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Assessing Faculty Quality of Life

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The challenges faced by colleges and universities today require professors dedicated to excelling as teachers, scholars, and mentors. Ironically, such individuals soon may become an endangered species. Since it is the faculty who carry out the essential work of the institution and who most directly affect the lives of students (Kamber, 1984), assessing faculty quality of life becomes a key issue for faculty developers and other university leaders.

In recent years numerous researchers have noted the declining morale of college and university professors. Balancing the multiple roles of personal and professional life is a complex and stressful task (Sorcinelli and Gregory, 1987). Decreasing mobility, financial constraints, increasingly stringent requirements for promotion and tenure, erosion of academic governance, and the pressures of teaching and keeping professionally current are having both a direct and an indirect impact on faculty morale, satisfaction, and self-esteem (Bowen and Schuster, 1985; Clarke, 1985; Jacobson, 1984). The morale problem is often acute for professors experiencing mid-life burnout (Boice, 1986). New faculty as well are experiencing significant job related stress and dissatisfaction (Turner and Boice, 1987). Bowen and Schuster (1986) suggest that the loss of status of the profession, the decline of compensation, and erosion of the work environment are bringing the academic profession to a critical juncture.

Keeping faculty members productive and vital calls for broad faculty development efforts (Gaff, 1976). The recruitment and retention of

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quality faculty will become more difficult in the future unless universities are successful at improving the work environment in order to reaffirm the traditional values of an academic community—scholarship, autonomy, participation, collegiality, reliable tenure, and breadth of learning.

The impetus for this study came from the researchers' awareness, from their clinical experiences with many faculty members, of the significance of faculty concerns and the direct impact of faculty well-being on student well-being. Since the information gained from clinical experience was confidential, the researchers sought to obtain information in a systematic way in order to address major issues of institutional mental health.

The purpose of this study was to assess the "quality of life" experienced by faculty at a state university with a stated teaching mission and an enrollment of approximately 10,000 students. A second purpose was to demonstrate a methodology for identifying faculty concerns through a series of personal interviews. The overriding value which influenced this study was that in an academic institution the development of its human resources should be a major purpose and an integral part of its processes (Cares and Blackburn, 1978).

Support for the project was provided by the university administration. In particular, the Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs offered encouragement by his excitement about the project, his openness to hear sometimes difficult feedback, and his deep caring for all persons within the university community. The Faculty Development and Instructional Services Center also contributed important support for the project in disseminating the report and in implementing a number of the recommendations.

Method

A 10% stratified random sample of 52 faculty members was drawn from a list of full-time, tenure track teaching faculty, supplied by the University's Office of Institutional Research. At least one faculty member from every teaching department was included. Of the original sample, three subjects declined to participate and were replaced with other random selections. The sample reflected the demographic parameters of the faculty population: the mean age was 45 years, the average number of years in the profession was 16, and 17 percent of the sample were women. The sample included 24 full professors, who averaged seven years at rank, 17 associate professors with an average of four years at rank, and 11 as-

sistant professors who averaged four years at the rank of assistant professor.

With the assistance of several campus consultants, the researchers developed a one-hour structured interview procedure for this project (the questionnaire form is available from the authors.) The format was similar to Spradley's (1979) anthropological research method and Denzin's (1970) sociological interview design.

A model for the interview process was adapted from a research technique developed by Laslett and Rapport (1975). This technique, known as "collaborative interviewing and interactive research," has been used primarily in the study of family dynamics. For studying faculty, several features of this method were particularly useful. The use of two interviewers and the awareness of the interview itself as a process similar to a clinical situation enabled the researchers to explore the personal meaning of responses, to attend to nonverbal and verbal cues, and to create an atmosphere of empathy and respect. Another essential feature was the use of the instrument as a guide for thorough and systematic collection of all data relative to the topics studied. The interviewers sought to go beyond mere descriptions of events and opinions to understand respondents' meanings in relation to the topics.

All of the interviews were conducted during the Spring and Summer Semesters by the researchers, two staff psychologists at the University's Counseling and Psychological Services Center. Verbatim responses were hand-recorded by the interviewers during the session. The identity of the subjects and their individual comments were kept confidential.

Results and Discussion

The information gathered from the faculty interviews was broad, diverse, and richly personal. This information was coded, compiled, and tabulated question by question (frequency tables and categories of responses by question are available from the authors.) Both the frequency of specific responses and the emergence of general themes within questions were considered valuable data. Most interesting, however, were the several broad themes which emerged across questions. The type of question, the context of the response, and the clinical impressions of the two interviewers helped determine which themes seemed most important. The major themes identified by the interviewers related to the following: 1) confusion about the institutional mission, 2) the paradoxical nature of teaching, 3) faculty needs for reward, autonomy, and creativity, 4) problems of academic leadership, 5) departmental concerns, 6) human

development concerns – family transitions, midlife challenges, career and personal development.

Institutional Mission

An important question which emerged for faculty was how an individual's own personal and professional goals fit within the overall mission of the university. Freedman, Brown, Ralph, Shukraft, Bloom, and Sanford (1979) have pointed out the unease, confusion, and lack of professional identity among faculty. The results of the present study suggested that there is a dynamic interaction between the faculty member's career goals and the university mission. Confusion in one led to confusion in the other. Confusion in both areas, e.g. a mission statement implemented with mixed messages and a faculty member experiencing midlife career dissatisfaction, often produced the unease and lack of professional identity highlighted by Freedman, et al. (1979).

A central aspect of this issue was the question of scholarship. Definitions of scholarship, a deeply held commitment for most faculty, differed appropriately among the basic sciences, the humanities, the arts, and professional fields. Such diversity is basic to an academic community. Ways of involving students in the pursuit of knowledge and meaning varied appropriately from discipline to discipline, and from teacher to teacher. Within this diversity territorial attitudes were present – the idea that one's definition of scholarship is the only right one, that the standards for one's department or college should apply to everyone else, or that the research methods of one's discipline provided the only source of truth. Faculty members rarely described the disciplines as complementary arenas of scholarship, functioning within a larger common purpose.

Many faculty members expressed a sense of powerlessness regarding questions of mission. When the several layers of administrators above them had differing views, some professors felt threatened and vulnerable, and many withdrew into the role of critic. Several referred to "the Dean's mission vs. the Vice-chancellor's mission" and questioned whose expectations would affect their own tenure, promotion, and merit decisions. Some individuals and departments gave up trying to articulate what they stood for in favor of conformity to perceived administrative agendas, losing sight of the fact that it is the faculty themselves who ultimately define the mission of the university.

The Paradox of Teaching

Closely related to issues surrounding the university's mission was the role of teaching in academic life. Teaching afforded both rich rewards and bitter disappointments to faculty members. Most said that teaching was the first priority of their work, yet they also acknowledged that good teaching generally was not rewarded by the system. When asked to share their best experience working at the university, faculty members most often mentioned classroom experiences and student relationships.

This finding seemed closely related to experiences at other institutions. As Paul Strohm notes, for example,

> We need not look far to find manipulative and self-interested encounters, outside the university and sometimes within. But the relation of teacher and student offers an occasional glimpse of another kind of encounter, to which each person brings his or her best self. A profession which fosters such encounters is worthy of sacrifice and hope (Strohm, 1985, p. 126).

The excitement of shared participation in learning, seeing students progress and expand, and having students respond with interest and enthusiasm provided faculty interviewees with some of their most meaningful rewards. They especially valued teaching a small group of highly motivated students. Honors classes, special topics courses, seminars, interdisciplinary programs, and team teaching were reported as examples of exciting and stimulating teaching challenges. Knowing that their teaching efforts made a difference mattered a great deal to most professors.

Some of the worst experiences also had to do with teaching. Many faculty members were concerned about the declining abilities of students. Others pointed to differences in values which they found disturbing. The present passivity of students and their motivation for jobs and financial security instead of an "education" confused and frustrated many professors. To those who hold to the nobility of teaching, to the important work of passing on the culture, it was difficult to have students who wanted only to get through a course. For numerous faculty members the notion of "retention," so popular with administrators, represented a commitment by the university to "coddle students" and to discredit the integrity of the teaching process.

Other researchers have suggested that of the three major faculty functions – teaching, research, and service – *teaching,* because of its multiple roles and time-consuming demands, is the most stressful (Gmelch, Lovrich, and Wilke, 1984). Some professors in this study were experiencing burnout or were concerned about it. As one put it, "I get psyched up for classes. I'm worried I'll someday lose the excitement." Helping profes-

sors maintain their excitement in teaching is a basic goal for universities which are genuinely committed to student learning.

Faculty Needs

With regard to work, professors most often expressed the need to feel valuable and valued. The knowledge that they were doing meaningful work was extremely important. Whether it be delivering a good lecture, serving as a mentor, doing research, or participating in faculty governance, most did indeed feel that what they were about was important, and they tried to do it well. Many felt that the external reward system did not reflect individual effort. As one professor put it, "The reward structure for a do-nothing professor is not that different from a do-something professor." A feeling of achievement and accomplishment was critical. To have the recognition and respect of colleagues was a prime source of feeling valued. When differences in priorities and professional interests became personal clashes, this need often remained unfulfilled. For some faculty the foremost acknowledgment of accomplishment came from colleagues within the field, but outside the university. Faculty members also sought recognition and respect from administrators. It was desired at all levels but essential from the chairperson. Whatever the personal style of the chair, it was incumbent that she or he find ways to let faculty know that their contributions were valued. Genuine appreciation was often more valuable than intermittent merit pay.

Professors in this study expressed a strong need for autonomy. Faculty members tended to see themselves as individual professionals, entering into contract with the university, not as "company" men and women. Most entered academics, at least in part, to have the freedom to pursue their own professional interests. Professors prized having the time and opportunity to read, to think, to do research, and to write and speak openly about issues and problems of their choosing. The freedom and encouragement to create, to develop new ideas, to engage in dialogue and debate were very important. Such freedoms are the hallmark of a university (Anderson, 1965), and they must be protected from administrative intrusion and financial constraint.

Many responses in the survey pointed to the need for faculty to have special opportunities for creativity, for learning new skills, for doing something different, and especially for participating in projects which cross lines of department and discipline. Professors frequently mentioned examples such as faculty development projects, interdisciplinary team teaching, off-campus assignments, new projects of various sorts, and released time for research or other activities. These experiences were im-

portant both for personal satisfaction and for continued professional growth. For specialists, sometimes trained in areas of narrow focus, such activities were paramount for a broader understanding of the university and each other.

Academic Leadership

Hierarchical structures are characteristic of higher education administration. The results of this study confirmed that as levels were added to the administrative structure, faculty tended to feel more burdened and hindered than facilitated by the administration. Moreover, each level added to the probability that communication would be unclear and that mistrust would increase. An administrator's very choice of the role itself, of management over scholarly pursuits, made his or her power motives and ego needs suspect to many professors. As one faculty member noted, "There is a great temptation here for good teachers to go into administration for power and money." Given leaders with integrity and effective communication, these suspicions lessened. In the absence of strong, honest, and visionary leadership, they festered into a generalized paranoia. As Nevitt Sanford points out in his seminal work on academic culture:

> But all this knowledge and expertise and humanity will not come to much, indeed it may not even find expression, unless faculty and students trust one another and all have some degree of trust in the administration. Paranoia is the social disease to which institutions of higher learning are particularly prone (1980, p. 207).

Administrators, for many faculty, were an unknown, a screen upon which they cast their own greatest hopes and worst fears. The greatest need was clearly for more professional, personal, and genuinely human contact.

The role of the departmental chairperson emerged as perhaps the single most important administrative position in the university, and the difficulty of the role was evident. Professors saw chairs as part faculty and part administrator, often perceived by each group as a member of the other. Those who were well-respected by the faculty were thought to possess an incredible mix of organizational and interpersonal skills combined with leadership ability, fair-mindedness, and meticulous attention to detail. To many faculty members it was the chair's interpersonal skills (or lack thereof) that they felt the most. As one professor put it, "The chair of the department sets the tone, and that's what you live with." Given the faculty's need for feeling valued and appreciated, those chairs who did

offer genuine respect and support, who empowered their faculty, were extremely valued. The chair significantly influenced the well-being of departmental faculty members and their perceptions of university issues.

Leadership of faculty is a great challenge. It is clear that effective leadership at all levels involves first, listening well to the many official and unofficial voices of the faculty and second, hearing, beyond concerns that may seem petty, what the deeper issues are. As one professor put it, "I worry about administrators who have no people training. We need more people who can read accurately what they hear." Faculty parking, for instance, may appear to be a trivial concern. In reality parking is a powerful symbol of status and an important clue to understanding faculty morale.

For participants in this study, the primary issue academic leaders needed to address was not how to manage but how to support. It was not how to administer; it was how to evoke the best from each person, to tap the deep commitments of faculty members to do important work and to do it well. The challenge was to prize the rich diversity that university faculty represented and to bring together diverse individuals and groups for the common purpose of educating students.

Departmental Issues

Another theme which emerged in this study was the importance of the department. The department and the issues related to it loomed as major sources of both satisfaction and dissatisfaction in life, in crises and challenges, and in best and worst experiences at the university.

Primary factors in departmental well-being seemed to be the composition of the group and the maturity of its individual members. The effectiveness of the department as a working group reflected the personal development of the members and their ability to communicate with each other in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Many faculty members paid "lip service" to the prizing of diversity, but day to day their individual differences often caused problems. In some departments the "old guard" were distrustful of newcomers or vice versa. In very large departments, factions often fought over issues and resources.

The choice to work in an academic community reflects certain values and some level of intellectual development. Intellectual development, however, does not imply an equal degree of emotional, social, or spiritual maturity. As in families, all aspects of human nature come into play within the department. Helping departments to become more functional groups is a worthy focus of faculty development efforts.

Human Development Issues

Several questions on the survey were aimed at gaining a better perspective on developmental issues confronting the faculty. Questions regarding professional goals and personal growth produced a surprising variety of responses. The responses to these questions emphasized pursuing scholarship, finding more balance in life, giving more priority to personal relationships, and focusing more on the spiritual side of life. The overriding value was involvement in the ongoing process of growth.

Understanding the intensity and diversity of these responses is facilitated by looking at a model of faculty and adult development. According to Nevitt Sanford (1980), the developmental sequence of a college professor proceeds in much the same way as other adults. Consequently, for a faculty with a mean age of 45, the developmental tasks involve self-acceptance, transcending generational boundaries, and enlarging one's capacity for intimacy (Levinson, 1978). Providing opportunities to address these concerns is an important administrative challenge.

It is not surprising that for many faculty the family was the source of the deepest satisfactions and the greatest frustrations in living. For many who have pursued with passion the life of the mind, it is only with the family that the heart is shared. Cool, detached, and logical in a professional symposium, many a professor goes home to let go in anger and love to experience his or her full humanity. At the same time, the security and stability sought from the family is frequently short-lived in contemporary society. The most significant life crises of these faculty came most often from family transitions – children growing up and leaving home, aging parents, family illness and death, and separation and divorce. The challenges which families present required that faculty continue to grow and mature as human beings.

Working out a comfortable balance between work and family life emerged as a high priority, a source of both satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and certainly an ongoing challenge. It was related not only to external pressures and to balancing time, but also to internal pressures to find a personal balance, to find ways of meeting spiritual and emotional as well as intellectual needs.

Recommendations

The stories of the 52 individuals interviewed in this project give us some meaningful information about the quality of life of the faculty and

the academic climate of the university. They tell us especially about human beings who are diverse, but share a deep commitment to their work and a sense of its importance. Among these faculty members there is overall a strong sense of responsibility and a high level of professionalism despite their dissatisfactions, frustrations, and disappointments.

Several possible directions emerge from this research. Although these 52 faculty members are from one university, their experiences are common to many campuses (e.g. Jacobson, 1985). To the extent that other institutions' issues overlap with the present findings, the following recommendations may help identify starting points for discussion and policy development by faculty and administration.

1. Work towards a consensus about the university's mission, synthesizing the "felt" mission of the faculty and the "stated" mission articulated by the administration.
2. Identify the formal and informal processes by which faculty receive rewards and recognition, searching for and resolving inconsistencies in tenure, promotion, merit pay, convenience of teaching schedules, and committee assignments.
3. Address the issue of academic leadership and the "distance" between faculty and administration by opening lines of communication, inviting direct and mutual feedback, and studying the pivotal role of the department chairperson.
4. Broaden the concept of faculty development beyond instructional and/or remedial services to include opportunities and practices which support the personal growth and career renewal of faculty.
5. Focus on organizational and personal well-being with the emphasis on self and institutional awareness and the interpersonal dynamics within the university community.

Conclusion

Beyond the results of the study, a word must be said about the time-consuming process of collecting data by conducting interviews with individual faculty members. The researchers chose this procedure over more traditional methods with the belief that each participant would be a more willing and enthusiastic research subject. What happened as a consequence became in many ways the most significant aspect of the study. Some faculty members felt honored to be interviewed; others described the process as uplifting, and still others reported a feeling of relief and catharsis. For the interviewers, it was an experience of discovering the humanity of the professoriate, the real, fragile, and human essence often

hidden by the intellectual and lofty image of academe. What started out as a plan to collect data in a unique and personalized fashion transformed into individual faculty development projects. The act of listening, questioning, and sharing key ingredients of faculty development did in a small but significant way empower each person who was interviewed.

The results of this research project were disseminated and discussed in a number of forums, including the Administrative Cabinet, the Council of Chairs, the Committee on Institutional Studies and Planning, the Faculty Development and Instructional Services Center, and several special interest groups. A number of faculty development efforts were a direct result of this report. These have included faculty breakfast meetings with the Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs, programs for Chairpersons, an ongoing faculty committee which voices faculty quality of life concerns, and an expansion of projects related to faculty personal and career development.

The human issues and concerns which have been raised in this study do not lend themselves to easy answers. Some are the issues of human beings living in this culture at this time. Some are concerns related to the very meaning and purpose of higher education. Some are focused on the specific academic community of Appalachian State University. The purpose of this study has been to generate discussion, to raise further questions, and to stimulate thinking about the quality of life of all the members of this community. The fact that such a study would take place at all attests to a recognition of the importance of people as individual human beings, in the life of the organization.

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