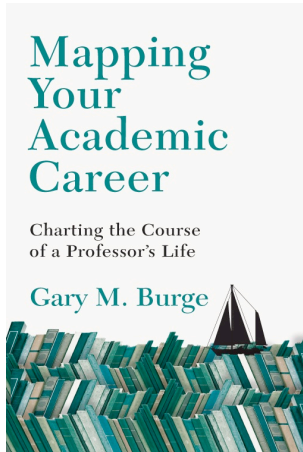




WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Mapping Your Academic Career: Charting the Course of a Professor's Life

Burge, Gary M.
InterVarsity Press, 2015

Book Review

Tags: administration | career development | faculty formation | vocation

Reviewed by: Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *McAfee School of Theology - Mercer University*

Date Reviewed: April 15, 2016

If one were to ask faculty to describe the developmental continuum of an academic career, the responses would probably be structured along the titles that correspond to the faculty ranks of assistant professor, associate professor, and professor. In *Mapping Your Academic Career*, Gary Burge takes a different approach, examining how faculty careers are shaped by developmental shifts that occur naturally across an adult lifespan. His central thesis is that the development of most faculty proceeds along predictable trajectories that are related, yet not necessarily identical, to their rank. Burge identifies three stages of development in a faculty career, which he labels as “cohorts.” These do not necessarily correspond to faculty rank or age. Instead, they are shaped by: (1) a scholar’s perception of themselves, their career, and their relationship to their institution; and (2) the institution’s perception of the scholar’s career progress and value within the institution.

Consistent with other lifespan developmental theories, each cohort is characterized by a central developmental task or question, which influences the choices they make and the forms of support they need. For cohort one, which corresponds to the early phase of an academic career (or possibly a shift to a new institution for experienced faculty), the central task is finding security and vocational identity, with tenure or a long-term contract being the watershed. The central task in cohort two, the midcareer period, is success – that is, achieving mastery and developing a unique voice in one’s teaching and scholarship. For cohort three, who are typically senior, tenured, full professors, it is finding significance – determining their value to the institution and the guild.

As a newly tenured faculty member, I approached this book under the assumption that it would

focus, at least in part, upon mapping the path to tenure and promotion; that it would discuss the institutional commitments and guild activities that would most likely gain the approval of promotion committees, provosts, and president. Burge's text, however, is not primarily concerned with how to get to each phase. He spends virtually no time discussing how to get a tenure-track position, how to get tenure, or how to map your path to professor. Instead, he is concerned with the health and vitality of faculty careers and how faculty can successfully navigate the tasks of finding security, success, and significance. Burge devotes a full chapter to each of the three cohorts, describing the individual, interpersonal, and institutional characteristics that predict successful navigation of the stage. He also notes that there are "predictable pitfalls" within each cohort, which may negatively impact, and in some cases end, a scholar's career.

Burge's text is most helpful for mid-career and senior faculty, as well as for the administrators who oversee them. Because of the prominent role and impact of tenure, faculty development efforts inordinately focus upon it. There is little attention upon helping tenured faculty intentionally reflect upon their vocation, including their commitments to teaching, scholarship, and service within their institutions and the larger society. Burge's text draws attention to the ways in which faculty evolve as they mature. He provides some insight into the issues that contribute to faculty members' loss of focus or motivation following tenure or promotion.

A significant shortcoming of the book is that it lacks a sound basis of support. Burge provides no description of the methodology used to identify the cohorts. There is no interview data and little support from extant literature to support many of his assumptions. His analysis relies heavily upon personal experience and anecdotes, which he often interprets in troubling ways. While he tries to include issues of race, ethnicity, and culture, his handling of those issues is sometimes clumsy and shortsighted. He does not question or critique institutional structures or systems that hamper the success and vitality of female and ethnic minorities. He treats these issues instead as individual problems that are the responsibility of ethnic minority and female faculty members to navigate.

Still, *Mapping Your Academic Career* is a worthy effort and a helpful book that faculty and administrators should read. In it, Burge names what is often unnamed in faculty development. And while the book has little in the way of firm support, it provides a good foundation for research on the developmental shifts and challenges facing faculty across their careers

https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/resources/book_reviews/mapping-your-academic-career-charting-the-course-of-a-professors-life/