

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

To Improve the Academy

Professional and Organizational Development
Network in Higher Education

1991

University Faculty Attitudes Towards Teaching and Research

Russell Lee

Michael Field

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/podimproveacad>



Part of the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

Lee, Russell and Field, Michael, "University Faculty Attitudes Towards Teaching and Research" (1991). *To Improve the Academy*. 217.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/podimproveacad/217>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in To Improve the Academy by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

University Faculty Attitudes Towards Teaching and Research

Russell Lee
Michael Field

Bemidji State University

Nationwide, policy makers in higher education are anticipating increasing difficulties over the next two decades in recruiting and retaining faculty in diverse disciplines (Bowen and Schuster, 1986). Faculty have, of course, always been an absolutely fundamental human resource in higher education, but anticipated shortages call attention to our need for understanding more fully how faculty feel and think about their lives as professionals. If we can understand what faculty find most meaningful and what they find most frustrating in their professional lives, perhaps we can create the kinds of institutional support systems and cultures that attract talented people to our colleges and universities, and keep them happily employed once they are hired.

The project to investigate the attitudes of faculty towards teaching and research began in response to frequent anecdotal statements, heard by the authors, that college teachers, even at primarily undergraduate teaching institutions, are far more interested in research than in teaching, and by implication, more interested in data and publication than in students.

Method and Sample

In order to gather more information about faculty attitudes toward teaching and research, we developed a 39 item survey, replicating some items from a major National Education Association survey (1979) and including items that had emerged in our own earlier pilot work.

Choosing to focus intensively on a single state system, we surveyed over 2,000 faculty members at seven state universities in the Minnesota State University System. All seven universities are primarily undergraduate institutions with mission statements that emphasize teaching, but with some expectations that their faculty engage in research in order to be promoted or tenured. Over 1,000 participants responded to the survey, a response rate of about 50%. The respondents closely matched the system parameters in terms of gender and academic rank, allowing us to report several significant findings with considerable confidence.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Thirty-nine questions used in the survey were placed into clusters through the use of factor analysis. The three emergent factors that bear on this paper are (1) interest and satisfaction in research, (2) interest and satisfaction in teaching, and (3) perceived institutional support for teaching.

Teaching and Research

Table 1 presents mean scores and standard deviations for the sample as a whole across the three attitudinal factors.

In general, the respondents reported considerably greater interest and satisfaction in teaching than in research. The respondents' view of the level of institutional support for teaching was not very high, however, indicating some conflict between what the faculty themselves saw as important and what they believed were institutional priorities. It is possible that such a disparity could influence the morale of college teachers.

TABLE 1

Mean scores and standard deviations for full-time faculty, where a mean score of 1 indicates a high level, a score of 3 a neutral level, and a score of 5 a low level in each of the attitudinal factors.

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Mean Score</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
1. Interest and satisfaction in research	2.59	.89
2. Interest and satisfaction in teaching	1.35	.36
3. Perceived institutional support for teaching	2.76	.81

Morale

While discussing teachers' attitudes, Bowen and Schuster (1986) describe a "perceptibly weakened morale" among college teachers, which they attribute to adverse trends in compensation and working conditions, a sense of insecurity about the future, and an awareness of the declining status of the profession. In contrast, Armour et al. (1990) report that 91% of their sample of senior faculty say that they are very or somewhat satisfied with their faculty careers. The National Education Association (1979) reported that an important minority of faculty were experiencing low morale. We patterned three of our questions after items in the National Education Association survey. Responses to those questions are found in Table 2.

There is moderate agreement among faculty that their morale is very high as measured by item 32. This is a positive finding. The high standard deviation, however, suggests a high degree of variability of response. Some faculty strongly agree with the statement, but almost as many strongly disagree. In other words, using these specific questions we did not find the low degree of morale that Bowen and Schuster (1986) describe, but we did find the important minority of faculty experiencing low morale that the National Education Association (1979) survey reports.

Faculty on the whole see their own morale as higher than others', as measured by item 33. Although this sort of finding is not unusual in opinion questionnaires (for example, people in general often see themselves as happier than others), and although the National Education Association

TABLE 2

Mean scores and standard deviations for responses to three faculty morale questions, where a mean score of 1 indicates a high level of agreement, a score of 3 a neutral level, and a score of 5 a low level of agreement.

<i>Item</i>	<i>Mean Score</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
32. My morale is very high	2.40	1.21
33. The morale of other faculty at my institution seems to be very high.	3.02	1.05
34. Compared with that of five years ago, the morale of other faculty at my institution seems to be very high.	3.08	1.10

(1979) survey reports similar findings, these results do not require the caveat that the sample for this survey was produced by self-selection, and thus may reflect a higher morale level among faculty who chose to fill out the questionnaire than among faculty who did not.

The picture is further complicated by the fact that in addition to the questions discussed above, we obtained a more sophisticated measure of faculty morale by using a cluster of items that included additional faculty opinions on matters such as committee work, bureaucratic procedures, chances for career development, and enthusiasm about teaching. The mean response to our faculty morale cluster was 3.08 on a scale of one to five, with a standard deviation of .73. This more inclusive score suggests that faculty morale is only moderately high. The reduced score for morale probably results from the inclusion of attitudes towards non-teaching activities as well as towards teaching activities.

In any case, these results do suggest a lowering of perceived morale compared to five years ago, as measured by item 34. Because of the cross-sectional nature of this study, it is difficult to say whether this lowering of morale will be a continuing trend. Bowen and Schuster (1986) found that about 44 percent of their sampled faculty saw a decline in morale over the past "five or ten years," and found the decline stronger among comprehensive colleges and universities, so declining morale may be an issue of some importance.

Inferential Statistics

We conducted a series of one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests and t-tests to compare each of our attitudinal factors with a number of demographic group factors, trying to find differences in how the demographic groups responded. The demographic groups included were: current academic rank, age, age when current rank was achieved, gender, and full- or part-time status.

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and t-tests are both designed to estimate the likelihood that differences found could be due to chance alone. Differences expected to happen by chance no more than five percent of the time are, by convention, referred to as significant at the .05 level. Smaller differences are reported as not significant or are not reported. T-tests were used when there were only two demographic possibilities within a category (male or female, full- or part-time), and ANOVA was used when there were multiple demographic possibilities within a category.

Table 3 shows which comparisons between attitudinal factors and demographic groups were found to result in overall differences within the demo-

graphic groups significant at or above the .05 level. The table indicates where significant differences were found within some demographic groupings with regard to some attitudinal factors, but does not indicate the direction of the differences. This table refers to ANOVA findings, so all of this data will require further investigation, either by looking at the direction of the differences or by subsequent, more precise, testing.

The statistical treatment described so far, as mentioned earlier, needs to be augmented. While differences found through t-tests are clear enough, an overall finding of $p < .05$ determined by ANOVA suggests that there are differences within the various elements of the demographic grouping, but does not say which of the elements are significantly different from which other elements within the demographic grouping. Tests called post-tests are used for this purpose. We chose to use Tukey's post-test, given its power in situations of unequal N's. Breaking a larger overall grouping into smaller ones always reduces the power of a statistical measure. It is possible to find overall differences significant, but to be unable to specify, within an acceptable level of probability, significant differences within the smaller units.

Studied relationships between our attitudinal factors and the demographic groupings that appear to interact with them are described below.

Interest and Satisfaction in Research

By rank: We found overall differences to be significant at the $p < .0001$ level. Tukey's post-test showed that assistant professors with three years or less of full time teaching experience expressed more interest and satisfaction in research than all other faculty, and that those at the rank of instructor expressed less interest and satisfaction in research than all other faculty. Faculty at other ranks did not significantly differ from one another.

By age: We found overall differences to be significant at the $p < .0001$ level. Tukey's post-test showed that faculty who are between the ages of

TABLE 3

Comparisons between attitudinal factors and demographic groups resulting in overall differences significant at or above the .05 level.

<i>Attitudinal Factor</i>	<i>Demographic Group</i>
1. Interest and satisfaction in research	faculty rank & age
2. Interest and satisfaction in teaching	faculty rank & age
3. Perceived institutional support for teaching	faculty rank

thirty and forty report significantly more interest and satisfaction in research than do faculty who are older than sixty or younger than thirty. The latter two groups do not differ from one another to a significant degree. All other age groups fall somewhere in the middle.

Interest and Satisfaction in Teaching

By rank: We found overall differences to be significant at the $p < .01$ level. Tukey's post-test showed that full professors with five years or fewer until retirement expressed more interest and satisfaction in teaching than all other ranks, which did not differ from one another significantly, although, in general, faculty at higher ranks showed more interest and satisfaction in teaching than did faculty at lower ranks.

By age: Although we found overall differences at the $p < .001$ level among the age groupings studied, the pattern that emerged via post-test was not clear enough to rank order the age groupings in a meaningful way.

Perceived Institutional Support for Teaching

By rank: Although we found overall differences significant at the $p < .05$ level among the faculty ranks, the pattern that emerged via post-test was not clear enough to compare the separate faculty ranks in a uniformly linear way. In general, however, there is a progression of less perceived institutional support for teaching as one moves up the ranks.

Discussion

Young faculty at the rank of instructor show little interest in research, while young assistant professors report significantly more interest and satisfaction in research than do any other faculty groups. Since those at the rank of instructor only very rarely have terminal degrees, engaging in research may be a low personal and job priority for teachers at that rank. Since most Ph.D. faculty within the Minnesota system are hired at the assistant professor level, an interesting and plausible interpretation of this finding is that our newest Ph.D. faculty have the most interest in research. Either we have recently begun hiring faculty with more interest in research or else faculty lose some of that interest after teaching within the system for a while. Possibly both of these explanations are true.

This survey suggests considerable disagreement among faculty about the values inherent in the common formulation of teaching and research as polar opposites. The evolution of new and imaginative definitions about what constitute legitimate scholarship and research (see Boyer, 1991) may provide

opportunities for faculty development initiatives that can ensure that such value conflicts are at least productive.

Our finding that faculty at higher ranks expressed somewhat more interest and satisfaction in teaching is of particular interest when it is noted that professors near retirement had the highest interest and satisfaction in teaching. This is unusual in that similar findings are not reported in the national literature (Baldwin and Blackburn, 1981; Lee and Field, 1987; Lowe and Anderson, 1980). A follow-up study of senior faculty near retirement would be appropriate. The relatively small degree of differences among groups of faculty on this factor is not surprising. It is important to remember that most faculty within the Minnesota State University System expressed an extremely high degree of interest and satisfaction in teaching. Their score on this factor was, in fact, their highest score. Extremely high scores for most faculty reduce the likelihood of finding significant differences among groups of faculty.

It is unfortunate that the slight increase in interest in teaching we found as one moves up the ranks parallels a slight decrease in perceptions of institutional support for teaching. Several of the institutions in our sample focused their teaching improvement programs on junior faculty. Failing to include senior faculty in faculty development programs not only reduces senior faculty members' opportunities to improve, but also prevents them from being participant role models to junior faculty and resources for junior faculty within the faculty improvement programs. Additionally, since lowered morale may be an emerging problem for faculty, senior faculty need to be a part of faculty development programs specifically aimed at morale issues.

Conclusion

Chief among our findings is that faculty at public undergraduate institutions are extremely interested in and derive great satisfaction from teaching. They are considerably less enthusiastic, however, and also more divided, with regard to their attitudes toward research. Despite their enthusiasm, however, most faculty report only moderate institutional support for teaching and may perceive a schism between their interests in teaching and the interests of their institutions. These results may be typical of faculty at many undergraduate teaching institutions, and suggest that increased attention be given to institutional support for teaching. Institutions should consider increasing support for teaching through workshops and other visible means. While systematic support for teaching will be useful for junior faculty, it is especially important to provide institutional support for mid-career faculty

who may tend to lose enthusiasm as their careers mature. The high levels of commitment to teaching by faculty near retirement does suggest, however, that the latter group may constitute more of a resource than previously realized. Programs using senior faculty as presenters and mentors would be a logical response.

References

- Armour, R.A., Fuhrmann, B.S., & Wergin, J.F. (1990). Senior faculty career attitudes: Implications for faculty development. In L. Hilsen (Ed.), *To Improve the Academy*. 9, 217-230.
- Baldrige, J.V., Curtis, D., Ecker, G., & Riley, G. (1978). *Policy making and effective leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Baldwin, R.G., & Blackburn, R.T. (1981). The academic career as development process: Implications for higher education. *Journal of Higher Education*. 52, 598-614.
- Bowen, H.R. & Schuster, J.H. (1986). *American professors: A national resource imperiled*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Boyer, E.L. (1990). *Scholarship revisited: Priorities of the professoriate*. Princeton, New Jersey: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- Lee, R.F., & Field, M. (1987). Full professor at forty: Implications of emerging faculty career patterns for professional development. *Proceedings of faculty evaluation and development: Looking ahead*, 26, 81-85. Kansas State University.
- Lowe, J.D., & Anderson, D. (1980). Factors related to career enhancement among tenured and non-tenured faculty. Unpublished paper available through EDRS (ED192691).
- National Education Association (1979). *Higher education faculty: Characteristics and opinions*. Washington, D.C.
- Trow, M. (Ed.). (1975). *Teachers and students*. New York: McGraw Hill.