age norms, and being off-time affects self-identity and self-esteem as individuals compare cultural and societal time expectations with their own time (Neugarten & Datan, 1973). Participants experienced difficulty *finding first tenure-track position* in AE, and some initially failed. Potential employers may resist hiring midlife career changers based on age, perceived lack of mobility, and associated new employee costs with limited remaining years (Newman, 1995). All participants prevailed and frequently faced *required relocation*. For a younger faculty member, relocation often means moving self, some boxes, and

limited furniture to a new apartment. For midlife participants, relocation required selling and buying houses; separating from children, grandchildren, and aging parents; leaving established professional and personal networks; and moving spouses, children, and accumulated households.

As new faculty, *tenure and promotion* presented challenges to write and publish in addition to teach and serve. Due to prior career experience, this study's midlife participants reported higher service demands than younger, less-experienced, new faculty. In Tisdell et al.'s (2016) survey, AE faculty ranked interest in teaching as a higher job motivation than interest in research or service and expressed dissatisfaction in lack of research time. Men generally devote more time to research and women to teaching and service (Cress & Hart, 2009; Park, 2000). Despite such gendered division of labor, the stakes are equally high. These findings illustrate nontraditional, nonlinear, and off-time career pathways to the professoriate for midlife women who more acutely experience common challenges and face unique ones.

Relationships and Roles

Relationships and roles are critical to women's self-identity (Caffarella & Olson, 1993) and underscore women's connection over separation in contrast to men's autonomy (Ross-Gordon, 1999). This study's participants reported *impacted relationships*, including loneliness and difficulty balancing the professoriate with roles of wife/partner, mother, grandmother, extended family member, and friend. Participants sacrificed relationships to meet faculty role expectations resulting in further conflict between personal and professional life dimensions. In response to such impacts, participants found themselves *endlessly explaining the professoriate to nonacademics*, who incorrectly assumed that they understood faculty's unique positions, requirements, and demands. Explaining tenure and promotion, writing and publishing requirements, and the field of AE were particularly challenging.

Although midlife career transition challenged relationships, this study's participants identified relational supports. Motulsky (2010) studied women at different stages of midlife career transition finding relationships assist in overcoming transition barriers, especially relationships with experts, colleagues, and friends. Furthermore, midlife women with such professional relationships experienced fewer and more effectively dealt with challenges. Mentoring relationships play an important role in preparing for future academic careers (Hansman, 2016). In this study, most *advisors and mentors* affirmed and encouraged participants and created teaching, researching, and publishing opportunities during graduate school, and some mentored participants as new faculty at new institutions. Such relationships, however, varied in form, support level, complexity, and satisfaction.

This study's participants also found support among *colleagues and peers* while students and later new faculty. In a study of AE graduate students, peer mentoring played a major role in building a community of practice for support and learning (Cherrstrom, Zarestky, & Deer, 2018). Mutual career identity and needs can develop into informal mentoring relationships and peer support systems (Barrett & Brown,

2014; Hansman, 2016). In Tisdell et al.'s (2016) survey, AE faculty ranked collegiality with departmental colleagues as the most important type of career support, followed by support from immediate supervisor, and collegiality with colleagues outside the department.

Half of this study's participants mentioned *God and church* as midlife career transition supports. God opened doors or windows and provided guidance and church provided community. All participants valued familial support while transitioning, especially from *parents and partners*. Parents unconditionally supported participants and, if possible, offered practical help. Husbands sacrificed careers to support their wife's faculty careers. Schlossberg's adult transition model includes spirituality, related to but distinct from religion, and social supports, such as intimate and family unit, as resources during transition (Anderson et al., 2012). Hansen's (1997, 2011) ILP model references a higher power, related to spirituality and purpose, and connecting family and work. These findings suggest transitioning to the professoriate in midlife challenges women's relationships and roles, yet relationships provide support. They also suggest the importance of a support team to meet the multiple, varied, and complex challenges midlife women personally and professionally experience.

Expert to Novice Transition

Starting a new career requires exiting former work roles and entering new ones (Scheid, 2005). Unique to midlife, this study's participants struggled with the *expert to novice transition*. As prior career experts, they had influence, authority, and resources but felt powerless as novice faculty and struggled to apply career prior experience in a new context. In contrast to AE's general recognition and validation of prior experience, participants believed administrators and colleagues often did not recognize such prior experience. In primary and secondary education studies, Williams (2010) found that women struggled as novices despite prior career experience and accomplishments, and George and Maguire (1998) found trainees felt patronized, undervalued, and invisible when faculty and administrators did not recognize or validate prior experience and knowledge. Paradoxically, Mayotte (2003) and Williams (2010) found teacher trainees not viewed as novices because of age and prior experience may not receive needed support and encouragement. This finding suggests women midlife career changers must reconcile changing roles and identity from prior career expert to new career novice. In addition, they seek recognition and validation of prior experience while simultaneously needing support to transfer such experience to a new context.

Prevalent Politics

In this study, prevalent politics permeated midlife career transition, especially tenure and promotion. According to Anderson et al. (2012), political context affects our experiences of and reactions to transitions. Gender, race, sexual orientation, and class influence social position and women's career development prospects and

progress (Johnson-Bailey & Tisdell, 1998). In George and Maguire's (1998) study, midlife career changers experienced sexism and ageism and felt their prior experience viewed as disadvantageous and age and maturity as liabilities. Sexism is imbedded in higher education structures, norms, and policies (Park, 2000), and assuming equitable treatment for themselves and others, new women faculty often find the realities of academic life shocking (Cress & Hart, 2009). Women face subtle and intractable barriers and find it difficult to attain higher professorial ranks, especially at major research institutions (Glazer-Raymo, Townsend, & Ropers-Huilman, 2000). At the extreme, tenure and promotion, unclear expectations, and subjective evaluations contribute to potential bullying and uncivil cultures resulting in negative experiences (Dentith, Wright, & Coryell, 2015). Such experiences sharply contrast with AE's vision of human fulfillment, positive social change, and a more human world (American Association for Adult and Continuing Education [AAACE], n.d.). This finding suggests midlife women may face genderism and ageism while transitioning to the professoriate and benefit from guidance to navigate their new political context.

Navigation Strategies

Schlossberg's adult transition model includes strategies as a potential resource, addressing how a person in transition copes (Anderson et al., 2012). Hansen (1997, 2011) alludes to strategies in the ILP model, managing personal transitions and organizational change. Accordingly, this study's participants identified and executed strategies to cope with and manage transition.

Participants took purposeful actions to *create community* on campus and in the AE field to cope with transition challenges and leverage supports. For example, they found comfort in realizing or confirming they were not alone in their experiences. Furthermore, community members understood and supported several transition challenges, such as the loneliness and newness of required relocations, stress of tenure and promotion and affected relationships, tedium of endlessly explaining the professoriate to nonacademics, and political pressures of higher education. Communities also offered practical solutions, such as sharing information, brainstorming solutions, researching, writing, and publishing activities.

Participants also strove to *apply prior career experience* in their new context of higher education. Prior experience influenced research, teaching, and service. For example, prior career knowledge, skills, and interests influenced research agendas, brought real world practice to classroom theory, and influenced service assignments and activities. However, they often struggled with how to best transfer prior career experience to higher education. In some cases, advisors/mentors or colleagues/peers helped guide such transfer.

Last, participants sought to *practice productivity* by minimizing, as much as possible, conflicting demands and focusing on what it takes to make tenure and promotion. They recognized research and publishing as top priorities for tenured and tenure-track faculty positions, but several felt conflicted about devoting more time

to research at the expense of teaching. Practicing productivity primarily related to increasing time and activities to research, write, and publish. However, they also hoped practicing productivity would free up time, and alleviate related guilt, to spend with family and friends who did not understand process demands.

These three strategies support Jones and DeFillippi's (1996) boundaryless career, requiring six interrelated competencies. The first three career competencies—*what, where*, and *when*—form a picture of the industry, in this study, higher education. The remaining three competencies—*why, whom*, and *how*—provide self-knowledge and skill to navigate the industry. In this study, each strategy advanced multiple competencies, as participants took action to better understand their new context of higher education and AE, themselves as AE students and new faculty, and their skills to navigate midlife career transition. Extending the boundaryless career, professional organizations can play a role in faculty executing these strategies. Tisdell et al. (2016) recommended increased AE faculty participation in professional organizations noting "the social capital these organizations provide not only may increase knowledge, productivity, and satisfaction of individual members, but also expand the scope and influence of the profession and field" (p. 93). Collectively, the findings suggest opportunities and offer implications for midlife career changers, their institutions, and professional organizations (e.g., AAACE, CPAE, AERC) to meet challenges, leverage supports, and execute strategies to navigate career transition.

Implications and Future Research

Based on the findings, this study has implications for theory and practice. First, the study expands traditional White-male-dominated adult and career development literatures with its focus on midlife, women, career transition, expert to novice transition, and the context of higher education. This study adds a nontraditional, nonlinear career transition process with related challenges, supports, and navigation strategies. The study also adds the development from prior career expert to new career novice (i.e., doctoral students and new faculty) along with strategies to develop to new career expert (i.e., tenured faculty).

Second, the study has implications for practice related to midlife career changers to the professoriate. The study contributes to doctoral student marketing, recruiting, admitting, advising, programming, preparing, and socializing related to the academy. In addition, the study has implication for faculty search committee membership and activities. Hiring can encourage or discourage midlife career changer applicants as potential faculty. Faculty development and socialization can help or hinder women midlife career changers as they strive to meet challenges, leverage supports, and execute strategies. Helpful interventions might include programming about finding and relocating for first faculty positions, navigating politics and tenure and promotion, and respectively minimizing and maximizing relational challenges and supports. Administrators can recognize prior career experience and help midlife career changers transfer such experience and navigate the higher service demands resulting from such experience. Institutions can provide strategic opportunities for graduate students

and new faculty to create community, apply prior career experience, and practice productivity. Such opportunities might include mentoring relationships and peer support systems. In addition, professional organization (e.g., AAACE, CPAE, AERC) can create opportunities for members across the field through conferences, communities of practice, publications, and networking.

Third, this study has practice implications for women midlife career changers. The study informs about a career transition process and related challenges, supports, and strategies. Such information can influence attitudes, satisfaction, and activities throughout transition, including the selection of institutions and programs. AE graduate students and new faculty will know they are not alone in facing challenges, including midlife's unique expert to novice transition. Creating community may offer practical information to face challenges and offer emotional support. Applying prior career experience may advance development from novice toward expert faculty. Practicing productivity may result in completing the career transition process, earning tenure and promotion, and helping those who follow.

Finally, the study informs future research. First, we recommend research on women midlife career changers at specific points along, and a longitudinal study spanning, the career transitions process. Such research may further examine the socialization of midlife AE graduate students and new faculty to the professoriate. Second, we recommend research to investigate midlife career transition to nontenure track faculty and other higher education contexts, such as community colleges. Third, we recommend research beyond AE, for example in applied fields and, for contrast, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. Fourth, we recommend research examining the expert to novice transition and subsequent journey to new career expert. Such future research could identify a process and clarify the individual, institution, and professional organization's roles in such development. Further study of challenges, supports, and strategies could identify interventions to facilitate such transition. Women's midlife career transition to the professoriate merits such additional research as their research, teaching, and service influences students, colleagues, institutions, communities, academic fields, and the world.

Authors' Note

This article is the first submission of comprehensive findings for publication in a journal. Previous oral presentations include preliminary, overview, and specific aspects of findings: AAACE (2015, 2016), AERA (2016), AERC (2015, 2016), and AHRD (2016).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Catherine A. Cherrstrom https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4903-053X

References

Alfred, M. V. (2001). Expanding theories of career development: Adding the voices of African American women in the White academy. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *51*, 108-127.

American Association for Adult and Continuing Education. (n.d.). *Who we are*. Retrieved from https://www.aaace.org/page/WhoWeAre

Anderson, M. L., Goodman, J., & Schlossberg, N. K. (2012). *Counseling adults in transition: Linking Schlossberg's theory with practice in a diverse world* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Springer.

Barrett, J., & Brown, H. (2014). From leaning comes meaning: Information comentorship and the second-career academic in education. *Qualitative Report*, *19*(37), 1-15. Retrieved from https://nsuworks.nova.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1009&context=tqr

Baruch, Y. (2004). Transforming careers: From linear to multidirectional career paths organizational and individual perspectives. *Career Development International*, *9*, 58-73.

Bierema, L. L. (1998). A synthesis of women's career development issues. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, *80*, 95-103.

Caffarella, R. S., & Olson, S. K. (1993). Psychosocial development of women: A critical review of the literature. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *43*, 125-151.

Cherrstrom, C. A., Zarestky, J., & Deer, S. K. (2018). "This group is vital": Adult learners building community. *Adult Learning*, *29*, 43-52.

Crane, B., O'Hern, B., & Lawler, P. (2009). Second career professionals: Transitioning to the faculty role. *Journal of Faculty Development*, *23*(1), 24-29.

Cress, C. M., & Hart, J. (2009). Playing soccer on the football field: The persistence of gender inequities for women faculty. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *42*, 473-488.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2017). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Dentith, A. M., Wright, R. R., & Coryell, J. (2015). Those mean girls and their friends: Bullies and mob rule in the academy. *Adult Learning*, *26*, 28-34.

Dreyfus, S. E. (2004). The five-stage model of adult skill acquisition. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, *24*, 177-181.

Finkelstein, M. J., Seal, R., & Schuster, J. H. (1998). *New entrants to the full-time faculty of higher education institutions*. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/pubs98/98252.pdf

George, R., & Maguire, M. (1998). Older women training to teach. *Gender and Education*, *10*, 417-430.

Gergen, M. M. (1990). Finished at 40: Women's development within the patriarchy. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *14*, 471-493.

Glazer-Raymo J., Townsend, B. K., & Ropers-Huilman, B. (Eds.). (2000). *Women and higher education: A feminist perspective* (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.

Hansen, L. S. (1997). *Integrative life planning: Critical tasks for career development and changing life patterns*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Hansen, L. S. (2011). Integrative life planning: A holistic approach. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, *48*, 167-169.

Hansman, C. A. (2016). Developing rewarding mentoring relationships in doctoral education: Models from research and practice. In K. Peno, E. Silva Mangiante & R. Kenahan (Eds.), *Mentoring in formal and informal contexts* (pp. 97-118). Charlotte, NC: Information Age.

Inman, P. L. (1998). Women's career development at the glass ceiling. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, *80*, 95-103.

Johnson-Bailey, J., & Tisdell, E. J. (1998). Diversity issues in women's career development. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, *80*, 83-93.

Jones, C., & DeFillippi, R. J. (1996). Back to the future in film: Combining industry and self-knowledge to meet career challenges of the 21st century. *Academy of Management Executive*, *10*(4), 89-103.

Mayotte, G. A. (2003). Stepping stones to success: Previously developed career competencies and their benefits to career switchers transitioning to teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *19*, 681-695.

Motulsky, S. L. (2010). Relational processes in career transition: Extending theory, research, and practice. *Counseling Psychologist*, *38*, 1078-1114.

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). *National study of postsecondary faculty*. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/nsopf/

National Center for Education Statistics. (2003). *Table 231: Full-time instructional faculty in degree-granting institutions*. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d03/tables/dt231.asp

National Center for Education Statistics. (2004). *Tables on characteristics of full-time instructional faculty and staff*. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/das/library/tables_listings/nsopf.asp

National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). *Table 316.80: Percentage of degree-granting postsecondary institutions with a tenure system and of full-time faculty with tenure at these institutions*. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_316.80.asp

National Center for Education Statistics. (2017). *Table 315.20: Full-time faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions*. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_315.20.asp?current=yes

Neugarten, B. L., & Datan, N. (1973). Sociological perspectives on the life cycle. In P. B. Baltes & K. W. Schaie (Eds.), *Life-span development psychology: Personality and socialization* (pp. 53-69). New York, NY: Academic Press.

Newman, B. K. (1995). Career change for those over 40: Critical issues and insights. *Career Development Quarterly*, *44*, 64-66.

Park, S. M. (2000). Research, teaching, and service: Why shouldn't women's work count? In J. Glazer-Raymo, B. K. Townsend & B. Ropers-Huilman (Eds.), *Women and higher education: A feminist perspective* (2nd ed., pp. 285-308). Boston, MA: Pearson.

Peterson, S. L., & Provo, J. (1998). Profile of the adult education and human resource development professoriate: Characteristics and professional fulfillment. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *48*, 199-215.

Ross-Gordon, J. (1999). Gender development and gendered adult development. *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education*, *84*, 29-37.

Ryan, J., Healy, R., & Sullivan, J. (2012). Oh, won't you stay? Predictors of faculty intent to leave a public research university. *Higher Education*, *63*, 421-437.

Scheid, M. G. (2005). *Career exchange: Trading in a corporate career for new options* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. (UMI No. 3160005). https://search.proquest.com/openview/d76b7622e02e1ed1a22883cb6a3b3456/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y

Swanson, R. A., & Holton, E. F., III. (2009). *Foundations of human resource development* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

Tisdell, E. J., Wright, R. R., & Taylor, E. (2016). Adult education faculty and programs in North America: Faculty background, work, and satisfaction. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *66*, 76-95.

Williams, J. (2010). Constructing a new professional identity: Career transition into teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education: An International Journal of Research and Studies*, *26*, 639-647.

Author Biographies

Dr. Cathy Cherrstrom is an assistant professor in the Department of Organization, Workforce, and Leadership Studies. Prior to joining Texas State University, she had a career in the financial services industry, most recently as a major-market Business Banking Executive, leading teams and serving business clients. Dr. Cherrstrom's research focuses on adult learning as well as career development and transition in the contexts of higher education and the workplace.

Dr. Mary Alfred is a professor of adult education in the College of Education and Human Development at Texas A&M University. She also serves as Principal Investigator and Executive Director for the Texas Center for the Advancement of Literacy & Learning (TCALL). Dr. Alfred's research interests include adult learning and development, equity and social justice in education and the workplace, immigration and learning, welfare reform and women's economic development, and women of the Diaspora.