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Interviews with Exiting Faculty: Why Do They Leave?

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Fourteen faculty terminating their appointments at a large public research university for reasons other than retirement were interviewed and administered a questionnaire. Findings indicate that a number of aspects of the work environment appear to be particularly important to faculty attitudes about the university: support of colleagues in the same research area; rewards for teaching; the relationship between salary and merit; resources for research; and the location of the institution. The paper discusses these findings in the context of the larger ongoing debate about the relationship between teaching and research and offers suggestions for improving faculty productivity and morale by addressing some of the issues identified by exiting faculty.

As recent literature attests, the diversity of talents and interests that faculty bring to their work strengthens and enriches academic institutions, enabling them to be effective at the myriad tasks required by society, and, in particular, required of research universities (Rice, 1991). At the same time, there is concern that definitions of scholarship are becoming increasingly narrow and fail to include the contributions to learning and knowledge made by those whose intellectual energies are more focused on the classroom than on publication and research (Boyer, 1990; Rice, 1991). From an institutional perspective, the failure to translate a philosophical and ethical commitment to diverse forms of scholarship into a tangible reward system that reflects that commitment can have a number of consequences. Perhaps most notable is the loss of talented faculty who feel out of place or unrecognized by a monolithic reward system that does not appreciate the natural variation of interests and skills across individuals and even over the course of a highly

productive career. Faculty who do not feel aligned with their institution's priorities may no longer participate actively in its functioning or may even choose to leave.

Although some attrition is inevitable, and even desirable, the costs of faculty turnover are high. It is estimated that for faculty members employed at the professional level, the cost of turnover is roughly equivalent to their annual salary (Esty, 1990).[1] Furthermore, turnover can exercise less tangible but potentially more damaging effects, leading to a general erosion of morale, loss of commitment to the institution, and further turnover (Esty, 1990). Perhaps the most compelling reason for administrators and faculty development consultants to examine the underlying causes of turnover, however, is that many of the causes reside within the work environment and are "fixable"—i.e., features of the work environment can be changed to enhance faculty productivity, commitment, and satisfaction (McGee & Ford, 1987).

Although a number of factors that affect turnover and job satisfaction have been proposed in the literature, certain characteristics of the work environment appear to be key, including: 1) communication between administrators and faculty; 2) availability of resources; 3) support of colleagues; 4) workload, particularly the amount of teaching required; 5) feedback about role expectations and performance; (6) participation in decision-making; and 7) opportunities for promotion (McGee & Ford, 1987; McKenna & Sikula, 1981; Neal, 1984; Steers & Mowday, 1981). Whether dissatisfaction results in a decision to leave is further moderated by the availability of alternative faculty positions.

With these factors as starting points, we decided to interview exiting faculty (faculty terminating their appointments at the university for reasons other than retirement) to understand more clearly and specifically why faculty leave and to what extent teaching is an issue shaping their decisions. Ultimately, we hoped learning more about the problems that precipitate faculty's departure from the university would enable the institution to become more responsive to a greater range of faculty needs and interests and broaden notions of productivity and scholarship.

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[1] Such estimates do not take into account set-up funds and other costs uniquely associated with academics.

Method

Sample

All deans and chairs were contacted and asked to submit the names of faculty members terminating their appointments for reasons other than retirement at the end of the 1990-1991 academic year. The 17 individuals so identified were contacted by letter and asked to participate in a study of exiting faculty. Two faculty were no longer on campus, and one refused to participate.

Of the sample of 14 faculty participants, about 80% were male and 60% untenured. A majority of the untenured faculty leaving the institution anticipated not receiving tenure or were unsure of the outcome of tenure review (the opportunity to submit tenure materials was available to them). They represented four schools on campus: Arts and Sciences, Business, Law, and Public and Environmental Affairs.

Measures

An extensive semi-structured interview and a questionnaire were administered to faculty participants. Interview questions focused on the job characteristics cited in the literature as having the greatest impact on faculty turnover, and faculty were asked directly about their reasons for leaving, their perceptions of the current job market in their field, and the type of institution at which they were taking a new position. Participants' responses in the interview data were coded using categories derived from previous research on faculty careers (data could be reliably coded into categories by two different interviewers). Questionnaires included global and facet-specific measures of job satisfaction as well as a series of questions about university policies and faculty development programs (Quinn & Staines, 1979). A few topics (e.g., salary and participation in decision-making) were addressed in both instruments.

Results

The results of the questionnaires and interviews were combined to provide insights about the exiting faculty members' reasons for leaving the university. The major categories identified for discussion of the results include: 1) work environment; 2) teaching and research; 3) review procedures and participation in decision-making; 4) salary; 5) overall job satisfaction; and 6) places for relocation and reasons for choices.

Work Environment - Support and Resources

One might expect faculty leaving their appointments at a university to be fairly critical of the overall work environment. Interestingly, however, although about one-third of the faculty described the work environment as "negative," an almost equal number described it as "positive." Moreover, about 25% of the sample distinguished between a positive and supportive "social" environment and an impoverished and isolated "professional" environment. As one faculty member put it, " It's difficult to say. . . the people are wonderful and friendly and at the same time the institutional culture is not congenial, not supportive of my brand of work. It is kind of odd being comfortable with the people and uncomfortable with the professional status." This same distinction became apparent in questionnaire data where there were substantially higher mean ratings for the personal than the intellectual environment of the department and university.

The exiting faculty cited two primary reasons for reporting a negative or mixed departmental experience: conflicts/divisions within the department and, especially, a lack of colleagues in the same research area. One faculty member expressed the reaction in the following way:

> It's very difficult for 'Junior Joe' in a department where other faculty are not interested in their field—have no interest in talking about it. There's no local network. But you know, even the people in related areas don't really talk—you can't get a brown bag going. There's really no conversation at a specific or a general level. Other places I've been people have talked and it helps overcome some of this [isolation].

This sense of remoteness was expressed by senior as well as junior faculty. Exiting senior faculty often indicated that their decisions to leave were motivated by the desire to work in departments with more faculty and resources in their research area. One faculty summed it up: "If we could get together as an intellectual community based around ideas and research (brown bags, etc.), this would be a better place to work."

To fulfill the need for collegial support, some of the faculty reported turning to other faculty outside their own departments and the university. A majority of faculty indicated, for instance, that they had some contact with faculty in other departments, generally related to research. By far, however, faculty felt their greatest professional support derived from outside the university, especially from scholars and collaborators in the same field. Faculty questionnaire ratings indicated, on average, substantially greater satisfaction with the recognition from the discipline than the recognition from the university.

Despite the perceived lack of collegial support within their specialty areas, most faculty felt that they were able to discuss problems related to their career with their chair or someone else in the department. Junior faculty indicated, however, that "There's always a sense that you have to be careful who you talk to. You want to maintain a good impression . . . 'impression management' is a factor." Communication at the department level was perceived as fairly good, with more of a breakdown between the department and higher levels of administration.

About half of the faculty felt their chair had generally been supportive of them. Chairs apparently wrote letters of reference, helped with professional opportunities and contacts, and eased time constraints through a reduction of teaching load. By and large, support was construed in terms of research—including making more time for research by teaching less.

When asked about the resources most needed to further someone in their academic fields at IU, faculty mentioned travel funds, improvements to the library holdings, and better computer facilities. Faculty responses varied considerably by discipline, and more data are needed to chart specific patterns of need. A number of faculty had received summer support and internal research funds and felt these were critical to their career development. Virtually all faculty indicated they would like to see more avenues for creating released time, more staff support, and more travel money. Not surprisingly, exiting junior faculty were more likely to cite a lack of resources (e.g., computer, graduate assistants, summer support) as having been detrimental to their careers and as part of the reason for their leaving. Significantly, when asked about needed resources, few faculty responded in terms of teaching. Even faculty who reported a keen interest in their teaching did not appear to seek the same kind of resources for teaching that they did for research.

Teaching and Research

Expectations for teaching per se (load, type of courses, choice of teaching assignments) were not a problem. A thornier issue was that of tangible institutional rewards for teaching. One faculty member explained: "My work was underestimated, particularly in regard to teaching. Strong years in teaching—who cares? The year I received a university teaching award, I got my lowest salary increment ever." And, from a different vantage point, one individual said, "I've been the beneficiary of a system geared to research and productivity. I can see at this point we need a broader base."

Despite consensus that teaching should be given more weight in salary and tenure decisions, relatively few faculty indicated they were leaving the

university to seek greater rewards for teaching. Nor did many of the faculty leaving choose to take positions at institutions that focus heavily on undergraduate teaching (e.g., four year liberal arts colleges). Although faculty's own professional interests undoubtedly shaped their decisions, it seems likely that findings also reflect the lower mobility of teachers compared to researchers and the reality that it is more difficult to find a new position based on a teaching dossier.

Views of the reasonableness of the institution's research expectations tended to vary with faculty's tenure status. Common complaints included the emphasis placed upon the quantity of research and the need to publish in particular journals: "Someone told me once that all deans know how to do is count. I didn't believe that before; now I do." There was substantial concern that scholarship was being defined by the editorial boards of two or three journals and that, in general, assessments of scholarship relied inordinately on constituencies outside the university. The problem of publishing in the "right" journals was frequently cited and appeared to be particularly acute when: 1) a department or school had multidisciplinary roots; 2) faculty had to incur personal financial costs to publish their work; and 3) faculty worked in nontraditional or fledgling specialty areas.

About a third of the sample reported that their role interests were evenly divided between research and teaching, while a majority described themselves as leaning toward or heavily invested in research. Exiting faculty were also, on average, less than moderately satisfied with the balance they had struck among research, teaching, and service responsibilities. These findings may reflect a mismatch between faculty's investment in teaching and the institution's emphasis on research. Equally plausible, however, is the possibility that these faculty have not found their present position optimally productive professionally and, based on their experience, are working to identify their academic interests more clearly.

Review Procedures and Participation in Decision-Making

There appeared to be ample review of pretenure faculty, but almost none for those with tenure. At least one tenured faculty indicated that post-tenure reviews would help keep administrators in better touch with their faculty. By and large, formal pretenure reviews combined with what faculty described as "hearsay" and "osmosis" made tenure criteria clear. Review procedures may have some unintended consequences, however. As one faculty commented:

> The formal review procedures made expectations very clear, almost too clear. It was very burdensome... demoralizing really. Expectations weren't

necessarily unreasonable. I think they were patient with me formally. I just did not flourish under that kind of a system; it impeded me. I tried to publish in journals that just do not accept my kind of work. Since my resignation I have finished four papers and a book manuscript . . . When I wasn't concerned with pleasing them, I was able to get things done.

Questionnaire data revealed that, on the average, faculty were more than moderately satisfied with their part in the departmental decision-making and with department policies. In contrast, faculty were less than moderately satisfied with higher-level administrative policies and with the limited role faculty play in decision-making at the university level.

Salary

During interviews, less than a third of faculty directly expressed dissatisfaction with salary. Moreover, questionnaire ratings indicated that, on average, satisfaction with salary was "moderate." At the same time, only a third of faculty interviewed felt that salary was tied directly to merit or similar criteria. Faculty comments appeared to be less an endorsement of current salary levels or policies than an unwillingness to spend valuable work time and energy on the issue—more of a state of determined disregard or resignation. One faculty member said:

Satisfied with salary? Yes and no. This again has to do with the understanding, appreciation, or even the interest on campus in what I am doing. If I had been in [the] Business [School] and got a MacArthur, I would be making three times as much. It's a mix and I understand the reasons. The university has made choices, and I'm not in the area they have chosen to emphasize. I expect I am well paid for an associate professor.

Another said, "It [salary] has never been an issue. It's been low compared to my colleagues, but it's never really bothered me." Salary was, however, often mentioned as one reason for leaving the institution.

Salary compression and external offers were two factors faculty described as having an invidious effect on the salary structure:

On the whole salary is satisfactory. You always think you deserve more. The problem in our department was that the only way anyone got increases is when they got an outside offer. There are great salary inequities within the department and people judge their value to the university by how much they make. Faculty see less or equally productive colleagues making much more money. You need to reward good people before they get outside offers.

When asked how the reward structure might be changed, faculty offered the following suggestions: 1) establish an across-the-board increment (e.g., based on cost of living) for all but give additional monies based on merit; 2) give greater salary rewards for outstanding teaching; 3) do not set salaries based on outside offers; 4) give increments in terms of dollar amounts and not as a percentage of the base; 5) have more post-tenure review to link performance more accurately to salary increments.

Job Satisfaction

Faculty responses to a standard job satisfaction measure on the questionnaire indicated that a majority of exiting faculty were "somewhat satisfied" with their positions, with the overall mean rating falling below "moderately" satisfied. As expected based on models of employee turnover, exiting faculty demonstrated lower levels of work satisfaction than other faculty at the university (see Olsen, in press; Olsen, 1991a, for comparative data). Although a majority of these faculty felt the university was only "somewhat like" what they had wanted, almost half said they would recommend the position to others. These findings suggest that faculty perceived a mismatch between the reality of the university and their expectations of it, but could still see value in their experience at the university and in their faculty position.

Places for Relocation and Reasons for Choices

Over a third of faculty were going to other Research I institutions. Several more faculty were taking positions at Research II universities, and a few were going to liberal arts colleges. Only one faculty member's future employment was outside academia. About a quarter of those interviewed felt it was hard or very hard to find a position in their field at the time. Consistent with complaints about their present position, faculty most frequently cited a greater number of faculty in their research area, a better location, more emphasis on teaching, and higher salary as advantages of their new positions.

Summary and Recommendations

The current set of interviews, especially when viewed in light of previous studies conducted on this campus (Olsen, 1991a, 1991b, 1992a, 1992b), provide some directions for further research as well as suggest areas of faculty life that could be currently improved. As the literature on turnover proposes, features of the work environment exercise an important impact on faculty attitudes and commitment to the university. In particular, the present study confirms the salience of collegial support, the relationship between

merit and reward, informative and supportive feedback, research resources, upward mobility, and location of the institution.

Although comparison of exiting faculty's responses to data collected in our other faculty studies on the same campus demonstrate many consistent perceptions across exiting and non-exiting groups, a couple of differences that emerged warrant mentioning. First, although declining collegiality is reported increasingly as an issue in faculty careers, exiting faculty appeared to feel the lack of departmental colleagues in their specialty especially acutely (Fink, 1984; Olsen & Sorcinelli, 1992). Second, many exiting faculty perceived the relationship between merit and reward as particularly tenuous and unfair.

Interestingly, as the faculty in this study spoke about their professional lives, it seemed that concerns about colleagues, salary inequities, and the university reward system generally stemmed from a more fundamental need for recognition. One faculty member said:

> The reason I am leaving is that I felt totally unsupported here. . . . Where I am going the people are a lot more like me. Personal style, values, interpersonal style. I'll be making less money and it will be a higher cost of living, but I decided that didn't matter. They valued me. They treated me like I had something to offer. I've never been treated that way here.

No institution can be all things to all people. Nevertheless, the responses of exiting faculty raised questions about how narrowly we define our expectations and values and how we make trade-offs when establishing priorities and rewards.

Results suggest the need for further exploration of the cumulative effects of workplace factors, for, as faculty comments consistently implied, it was an interaction of factors that motivated departure rather than any single issue or problem. Dissatisfaction with salary, for example, seemed to increase qualitatively when faculty had serious concerns about other aspects of their careers (Olsen, 1992a, see also Olsen, 1991b).

As we prepare to analyze the cumulative effects more fully, however, it is important to begin thinking how to address some of the issues identified by these exiting faculty, in particular, issues related to the rewards for teaching, communication of expectations, conflict between teaching and research, and salary.

Rewards for Teaching

Faculty consistently expressed dissatisfaction with rewards for teaching. When confronted with this issue, chairpersons and administrators typically

cite the difficulty of assessing good teaching as an impediment to establishing a more teaching-responsive reward system. In many ways, faculty, even those who are highly committed to their teaching, share and promote this view by not approaching their teaching with the same kinds of strategies and expectations they bring to their research. When asked about needed resources, faculty focused on research rather than teaching. Faculty also appeared to expect to discuss research—but not teaching—with colleagues. Research articles and grants were given to chairs or other faculty for review, but not course syllabi or other instructional materials. Further, recently collected data on undergraduate teaching suggest that faculty tend not to read about instructional techniques or discuss teaching with instructional consultants on campus (Olsen, 1992b). Overall, faculty try to advance their teaching by looking at the feedback they receive on student evaluations, keeping current in their field, and thinking about how to deliver information effectively.

Faculty development specialists must help faculty realize that teaching often requires the same kinds of resources and collaboration as does research—e.g., publications, technological innovations, teaching consultants/master teachers. Faculty developers must also show faculty how to wed their efforts to improve their teaching to assessment of learning and documentation of teaching. Faculty should be made aware of the many assessment options currently suggested in the literature and encouraged to select those best suited to their own teaching goals. Such explicit techniques not only document instructional creativity, effectiveness, etc., more fully but also provide invaluable tools for the ongoing advancement of teaching.

Communication of Expectations

Data suggest that some improvement in communication of expectations about professional performance is needed. Chairperson workshops discussing the frequency, formality, and content of faculty reviews might be useful for promoting introspection about whether current procedures reinforce or diminish faculty motivation and efficacy as well as for familiarizing chairs with new ideas and approaches. Data from recent studies on pretenure and mid-career faculty indicate that although junior faculty are increasingly subject to extensive formal review and feedback, post-tenure faculty feel somewhat disenfranchised by the infrequency of feedback and the lack of departmental recognition (Olsen, 1992a; Olsen & Sorcinelli, 1992). With regard to review of pretenure faculty, present findings further suggest that chairs should explicitly articulate the rationale behind requiring publication in particular journals and possibly identify viable exceptions to this general

requirement. One concern expressed in this study is that endorsement of a relatively narrow definition of scholarship will, in the long run, disadvantage academe and scholars by failing to promote the kind of innovative research and intellectual risk-taking that successfully moves a discipline forward.

Conflict Between Teaching and Research

There is often conflict between broad disciplinary teaching needs of a department and increasing specialization of research interests. The conflict was most evidenced in this study by the references to lack of collegial support. The lack of colleagues in the same area of research within the department was a dominant theme throughout faculty interviews and was frequently cited as a key motivator in decisions to leave. In their comments, faculty made several suggestions that might be useful for departmental administrators to consider in addressing this problem, including:

- making a commitment to hire more than one person in each area/subarea;
- hiring at a senior level (not the assistant level) when a particular field will be covered by a single faculty member;
- encouraging communication among specialty areas, emphasizing shared features of scholarship;
- considering having some courses taught by adjunct or part-time faculty rather than hiring in an area the department is not committed to developing (joint appointments might also be an option for some faculty who meet needs in two departments).

Salary

In all of our faculty studies, the significance of salary becomes amplified when other forums for feedback and recognition are absent and when faculty are experiencing other problems at the institution (Olsen 1991b; Olsen, 1992a). Findings from the present study further suggest that equity issues—whether faculty can perceive a meaningful and consistent relationship between merit and reward—have a particularly strong effect on faculty attitudes and morale. As one faculty member put it, the current system benefits most the "gypsy scholar" whose talents travel with him/her to the highest bidder. To address this issue, administrators should be encouraged to examine the consequences of current salary practices (e.g., responding to outside offers) and ask themselves questions about who benefits and who is disadvantaged by such a system (e.g., married faculty with children). The rationale behind the reward structure could then be discussed with faculty. Although faculty may remain critical, the openness of such an approach could improve faculty morale. Moreover, administrators and chairs should be made aware of the

possibility that they can divest salary and salary increments of some of their psychological importance by implementing more frequent, informal, and substantive feedback for faculty at all ranks.

Conclusion

Although exiting faculty would like more rewards for teaching, teaching concerns did not appear to be the primary motivator for faculty's seeking new appointments. Exiting faculty expressed feeling isolated, professionally, if not personally, from colleagues in their department and, more generally, feeling that their teaching and research contributions were undervalued by the university. Faculty comments suggest that open-ended, informal collegial exchange and evaluation may be being replaced by formal, highly specific, quantitative evaluation criteria and procedures (or no communication at all). We may thus be gaining clarity and rigor at the expense of support and creativity. Ironically, then, at a time of financial exigency, we may be promoting a culture that focuses heavily on salary, external offers, and mobility as indices of success, while overlooking the intellectual and inter-personal support that could foster faculty productivity and retention at little cost.

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