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Gender Differences in Faculty Perceptions of Factors that Enhance and Inhibit Academic Career Growth

Edwin L. Simpson

Northern Illinois University

This study explored the perceptions of 139 higher education faculty regarding influences related to career vitality. Users and nonusers of an individualized career development program participated. Significant differences were discovered between men and women related to reasons for choosing their career, sensitivity to mentoring, and sources of career satisfaction.

Faculty developers naturally want to do the best possible job of meeting the needs of the faculty with whom they work. Because the program at Northern Illinois University (NIU) is centered on self-initiated career planning and individual consultations intended to assist faculty with academic renewal, the desire to understand and meet the specific needs of faculty related to career growth prompted an extensive survey. One purpose of the survey was to compare responses of faculty who had developed career growth agreements through the faculty development program (users) with a characteristically similar group who had not used the services (nonusers). It was hoped that a better understanding of factors that enhance and inhibit career growth might lead to improved consultation techniques and more effective marketing of the faculty development program.

The questionnaire for the survey was based on academic career development literature that suggests that career vitalization can be linked to such factors as reasons for choosing the profession, expectations about professorial work and the nature of mentoring support received prior to and during

the academic career (Clark, 1987; Lynton & Elman, 1987). Differences between women and men with regard to these variables have also been cited as factors related to faculty vitality (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1989; Corcoran & Clark, 1984). Thus, the study attempted to examine factors that enhance or inhibit faculty career development. Ultimately, the purpose was not only to meet the NIU faculty needs for career renewal but also to stimulate conversation about human resources within institutions of higher education.

Method

In Spring, 1990, faculty development staff at Northern Illinois University (NIU) distributed a 21-item, multiple-response questionnaire to faculty to determine perceptions related to academic life, work background, professional activities, general influences on academic career development, and work satisfaction. A total of 261 questionnaires were distributed to 87 faculty who had made contact with the Faculty Development Office between 1982 and 1990 (users) and a larger sample of 174 faculty who had no previous contact with the office (nonusers). The nonuser sample was matched to the user sample on the basis of department, gender, and length of service at NIU.

Of the total number of faculty surveyed, 58 (67%) of the "users" and 81 (47%) of the "nonusers" returned completed questionnaires. About 70% of the respondents were men and 30% women, compared to a campus ratio of 74% men and 26% women. Respondents included assistant professors (12%), associate professors (37%), full professors (45%), and others (6%). The average length of service at NIU for respondents was about 19 years.

A Chi square analysis of nominal data was used to determine differences between perceptions of faculty who had sought development assistance (users) and those who had not (nonusers) and between men and women faculty. Interestingly, the analyses revealed few differences between the responses of program users and nonusers; however, several significant differences were found between responses of women and men faculty regarding factors that enhance or inhibit career vitality. This article, then, addresses those gender differences, focusing specifically on career choice influences, fulfillment in the job, mentoring roles, and overall job satisfaction.

Results

Influences on Career Choice

Faculty were provided a series of 15 alternatives in response to the question, "Why did you become a professor?" Each respondent was instructed to identify all the items from the list that influenced his/her decision to choose an academic career. The most frequently identified career influence was "attraction of the academic life style," with 75% of the respondents choosing that option. Other frequently cited influences included "desire to be a teacher" (66%) and "encouragement by a mentor" (51%). "A desire to write and do research" and "a desire to help people" were both identified as influences by 42% of the respondents.

Significant differences between men and women emerged from the survey data with regard to several of the career influences (Table 1). The influences most frequently cited by women were the "desire to write or do research" and the "influence of a family member," and there were significant differences between men and women in the frequency with which these two influences were cited. The largest percentage of men, on the other hand, cited "attraction of academic life style" as a major career influence. Women indicated they were significantly less attracted to the profession due to the academic lifestyle. For men, a "desire to be a teacher" was the second most frequently cited influence, and, once again, there was a significant difference in the percentage of men and women citing this career influence. Although

TABLE 1
*Percent of Men and Women Citing Various Influences
on Career Choices**

	Men	Women	χ^2	P<
Attraction of academic lifestyle	76%	50%	9.14	.01
Desire to be a teacher	63%	19%	22.78	.001
Encouragement by a mentor	52%	48%	.18	n.s.
Desire to write and do research	44%	74%	10.59	.001
Desire to help people	39%	41%	.05	n.s.
Influence of a family member	9%	71%	56.53	.001
Best job available	9%	50%	29.49	.001

*n = 139

one-half of the women indicated that they were influenced by the fact that being a professor was "the best job available," only 9% of the men indicated that they chose to become a professor because it was "the best job available."

Fulfillment in the Job

A second important focus in the survey was job fulfillment. As part of the information on job fulfillment, respondents were asked, "To what degree have you been able to do what you have wanted to do in each of the following areas: teaching, service, research, and other creative activities?" Possible responses included "mostly," "some," "little," or "not at all." The two most fulfilling areas indicated by the respondents were teaching and service. About 70% of the respondents replied that, for the most part, they have been able to teach to the degree that they wanted while at NIU. More than one-half indicated they were able to engage in service related to their academic roles to the degree they wished. Less than 10% responded that they had little or no opportunity to teach what they wanted or to engage in service activities to the degree they wished.

In order to examine feelings of professional frustration identified as "stuckness" in the literature (Corcoran & Clark, 1984), faculty were asked, "Since you were awarded tenure or your first multi-year contract at NIU, have you ever felt 'stuck' in your career development?" Those who responded, "yes," were asked to select from 14 circumstances that may have contributed to their feeling stuck.

Of the NIU faculty sampled, 49% of the men and 56% of the women felt "stuck" at some point in their careers since being awarded tenure. About two-thirds of those indicated that currently they were "definitely" stuck or "somewhat" stuck. Several conditions seemed to contribute to feelings of being stuck. The major cause that contributed to feelings of being stuck reported by over 50% of all respondents was lack of funding. Additionally, diminished energy, conflicts with colleagues or departmental chair, lack of intellectual stimulation, and lack of departmental or institutional status were conditions reported by about 30% of the faculty who felt stuck in their careers.

Significantly, when identifying circumstances that contributed to being stuck in their career development, women more frequently cited "lack of status in their major field of interest." Other factors frequently identified by women, though not found to be significantly different from men, were "conflicts with administration," and "lack of intellectual stimulation." Men, in contrast to their female colleagues, more frequently cited "teaching the

same courses every semester” and “diminished professional opportunities” as contributing to their feelings of being stuck.

The Mentoring Role

The supportive nature of relationships faculty have with peers, or lack thereof, can be a source of career satisfaction or disillusionment. Thus, a series of survey questions addressed the frequency and degree of mentoring experienced by NIU faculty in the following question: “A person who has provided assistance in the advancement of one’s career is sometimes referred to as a mentor. Have you had a mentor(s) during your academic career?” Respondents who responded, “yes,” were asked to identify from a list of possibilities the functions that were performed by mentors and to indicate whether they had ever served as a mentor themselves.

Almost two-thirds of the total number of respondents indicated that they had been assisted by at least one mentor during their careers, with an average of over two mentors each. Eighty-one percent of women faculty reported they had mentors to support their careers, compared to 56% of the men. More than 40% of the respondents had themselves served as mentors during their careers. About three-quarters of faculty who had a mentor also had served as a mentor themselves at NIU or other institutions.

A notable area of contrast existed between female and male perceptions of the functions mentors served in academic career development (Table 2). Women significantly more frequently cited all mentoring functions listed in

TABLE 2
*Percent of Men and Women Citing Various Functions
Provided by Mentors**

	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	χ^2	<i>P</i> <
Served as a model	42%	67%	7.35	.01
Challenged me to progress in the profession	38%	71%	12.81	.001
Listened to professional problems	37%	57%	4.76	.05
Gave me support as a person	36%	71%	14.41	.001
Provided resources to solve professional problems	30%	48%	4.15	.05

*n = 139

the survey as functions fulfilled by mentors who provided support for their career development.

An area of difference between users of development assistance and nonusers did emerge in perceptions of the functions served by mentors. Although approximately the same proportion of users and nonusers experienced the influence of mentors in their career development, a greater percentage of users indicated that their mentors fulfilled the various career facilitating functions listed in the questionnaire.

Although having had a mentor did not appear to be related to feeling currently stuck for men, it may be related for women. Equal proportions of men who felt stuck in both the user and nonuser group had not received mentoring. Contrary to what we might expect, 80% of the stuck women indicated they *had* been mentored.

Career Satisfaction

As part of an effort to obtain data on overall career satisfaction, faculty were asked, "If you were starting over, would you choose a career as a faculty member?" Choices for responses included "definitely," "probably," "probably not," and "definitely not." Over three quarters of the faculty surveyed indicated that they would "probably" or "definitely" choose careers as faculty members if they were starting over. However, whereas 85% of the women chose "definitely" or "probably" in response to the question, only 71% of men indicated they would "definitely" or "probably" choose careers as faculty members if they were starting over.

When asked about how their satisfaction matched what they anticipated at the time they decided to become a professor, men and women again differed. Seventy-one percent of women responded that they were as satisfied, or more satisfied now than when they decided to become faculty members compared to 54% of the men who were as satisfied or more satisfied at the present time than when they decided on academic careers.

Another item asked, "How satisfied are you with the following aspects of your career?" Respondents were able to indicate that they were "very satisfied," "somewhat satisfied," "not very satisfied," or "not at all satisfied" in response to items about the quality of people at NIU, personal recognition, personal and professional opportunities, and work conditions. The strongest response was related to the quality of NIU faculty, with nine out of 10 respondents indicating that they were somewhat to very satisfied with the quality of the faculty. Participants in the survey also held in regard opportunities to make use of their abilities, pursue their professional interests, have

variety in their work, use time as they saw fit, and see the fruits of their labor—all of which, according to their perceptions, were possible at NIU.

When responses of men and women were analyzed according to their satisfaction with specific aspects of their careers at NIU, there also were variations based on gender. More women indicated that they were “very satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied” with physical working conditions (48% of the women versus 39% of the men), available resources (63% of the women versus 53% of the men), and promotion and professional advancement opportunities (44% of the women versus 31% of the men). Salary was the aspect of career with which men faculty were most satisfied, with 60% of the male respondents choosing “very satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied.” “Available support resources” was the second most frequently identified source of career satisfaction for men.

Implications

Although this study began as an effort to compare users and nonusers of the faculty development services, an unanticipated—and far more consistent—finding was that differences in responses were much greater between men and women than between faculty who had used the consultation and growth planning services of faculty development at NIU and those who had not. Men and women faculty who responded had distinctly different perceptions of influences that drew them to the academic profession, factors that enhanced or inhibited their fulfillment, the frequency and function of mentoring during their careers, and overall satisfaction. What do these results mean for faculty development programs with a similar orientation in providing career renewal assistance?

First there are implications for faculty developers related to reasons that faculty chose academic careers. Particularly in setting goals for enhancing career vitality of an individual instructor, these findings suggest it is important to seek information about reasons for career choices. A consultant might work very differently, for instance, with a female faculty member whose career choice was influenced by a member of the family as opposed to a male faculty member whose desire was to be a teacher. Similarly, a consultant might ask different questions and assist in setting different career-enhancing goals for female faculty who have a strong desire to write and do research as opposed to female faculty who have a strong desire to help people. These possibilities suggest simply that consultants might enhance their services by being prepared to talk to faculty about the influences on their career choices, to expect differences in the reasons for choices, and to be prepared to take

those influences into consideration when assisting faculty in setting goals for career growth.

The findings on fulfillment and overall satisfaction also present interesting findings for further consideration by faculty developers, particularly results about being stuck in one's career. For instance, the fact that the degree of status in the disciplines with women faculty may be a greater barrier to career growth than for men and that lack of intellectual stimulation and conflicts with administration may be more frequent sources of career inhibition for women are important issues to be considered, both in assisting individual faculty during consultation and in thinking about how to enhance climate for women at the institutional level. The fact that men seem to be stifled in their careers more by routine in teaching and lack of opportunities as professionals also has implications, not only for faculty developers but also for others who can make changes in the kinds of teaching assignments and professional opportunities that are made available to men. In interpreting the results of the data on fulfillment, faculty developers should recognize that literature on faculty satisfaction indicates that lack of fulfillment is not necessarily related directly to feelings of frustration. Periodic frustration during the career of most faculty is common. Some feelings of professional uneasiness may in fact be part of the natural career development of faculty. Prolonged persistence of these feelings, however, is cause for concern. In these cases faculty developers must be particularly cognizant of the need to move faculty beyond these feelings. Understanding faculty's sense of fulfillment, feelings of stuckness, and overall satisfaction can provide valuable information in that process.

The findings about mentoring also have implications for faculty developers, particularly since the finding that women more frequently had mentors seems to be inconsistent with literature that suggests that women have fewer mentors than men (Gilligan, 1982; Merriam, 1983). Perhaps the opportunity that women respondents had to select well-described functions of mentoring helped them recognize more readily the process of mentoring that actually has occurred during their careers. This finding needs further investigation. Also, a notable observation was that program users seemed distinctly more sensitive than nonusers to the functions of mentoring. Recognition of and sensitivity to the prominent role that mentoring seems to play in the perception of all faculty clients to the program should be part of career planning discussions. Certainly these findings can be useful in determining how best to mentor or establish mentoring programs for ongoing faculty career growth.

Taken collectively, then, the results have major implications for faculty developers involved in faculty career growth. It is important for developers

to realize that the way faculty are guided through academic renewal has a great deal to do with their expectations and experiences coming into the profession and the way these factors are addressed or reconciled in the course of a career (Simpson, 1990). Thus, a brief biographical history may be a valuable beginning to consultation. In addition, it is important to reinforce that the results of this study should encourage all of us to explore more fully the methods of consultation needed to address the needs of both male and female faculty members. These findings should also prompt us to be more sensitive to ways in which our programs are marketed so that faculty will use them and find them worthwhile.

Conclusion

Although this study carries with it some of the usual limitations of a self-report instruments and methods of sampling, it suggests some clear differences in what influences men and women faculty in academic career development. These results are important not only because they enhance or inhibit faculty vitality but also because they affect faculty development efforts. They should be given careful consideration both at the level of individual faculty consultation and at the level of the institution that is attempting to develop or improve counseling and support systems for faculty.

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