Faculty Life and Institutional Change in the 1990s: Interviews with Faculty from One U.S. University

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Introduction:

In the face of dramatic changes in U.S. institutions of higher education, faculty are experiencing a variety of influences that act to render their academic practices far more complex and challenging. These factors can be described in terms of sources of satisfaction for faculty, their origins as internal or external influences, and whether the influential changes arise at local or national levels. This paper describes the findings of a series of interviews of faculty at a U.S. university, a research process that offers understanding of the quality of the participants' academic lives. The interviews reveal that, while concerned with and affected by the academic environment, faculty could benefit from institutional commitment to the broader community and global settings.

A wide range of strategic management approaches are being discussed at institutions of higher education across the United States (Deming, 1986; Lindquist, 1978; Schein, 1992; Senge, 1990). In the literature, at conferences, and in faculty conversations, there is the collective recognition that the faculty role is changing. Many faculty are already experiencing heavier teaching loads, larger class sizes, less administrative support, and growing public pressure for greater accountability, greater commitment to student learning, and greater use of technology. Faculty are also feeling government and public pressure to increase accessibility to students and offer more courses to enable students to move through degree programs faster. This reality, however, does not reduce or diminish traditional faculty expectations to undertake scholarly research, to search for new funding sources, to work collaboratively on community projects and activities, and to serve on university and academic committees.

As higher education is being repositioned to meet the needs of 21st century students, dramatic institutional changes increase the complexity of faculty life across academic ranks. This study seeks to understand this complexity from the perspective of those who experienced it. Through a series of open-ended interviews at a Doctoral I university[1], faculty highlighted the complex issues affecting the quality of their academic lives at a U.S. institution undergoing institutional change in the 1990s. Three basic questions guided this study: How do faculty describe their academic lives in the 1990s? What are the primary factors influencing the quality of their academic lives? What changes are needed to improve the quality of academic life in the future?

Research methods:

The qualitative research approach was used to gain an understanding of academic life from the perspective of faculty across academic ranks (assistant, associate and full). Through stratified random sampling by academic rank (6 assistant professors, 6 associate professors, 6 full professors), eighteen tenured or tenure-track faculty were selected to participate in the interview study. Of the eighteen, 8 were men and 10 were women.[2]

All participating full professors were tenured, and all but one had spent more than 11 years in the academy. The one who had spent only 11 years in the academy came to the profession after spending 21 years in industry. Because hers is a highly technical field, prior practical experience added depth and richness to her academic life, a depth and richness that she claimed was the critical key to her success in the academy. Of the associate professors interviewed, all had spent more than 8 years in the academy and all but one were tenured. The untenured professor was in a technical field and entered the academy as an associate professor (tenure track) after spending many years in industry. Participating assistant professors were untenured except for one who had been a faculty member at the research site for 28 years (tenured 21 years) and lived through many shifts in institutional and educational thinking. Although unconventional as an assistant professor, his historical insight proved extremely valuable in understanding the impact of change in the academy, in general, and at the research site, in particular.

The researcher conducted all of the interviews. My role of researcher within this study was one of an 'insider' examining her own culture[3] Working in the Office of Academic Affairs, I was not only an employee at the research site and a colleague of the faculty participants but worked closely with those making retention, promotion and tenure decisions. I gained entry to the research site from the Office of Academic Affairs of the regional research university.

Managing the research environment was very complex. Because of my working relationship with those making personnel decisions, I continually monitored the research process, making adjustments in response to participants' needs and comments. The qualitative design of this study allowed me to put my own assumptions aside and to recognize emerging issues as I gathered and analyzed participants' responses. I also knew that extensive organizational change can breed unrest and suspicion among employees. Given my affiliation with the executive administration, I expected some resistance on the part of faculty to trust my constant assurance of confidentiality[4] Those concerns, however, were quickly alleviated during the first few interview experiences. I soon realized that, in spite of my position within the executive administration, faculty trusted me to protect them and were willing to talk openly about their academic life experiences at the research site. In addition, I was always considerate of their time. Because I was an 'insider', I understood the demands on their time and scheduled interview meetings at their convenience.

The role of an insider researcher is unique and carries with it added responsibilities and pressures to protect the confidentiality of participants, to continuously monitor personal biases, and to set high standards for objectively reporting findings. As the study progressed, it became increasingly important for me to separate my role as a researcher from my role as an administrator and faculty colleague at the research site.

Although confidentiality is always an important consideration, it was particularly critical in this study because of my relationship to the research participants and site. The study complied with the requirements established by the University's Human Subjects Review Board. All participants were assured of complete confidentiality throughout the data collection process and were asked to sign an Informed Consent Form before participating. The respondents were specifically told that faculty names would never be revealed to anyone; that no interview transcript would be produced connecting interview comments with faculty names, and that all data would remain the sole property of the

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researcher; and all data would be stored at the researcher's home and not at the research site.

Throughout the interviews, faculty talked about their experiences, illuminating their expectations, disappointments, triumphs, fears, and concerns. Their descriptions pointed to the complexity of balancing academic life in the 1990s and underscored a growing conflict between traditional and current realities for faculty work at the close of the 21st century. After data analysis of verbatim interview transcriptions, recurring emergent themes were grouped into three broad, descriptive categories5: (a) sources of satisfaction/sources of dissatisfaction; (b) external pressures/internal pressures; and (c) national change/local change. First, I provide a descriptive account of what I learned during the faculty interviews. Then, after a brief summary, I examine the implications of these findings for rethinking the relationship between faculty roles and institutions of higher education at the beginning of the 21st century.

Sources of Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction

Although most faculty participants across academic rank enjoyed the flexible nature of academic life, many saw the 'flexibility' as a source of dissatisfaction because it provided greater opportunity to take on too much or too little depending on one's degree of commitment to work or one's position in the career cycle.

For most faculty, academic flexibility contributed to the frantic nature of faculty life in the 1990s. Although past studies have shown that faculty often describe their lives as over-committed (Blackburn & Lawrence, 1995; Bowen & Schuster, 1986), the faculty participants of this study provided descriptions of lives ruled by a strong commitment to teaching, a desire to be accessible to students via e-mail or by maintaining clearly defined office hours, a desire to stay current in their field and to learn new technologies, and a commitment to both professional and university service. For most, the over committed nature of their lives was exacerbated by a decrease in administrative support due largely to budget constraints; by a constant stream of unmotivated or under prepared students; and by a reward structure that placed greater value on discipline-specific research and encouraged commitment to external, professional organizations.

The findings also suggest that academic rank influences a faculty member's degree of professional satisfaction. Having been accepted into the academic profession by successfully negotiating the rigors of a traditional promotion and tenure process, full professors had the strongest sense of job security, peer recognition, and institutional acceptance. As one full professor explained, "When you have tenure, you have more opportunity. You have independence – greater independence and so you can go off and take greater risks." On the other hand, assistant professors tended to feel less certain about the course of their academic careers. Pressures to develop effective teaching skills, to build a strong research agenda, to seek external funding, to speak nationally and to publish regularly are often overwhelming expectations immediately facing new faculty. Similarly, associate professors described lives caught between two worlds. Having just negotiated the rigors of the tenure process, they were ready to broaden their academic role. Regardless of academic rank, learning to juggle the often competing and sometimes conflicting demands of academic life in a highly flexible work environment becomes the ultimate demand on time and energy.

External Pressures/Internal Pressures

The key external pressures identified by full and associate professors were rapid technological advances, legislative calls for accountability of faculty time and effort, and the public's misperception of faculty contributions. The assistant professors, however, presented a different set of external pressures. They were more concerned about the economic and political forces that were affecting their ability to get faculty positions and to attract research dollars.

Although technology had definitely influenced academic life at all levels, it had the greatest impact at the full professor level and the least impact at the assistant professor level. This difference is due largely to the fact that assistant professors had more experience with technology during their graduate years and, therefore, used it more routinely than full professors. On the other hand, assistant professors felt more strongly than any group that the economy had the greatest impact on their lives. Most of them spoke about the difficulty they experienced in trying to find an academic position. Once in a position, they found it equally difficult to get any kind of funding for their research. Many assistant professors felt extremely frustrated because without research funding their chances of surviving in the academy were greatly diminished.

In addition to the external pressures of technology and the economy, full professors and associate professors expressed concern about the growing public misperception about their work. They felt that, somehow, higher education ought to do a better job of communicating with the general public about the value of faculty contributions to the advancement of knowledge and faculty commitments to the communities their institutions serve.

Several internal pressures also influenced faculty life at the research site. Full professors and associate professors were very concerned about the steady decline in administrative support for both teaching and research. In general, they felt that the cutbacks had greatly affected the quality of their teaching and research efforts. They also felt that budget constraints had affected student learning because they were not able to obtain the most current lab equipment or teaching materials. At the same time, assistant professors were less affected by institutional cutbacks because they were more insulated by their academic units. In addition, most assistant professors at the research site had been hired after many administrative cutbacks had occurred. For them, 'living without' administrative support was the only professional experience they knew.

In addition to a decrease in administrative support, most faculty expressed concern about the faculty reward structure and the mixed messages often sent by an institution that was striving to become a Research II University as defined by the Carnegie Classification.6 Faculty across the ranks were concerned about knowing where to place their efforts because the institution expected high competence in all dimensions of faculty work but placed greater value on publications within the reward structure.

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Local Change/National Change

Three major issues continually surfaced when participants were asked about the kinds of changes needed to improve the quality of their professional lives at the research site. The first issue related to the faculty reward structure. Although the full professor participants had tenure, one said she definitely felt 'guilty' about having that type of job security today. Other full professors said that they were concerned about the 'mixed messages' junior faculty received from the research site administration. They felt that the pressure to demonstrate competency in teaching and research was too high during the early years of one's career. They said repeatedly that they strongly urged their junior colleagues to concentrate on publishing regardless of the institutional focus. The assistant professor participants were the strongest advocates for changing the reward structure. They were experiencing great difficulty balancing the demands of the academic jobs and the demands of their personal life.

The second and third issues related to the development of a more collegial atmosphere at the research site and the need to reformulate academic standards and expectations. Across academic ranks, faculty expressed the need for a greater sense of community for both faculty and students. The third issue focused on the need to raise student standards for admission along with course expectations in the classroom. Faculty continuously talked about the decline in student motivation and level of preparedness for college work.

Implications

The findings from this study suggest that subtle but fundamental changes are already affecting the culture and climate of faculty life at the research site. In particular, the faculty participants described lives that are continually responding to several major forces such as technological advancements, diverse student populations, organizational restructuring, a traditional reward structure and calls for professional accountability.

As noted by Kuh and Whitt (1988), behaviors and actions are directly related to environmental influences. Although the faculty participants said that they often felt left out of the administrative decision making process at the research site, they wanted their voices heard. In fact, participating faculty continually told me how pleasant it was to be able to talk about their professional lives during the interview process. On several occasions, faculty interviewees enjoyed the interview experience so much that when the allotted time was up they delayed a scheduled meeting so we could continue. This may be an indication that more opportunities are needed that give faculty a voice in "how they create their reality" (Senge, 1990, p. 13).

Senge (1990) argues that in order for organizations to successfully restructure, employees must see themselves as an integral part of both the organizational structure and the community they serve. The findings from this study point to the need for higher education institutions to become "learning organizations" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), allowing for greater collaboration in the decision making process especially during times of rapid change.

To fully understand the complexities underlying faculty life today, it is necessary to look back to Bowen and Schuster's 1986 landmark study on the status of faculty. Their findings painted a rather pessimistic picture of academic life. On almost every campus they surveyed, faculty morale was generally low. They attributed this to several important

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changes that occurred in higher education during the 1970s and 1980s. These changes included a shift in campus priorities away from teaching to research, a shift toward academic sub-specialties, and a shift in loyalty from institutions to disciplines. Institutions of all kinds began to mimic research universities, diminishing the role of teaching as a means to achieving academic success. As a result, faculty members have continued to place their time and effort on work that institutions value and reward. In addition, the shift toward narrow academic specializations caused a feeling of academic isolation, a loss of academic collegiality, and a lack of commitment to institutions.

Writing almost 10 years after Bowen and Schuster, William Plater (1995) suggests that today's institutions of higher education are at risk because the public will no longer support a higher education system that caters to the convenience of professors. He argues that faculty must be responsive to constituent needs, accountable for time and research efforts, attentive to the needs of diverse student populations, and technologically savvy. He warns that since higher education no longer has the exclusive hold on knowledge, faculty must be more concerned about serving the needs of students and communities than ever before.

Although the faculty participants of this study did not seem to suffer from low morale, they did describe professional lives stressed by an institution that still adheres to the shift in priorities described by Bowen and Schuster in 1986 while they struggle to make those priorities conform to the changing world described by Plater in 1995. The participants also acknowledged that they were operating under enormous pressures. They described lives focused on trying to cope and adjust. One full professor said that he simply worked 'harder and longer as there seemed to be less and less time'. Another suggested that his life resembled the 'juggler with the spinning plates'. Not one faculty participant described the serene, contemplative life mistakenly thought by the public to be the life of a university professor. In addition, not one faculty participant described a life almost exclusively devoted to research as Bowen and Schuster described in 1986. Instead, this study found that faculty were trying to manage the competing demands of academic life in a traditional environment that does not yet acknowledge that there may be more than one model of a successful academician and that today's academicians must play multiple roles. These findings support the argument by Blackburn and Lawrence (1995) that "It is therefore important to study faculty, to learn about not only how they actually behave but also why they behave as they do" (p. 4).

Implications for Practice

Several universal inferences can be drawn from these findings. Institutions should, as an example, expect universal competence from faculty but that does not mean that all faculty should do the same things. The main drawback of the current system is that a single model for faculty life is expected. Since only a small minority of faculty actually achieves it, tension and frustration result because of a lack of flexibility in the reward system.

Institutions should recognize the close relationship between job security and job satisfaction. Obviously there will always be sources of dissatisfaction with anything one does but they are tolerable in an organization when one feels a sense of belonging. The following response by one associate professor participant to my question about improvement of faculty life over time makes the inference clearer:

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> First of all, I have tenure. There is no monkey on my back. I have a reasonable feeling of security, you know. Although I haven't changed my behavior, I just feel that I can't be fired. Isn't that nice. It isn't that I don't do my job… I feel accepted by the university community… I have a bit of seniority in the department now so I now speak out… I say what I need to say. I have a bit of power.

Institutions need to develop more collaborative administrative structures as suggested by Chickering and Reisser (1993) and Senge (1990). Several faculty said that the research site had actually been more collaborative when it was a smaller institution.

> We used to be asked… When I first came here – some of these new building were being built… we were given the plans for the buildings. We were given the architect's drawings. We were asked to look them over and suggest any modifications or changes that might be appropriate for our use.

> The findings indicate that faculty wish to be informed about administrative changes and they want their voices heard in the administrative decision making process.

> Institutions need to consider the value of raising both admission standards and academic standards for learning. Across all academic ranks, faculty expressed concern about the lack of motivation and the lack of preparedness they recognized in their students. Not a phenomenon unique to the research site, institutions of higher education across the nation struggle to meet the needs of diverse student populations whose degree of preparedness for college-level work varies widely (Plater, 1995).

> Furthermore, institutions need to carefully consider the impact of institutional changes on the quality of academic life for both faculty and students. Restructuring academic units at the research site greatly increased the demands on faculty time and energy. The following excerpt from one full professor describes the sentiments expressed by most faculty participants:

> Technically, I have a 'research' day. Being program coordinator in a 'departmentless' school means assuming duties typical of a department chair. I find myself buried with details and paperwork that often is all consuming. I rarely take lunch and run from meeting to meeting - then go to class. Only when I am away from the University can I engage in writing or class preparation.

As schools, colleges and departments merge their resources in an effort to become more efficient and cost effective, greater responsibility for routine work falls on faculty. This change clearly cuts into the time faculty spend on the work traditionally thought to be the responsibility of an academician (Plater, 1995). Closely associated with changes in organizational structures is the rearticulation of institutional missions that focus greater attention on teaching students and serving communities. As organizational structures become more closely aligned with institutional missions, the time and effort faculty spend on teaching and service increases (Plater, 1995). This shift in priorities makes it even more critical that institutions reexamine their faculty reward structures, making sure to adequately and fairly reward faculty for the work required of an academician today.

Implications for Research

Over the past decade, there have been fundamental changes in the culture and climate at U.S. higher education institutions, in general, and at the research site, in particular. Technological advances have produced an almost frantic and costly struggle for universities to remain current in an age of dramatic change and rapid dissemination of information. Additionally, the changing demographics of our society can be seen on college campuses across the US, creating a need for greater emphasis on teaching and as well as on multiple ways of knowing and learning.

The growing influence of organizational strategies like TQM (Deming, 1986) and Organizational Learning (Senge, 1990) are changing the way higher education operates. These types of models can provide ways to create and maintain more collaborative work environments, breaking down long established barriers between faculty and administrators, as well as universities and communities.

The growing unrest concerning the traditional faculty reward structure clearly indicates a disjunction between the faculty role and the promotion and tenure process. Finding ways to provide job security and still maintain the integrity of academic freedom is a problem unique to higher education for which no model currently exists.

Finding solutions to these problems begins by carefully and systematically gathering data about academic experiences. Large scale, quantitative studies such as those by Blackburn and Lawrence (1995) and Bowen and Schuster (1986) are critical to providing a broader understanding of the faculty experience. They do not, however, provide contextual descriptions of the faculty experience directly from the voices of the faculty. The work of Hageseth and Atkins (1988) laid the groundwork for this study. Their qualitative approach provided rich information that led to focused change at Appalachian State. This study is another step in the direction they took. It provides a picture of current academic life at one institution undergoing rapid change during the 1990s.

Because changes experienced by the research site are similar to the types of changes occurring at most U.S. institutions of higher education, the implications drawn from this study provide topical areas for future qualitative inquiry. Since we are living in a time of rapid global change, more contextual studies are needed to examine the impact of these changes on faculty and students at different types and sizes of institutions within the U.S. and around the world.

It is evident that we need further research to better understand (a) how new forms of scholarship should be rewarded in different types of educational settings, (b) how faculty roles should be redefined as institutions respond to increased pressure to place greater emphasis on teaching and student learning, (c) how changes in faculty roles impact student learning, (d) how changes in the academic culture can foster greater responsiveness to the needs of global and local communities, and (e) what leadership characteristics are needed to effectively manage higher education institutions in the 21st century. Since the only thing we know about the future is that it will be different from anything we have known before, the type of insight gained from qualitative inquiry will become a critical component of the decision making process in the future.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Recognizing that many pressures were affecting the research site in the mid 1990s causing changes to its organizational structure and mission, and understanding that many assumptions about the impact of change on the lives of its faculty were undocumented, I undertook this qualitative study to both document and describe the state of faculty life during the 1994-1995 academic year. Although the findings represent the perspective of faculty at one institution, they are supported by other large-scale studies (Blackburn & Lawrence, 1995; Bowen & Schuster, 1986; Fairweather, 1991) showing that faculty members generally share similar concerns about the state of higher education in the U.S.

This study's findings describe faculty who accept the values of traditional academic life although they wish that the reward structure provided a better balance between research, teaching and service. They continually advise junior faculty to place greater effort on research, publications and grant funding. Although the faculty participants were aware of the impact of technology on their professional lives, few matched the advantages of technology to specific learning objectives for their students. Even though most faculty participants lamented the fact that their students did not share their love for learning, few saw this as an issue requiring innovative teaching strategies or more interactive course curricula. Almost all faculty participants agreed that faculty should be accountable for their time and effort, but most saw it in terms of their own teaching and research agendas, not in terms of the needs of the communities they serve. As faculty spoke of balancing the competing demands of academic life, the word 'integration' became a constant descriptor. Many said that the only way to survive in today's academic environment is to integrate teaching, research and service as much as possible. This need to integrate was born more out of a struggle to manage time efficiently in the Information Age than out of a need or desire to merge theory and practice.

In conclusion, two recommendations or 'next steps' emerge to address the issues and concerns raised by this study. Higher education executive administrators must more clearly articulate their institution's mission, specifically how faculty goals can support an institution's obligation to the various constituencies it serves. In addition, executive administrators must do a better job of defining expectations for faculty work and be willing to enact a more flexible reward system that recognizes new tasks that faculty at all academic levels must undertake in the 21st century.

Institutions must encourage faculty participation and support faculty development efforts. As institutions of higher learning become more attuned to the needs of students and communities, the importance of faculty collaboration within and across disciplines increases. Interdisciplinary conversations can be supported effectively through faculty development activities that expose faculty to the national debate and help them learn how to meet the multi-disciplinary teaching, research and academic life challenges that will face higher education worldwide in the next millennium.

At the end of the 20th century, U.S. higher education is searching for its place in a highly technological and global environment. As tuition rises and funding sources shrink, students, parents, prospective employers, taxpayers, and lawmakers want to know what higher education has to offer on the new playing field. Like all organizations, we must learn to embrace change, realigning our priorities and our work with the needs of a larger,

global environment. We must be willing to value and equitably reward new dimensions of work. To survive, we must be able to show that what we have to offer contributes to advancing our world and preparing future generations to live and work successfully in it.

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Endnotes

1. The Carnegie Classification System was created by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. The latest update occurred in 1994. It includes all degree-granting U.S. colleges and universities that are accredited by U.S. Secretary of Education recognized agencies. Classification is based on amount of federal support, number of degrees conferred, and highest degree level offered. For more information see the April 6, 1994 edition of The Chronicle of Higher Education or access the Internet at websites such as http://www.montana.edu/~aircj/policy/carnegie.html or http://www.highered.org/resources/carnegie_classification.htm

2. Each of the 18 participating faculty members was interviewed for at least one hour. Each interview was audio taped for immediate transcription and analysis. By rank the gender breakdown was: Full Professors (3 men, 3 women), Associate Professors (3 men, 3 women), Assistant Professors (2 men, 4 women).

3. Aguilar (1981) points out that insider researchers become immersed in the culture they are studying much faster than outsiders, create a more relaxed research atmosphere for participants, and can build checks for bias through a process of triangulation. My experience in this study supports Aguilar's claims and confirms the value of insider research. Because I was familiar with the changes that occurred over time at the research site, I shared a common understanding and language with the research participants. Their descriptive anecdotes carried both implicit and explicit meaning. Because my position within the research site made me aware of changes at the wider university as well as the local academic unit levels, I understood the participants on both the personal and institutional levels. When both researcher and participants not only speak a common language but share common experiences, data analysis becomes richer, more contextual, and more focused in reaching useful conclusions.

4. Maintaining high ethical standards as a researcher was paramount. Protecting the identity of the participants, maintaining the integrity of the research process, managing and reporting data accurately, and checking continuously for personal bias during data analysis were critical components to producing quality results that can both inform and improve social organizations. To guard against bias, I continually checked for personal biases and looked for negative as well as positive points in the data. In addition, I continually coded and categorized data, forcing myself "to ask the most obvious questions" (Stephenson & Greer, 1991, p. 125). In the end, I found that being an "insider" proved beneficial during data analysis since I was able to attach cultural meaning to the descriptions, anecdotes, examples and comments made by faculty participants.

5. Each one-hour interview was audio taped, transcribed verbatim, and checked for accuracy by the researcher. Each interview transcript was printed with each line numbered using The Ethnograph (a qualitative data analysis software) and bracketed to identify emerging themes within and across faculty ranks. Recurring themes were identified within each faculty rank. A recurring theme was a theme that occurred at least

three times within an academic rank. Recurring themes were grouped into category sets: Sources of satisfaction/sources of dissatisfaction, external pressures/internal pressures, local changes/national changes.

6. Research II University is one of the 10 Carnegie Classifications of U.S. colleges and universities established by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (See endnote #1). Oxford University Press. Higher Education. Human Organization, 40(2), 123-130.

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