

Looking Successful; Feeling Marginal

Chris is an assistant professor, nearing the end of his third year in a large social sciences department. He took his current position after completing a post-doc at one of the nation's finest private research universities. He has continued to pursue a research agenda established under the supervision of his post-doctoral mentor, collaborating with three other members of his field, all of whom are at other institutions.

Chris's work has been positively received in his department's research seminars and he has been told by his chair that he looks "on track," with six publications in top tier journals and several more in the pipeline. But Chris has known for some time now that this work is not his passion; he cannot imagine himself doing it over the span of his career. What do intrigue him are issues of public health in minority communities---such as the one from which he comes. He is interested in questions about the utility and application of Western legal principles to the use of human subjects for clinical medical research in different socio-cultural contexts. He has an idea for a different approach to examining the socioeconomics of health care disparities. But he is uncertain of the wisdom of shifting his scholarly focus at this point. And he has heard that community-based work (a colleague called it "minority research") does not garner much respect. He cannot name a single colleague at his institution doing work of this nature.

Chris cannot claim to have a mentor on his faculty. He sought a senior colleague's advice when he was writing his first article, and received some helpful suggestions, but hasn't had one-to-one contact with him since. In his annual meetings with his department chair Chris had the chance to discuss his teaching preferences and talk at length about his research, which paralleled some the chair had done at an earlier point in his own career. But it is his future as a scholar that he most wishes to openly discuss. He wants to know how his aspirations would be viewed but wonders what he would do if he revealed his true interests only to be told he should drop the idea.

Chris is very impressed with his students and really enjoys his teaching. And he spends a great deal of time with minority students, who show up at his office at all hours. Oddly, his teaching evaluations have not reflected these positive relationships. In fact, there have been instances in which he has felt a distinctly unfriendly – almost hostile – atmosphere in his classroom, which left him feeling very unsettled. He is concerned that his promotion review will leave no opportunity to show the many productive hours with satisfied students, since there is no formal accounting of them. He wonders if this is an issue for anyone else.

All in all, Chris has very mixed feelings about his place in his department, and the university as a whole. While he is impressed by the academic quality of his colleagues and students, it doesn't feel like sufficient reason to stay. He recently got a call from one of his collaborators, a faculty member at a large land grant university with a long tradition of community-based research, telling him about an opening on their faculty and encouraging him to apply. He is seriously thinking that he should.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- 1) You are the chair of the department in which Chris is a faculty member. What is within your power to do to retain him on your faculty?
- 2) You are Chris's post-doc mentor. What advice can you give him to help him evaluate the potential for remaining...and flourishing at his current institution?