

Higher Education Support Personnel

Worklife Issues

by *Linda K. Johnsrud*

Linda K. Johnsrud is associate dean for academic affairs, College of Education, University of Hawaii at Manoa. A past member of the University of Hawaii Professional Assembly and a 1998-99 fellow of the American Council on Education, she has also chaired the university's faculty senate.

*Johnsrud writes extensively on worklife issues of administrative staff and faculty. She is author of *Maintaining Morale: A Guide to Addressing the Morale of Midlevel Administrators and Faculty* (College and University Personnel Association, 1996). A frequent speaker on campus and in the community, Johnsrud has worked with colleges and universities in Guam, Japan, Korea, and Western Australia.*

About 60 percent of all higher education employees are support personnel.¹ But what do we know about their worklives? Statistics on education support personnel (ESP) published by the National Center for Education Statistics focus on demographics—size, salary, education, sex, and race—not on worklife issues. Some reports on ESP worklife issues portray staff members as a group, thereby obscuring within-group differences. Other reports focus on a subset of employees, thus precluding comparisons. Neither approach reveals the commonalities and differences in worklife issues among staff members. Assuming that secretaries, technical staff, machine operators, and food service workers, for example, share the same concerns and sources of satisfaction ignores obvious differences in roles, tasks, and working conditions. A 1997 NEA-sponsored survey—first reported in the *NEA 1999 Almanac*—permits us to compare and contrast worklife issues and concerns among occupational work groups.²

CATEGORIES OF EDUCATION SUPPORT PERSONNEL

Let's first note the key groups of higher education support personnel. NEA divides ESPs into nine occupational groups:³

- 1) Building and grounds maintenance/repairs
- 2) Security services
- 3) Food services
- 4) Health and student services
- 5) Paraprofessionals (instructional and non-instructional aides)
- 6) Secretarial, clerical, administrative services
- 7) Technical services
- 8) Trades, crafts, machine operators
- 9) Transportation, delivery, vehicle mechanics

NEA randomly surveyed members of all nine groups of ESPs in higher education by mail, obtaining a 54 percent return rate (n=1,061)*. (*The usable "n" varies due to missing data on specific questions.) The results were weighted by NEA region. The

small numbers of respondents in some groups mandated an analysis by four primary groups:

1. Clerical (secretarial, clerical, administrative services) = 64.5 percent of the total respondents (n=669).
2. Technical/paraprofessional (health and student services, paraprofessionals, and technical services) = 17.6 percent (n=182).
3. Service/maintenance (building and grounds maintenance/repairs, security services, food services, and transportation, delivery, vehicle mechanics) = 13.8 percent (n=143).
4. Skilled crafts (trades, crafts, machine operators) = 4.1 percent (n=43).

Figure 1 shows the relative representation of the respondents by occupational group (n=1,037), in the four groups analyzed in this chapter.

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

About 77 percent of the NEA survey respondents who provided their occupational group were women (n=798); 23 percent

(n=239) were men. Figure 2, breaking down occupational groups by sex, shows substantial gender segregation. Women predominated among the clericals: 93.3 percent vs. 6.7 percent (n=624 and 45, respectively); and the technical/paraprofessionals: 72.5 percent vs. 27.5 percent (n = 132 and 50). Most skilled crafts respondents were men: 98.0 percent vs. 2.0 percent (n = 42 and 1). So were most service/maintenance respondents: 71.3 percent vs. 28.7 percent (n = 102 and 41). These patterns remained after controlling for institutional variation and organizational differences.⁴

Most respondents were white (85.1 percent); the next largest groups were Black (9.0 percent), Hispanic (2.9 percent), Native American (1.1 percent), and Asian (1.1 percent). Less than 1 percent reported mixed race/ethnicity (Figure 3). Table 1 breaks down the occupational groups by race/ethnicity. The proportion of whites—the majority in every group—ranged from 72 percent (service/maintenance) to 88 percent (technical/paraprofessional). The service/maintenance group showed the highest proportion of Blacks (23 percent of 139 respondents). But nearly half the Black respondents were clericals (46 of 92 respondents). Hispanics

Figure 1

Respondents by Occupational Group (n=1,037)

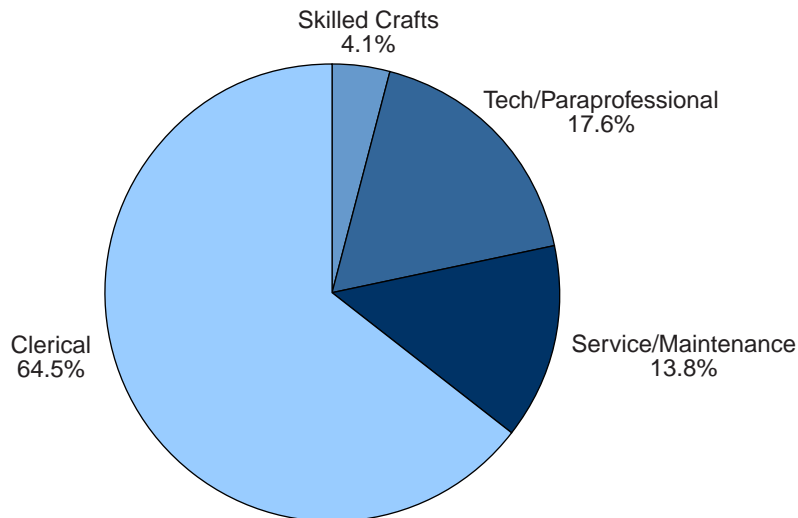
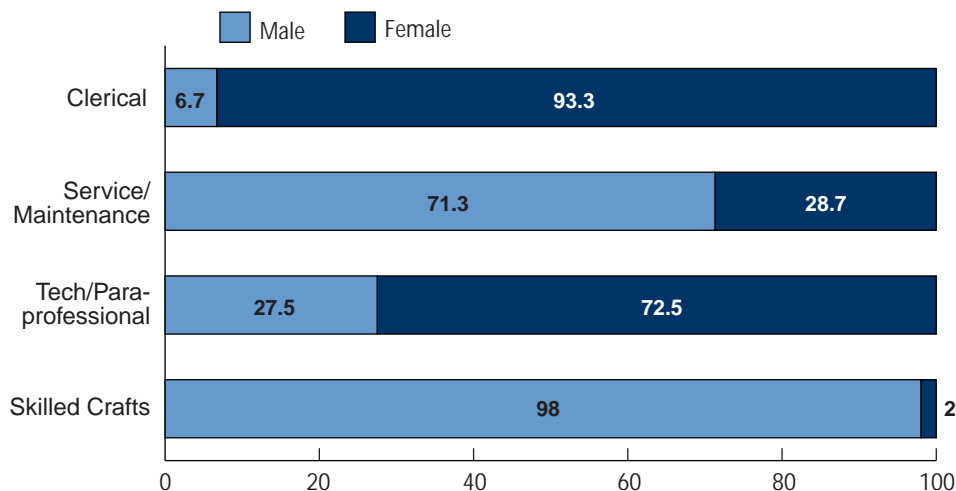


Figure 2

Respondents by Sex and Occupational Group



Source: 1997 NEA Survey of Higher Education Support Personnel Members

represented between 2 and 3 percent of each group; Asians and Native Americans less than 3 percent.

Table 2 shows the highest degree earned by members of each occupational group. About 30 percent of the technical/paraprofessionals had bachelor's degrees. Among the clericals and the skilled crafts respondents, 38 percent and 42 percent, respectively, reported "some college" as their highest degree. About 48 percent of the service/maintenance respondents had a high school diploma or a GED. Figure 4 shows little variance in the mean age of respondents by occupational group (46 to 48 years of age).

Average annual salaries differed by occupational groups (Figure 5). The skilled crafts group reported the highest salaries (\$26,266); service/maintenance workers reported the lowest (\$21,321). Clericals and technical/paraprofessionals reported intermediate average annual salaries (\$22,972 and \$24,817, respectively). Figure 6 breaks down salary by gender. Male respondents reported higher average annual salaries in the clerical, service/maintenance, and technical/paraprofessional occupational groups. In the skilled crafts, the one female respondent reported a slightly higher salary than the average for men.

SOURCES OF SATISFACTION AND DISSATISFACTION BY ESP OCCUPATIONAL GROUP

Table 3 summarizes levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with each of the 14 work-life items included on the NEA survey. There were no statistically significant differences by occupational group on the level of satisfaction expressed on several categories: wages you earn, employee benefits, kind of work you do, amount of work you are expected to do, chances for promotion or advancement, and health and safety protection. All four groups expressed satisfaction—defined as the sum of "very satisfied" and "satisfied" responses—with amount of work, health and safety protection, employee benefits, and kind of work (range = 74 to 90 percent).

Respondents across the occupational groups reported dissatisfaction—defined as the sum of "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied" responses—with wages earned and chances for promotion or advancement (44 percent and 68 percent, respectively).

The four occupational groups reported significant differences in levels of satisfaction on several other worklife issues (Figures 7 through 14). For example, 33 percent of the

Table 1

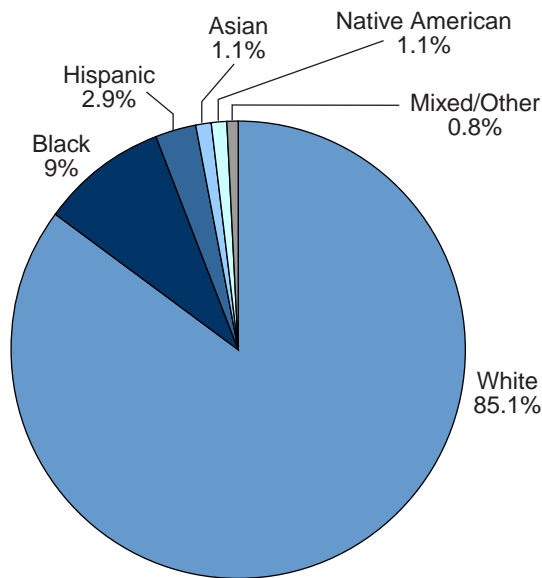
Respondents by Race/Ethnicity and Occupational Group (n=1,017)*

Race/Ethnicity	Number (percent)			
	Clerical	Service/ Maintenance	Technical/ Paraprofessional	Skilled Crafts
Asian	9 (1.4%)	1 (0.7%)	1 (0.6%)	0
Black	46 (7.0%)	32 (23.0%)	11 (6.1%)	3 (7.1%)
Hispanic	20 (3.1%)	3 (2.2%)	5 (2.8%)	1 (2.4%)
Native American	8 (1.2%)	2 (1.4%)	0	1 (2.4%)
White	571 (87.0%)	100 (72.0%)	159 (88.3%)	36 (85.7%)
Mixed/Other	2 (0.3%)	1 (0.7%)	4 (2.2%)	1 (2.4%)
Totals	656	139	180	42

* Due to missing data.

Figure 3

Respondents by Race/Ethnicity (n=1,017)*

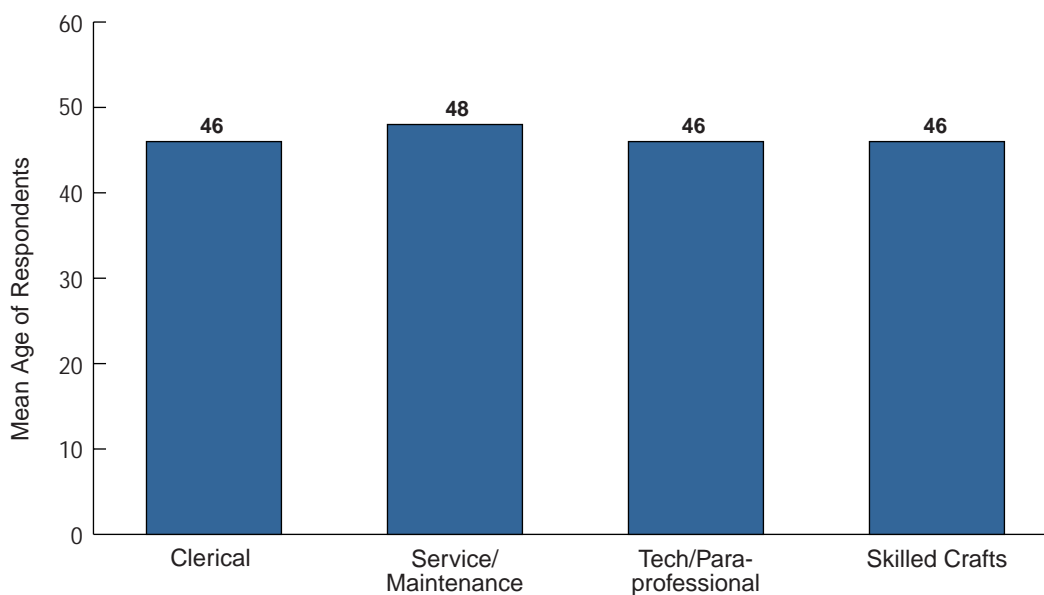


Source: 1997 NEA Survey of Higher Education Support Personnel Members

* Due to missing data.

Table 2**Respondents by Highest Degree Earned and Occupational Group**

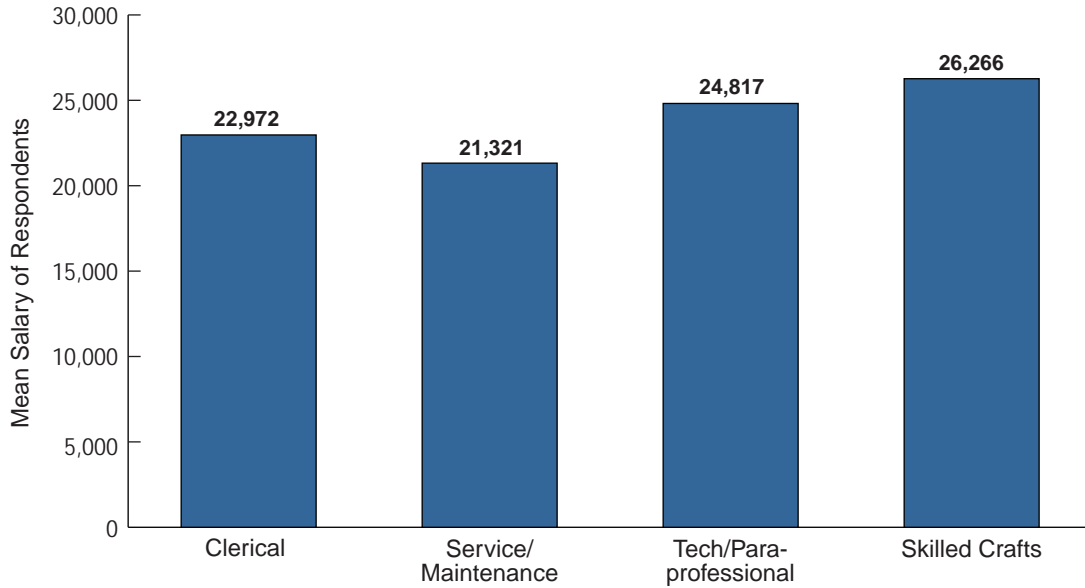
Highest Degree Earned	Number (percent)			
	Clerical	Service/ Maintenance	Technical/ Paraprofessional	Skilled Crafts
No high school	4 (1.0%)	13 (9.0%)	1 (1.0%)	1 (2.0%)
"High school, GED"	110 (16.0)	68 (48.0)	18 (9.0)	14 (33.0)
Some college	253 (38.0)	36 (25.0)	37 (20.0)	18 (42.0)
Two-year degree	188 (28.0)	18 (13.0)	46 (25.0)	6 (14.0)
Bachelor's	93 (14.0)	6 (4.0)	55 (30.0)	4 (9.0)
Master's	19 (3.0)	2 (1.0)	29 (16.0)	0 (0.0)
Doctorate	1 (0.001)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
Totals	668	143	186	43

Figure 4**Respondents Mean Age by Occupational Group**

Source: 1997 NEA Survey of Higher Education Support Personnel Members

Figure 5

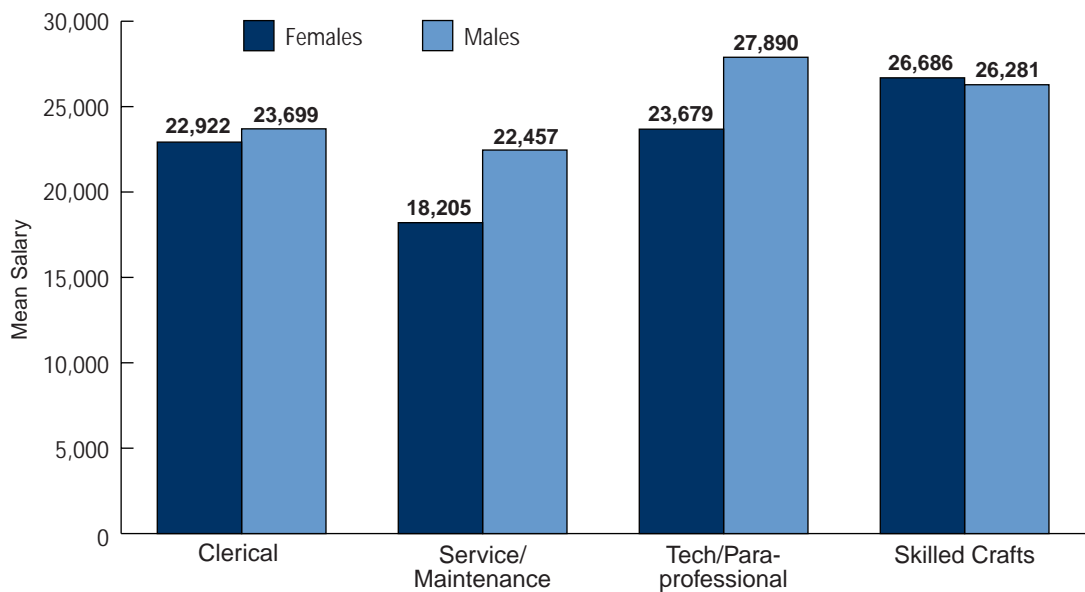
Respondents Mean Salary by Occupational Group



Source: 1997 NEA Survey of Higher Education Support Personnel Members

Figure 6

Respondents Mean Salary by Occupational Group and Sex



Source: 1997 NEA Survey of Higher Education Support Personnel Members

service/maintenance respondents—but only 19 percent of the clericals—noted dissatisfaction with the personal fulfillment they experience from their job (Figure 7). Similarly, service/maintenance disclosed greater dissatisfaction with the freedom they experienced in their positions (23 percent of each group) than do clericals (11 percent) (Figure 8).

Skilled crafts group members were considerably more dissatisfied with their job security (33 percent) than members of the other groups (clericals = 17 percent; service/maintenance = 23 percent; technical/paraprofessional = 24 percent) (Figure 9). The skilled crafts respondents also reported the highest levels of dissatisfaction on opportunities for training to improve skills (57 percent) and for retraining or developing new skills (59 percent) (Figures 10 and 11). In contrast, only 25 and 28 percent of the clericals were dissatisfied with their training and retraining opportunities, respectively. Respondents from the service/maintenance and technical/paraprofessional groups fell between these extremes.

Figures 12, 13, and 14 show the levels of satisfaction with the support received from supervisors, local associations, and faculty members, respectively. Service/maintenance expressed the most dissatisfaction with supervisor support (41 percent). Skilled crafts respondents were most dissatisfied with support from their local association (48 percent) and from the faculty (39 percent); service/maintenance (32 percent), clericals, and technical/paraprofessionals followed (25 percent of each group).

Table 4 measures overall satisfaction and dissatisfaction for each group, computed by averaging the percentages for each of the 14 worklife issues. Clericals reported the highest overall satisfaction (75 percent); skilled crafts, the lowest (64 percent). The total satisfaction level across the four groups was 73 percent—a relatively high level of reported satisfaction. But this level also meant that, on average, one quarter or more of the respondents in every group were dissatisfied.

Table 3

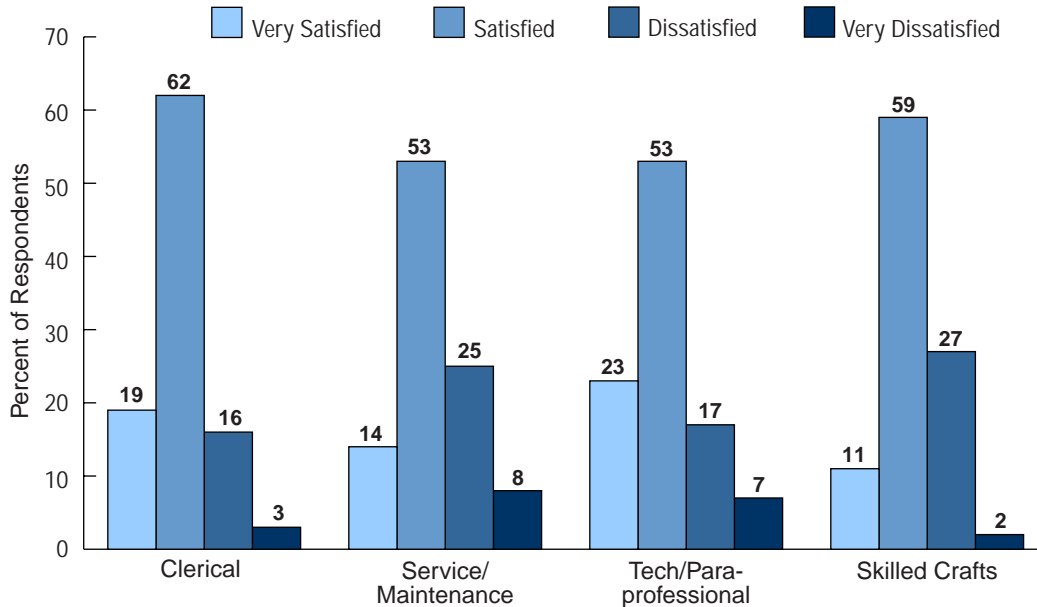
Summary: Percent Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction by Worklife Issue

Worklife Issue	Satisfied %	Dissatisfied %
Wages you earn	56.4	43.6
Employee benefits	88.5	11.5
Fulfillment from job*	77.5	22.5
Freedom to do job*	85.2	14.8
Job security*	80.7	19.3
Kind of work you do	90.1	9.9
Expected work	76.4	23.6
Chances for promotion	31.9	68.1
Training to improve skills*	69.1	30.9
Retrain/develop new skills*	66.5	33.5
Health and safety	81.4	18.6
Support from supervisor*	73.7	26.3
Support from association*	73.7	26.3
Support from faculty*	73.4	26.6
Overall %	73.2	26.8

* Responses differed significantly by occupational group (see Figures 7-14)

Figure 7

Personal Fulfillment From Job*



*Chi-square = 24.68, significant at $p < .003$

SOURCES OF CONCERN BY ESP OCCUPATIONAL GROUP

The NEA survey also asked the respondents to rank worklife issues by level of concern. Wages that did not reflect changes in the job, and layoffs and downsizing were major concerns for the four occupational groups (57 and 45 percent, respectively). The increasing amount of work, the need for retraining, and skill improvement were also major concerns (38, 28, and 26 percent, respectively) (not tabled here).

Other areas of concern showed considerable variation by group. Service/maintenance and skilled crafts respondents were "very concerned" about contracted work (very concerned = 50 and 46 percent, respectively). In contrast, only 18 percent of the clericals and of the technical/paraprofessionals answered "very concerned" (Figure 15). Similarly, 41 and 40 percent of the service/maintenance and the skilled crafts respondents saw health and safety threats as a major concern; the respective proportions for clericals and technical/paraprofessionals were 22 and 24 percent (Figure 16).

Skilled crafts respondents saw involuntary transfers as of relatively little concern (major concern = 7 percent; minor concern = 62 percent) (Figure 17). So did clerical and technical/paraprofessionals (major concern = 26 and 17 percent, respectively). But involuntary transfers were a major concern for 38 percent of the service/maintenance respondents. Working outside one's assignment (Figure 18) varied as a major concern from 20 percent (technical/paraprofessionals) to 35 percent (service/maintenance).

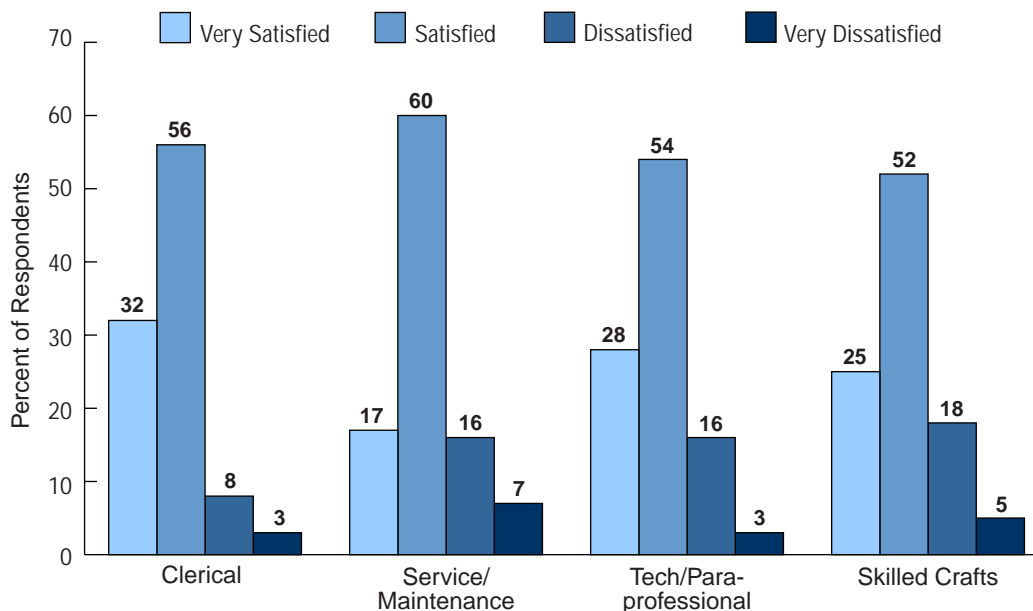
All four groups saw the lack of opportunities for promotion and advancement as a major concern (Figure 19). The range: from 53 percent of the technical/paraprofessionals to 69 percent of the skilled crafts respondents.

SUMMARY

These statistically significant differences by groups on many issues should come as no surprise. Many differences uncovered are commonsensical when the conditions and context of the work in particular occupational areas are considered. Despite the differences,

Figure 8

Freedom in the Position*



*Chi-square = 29.20, significant at $p < .001$

all four occupational groups listed wages that do not reflect changes in the job, chances for promotion, and the possibility of layoffs and downsizing as sources of greatest dissatisfaction and/or greatest concerns. The following summaries note the issues of particular concern to each group.

Clerical staff: Clericals reported high levels of satisfaction relative to other support personnel; they, for example, expressed the most satisfaction with the freedom experienced in their positions. But one-fourth of the clericals were dissatisfied with support from their supervisors, their association, and the faculty. The primary concern: the lack of opportunity for promotion and advancement.

Service/maintenance: This group reported higher levels of dissatisfaction than other groups on their opportunity for training to improve skills and to retrain and develop new skills, and on supervisor support. Service/maintenance workers were also concerned with involuntary transfers, work outside their assignments, threats to health and safety, and the potential of contracted work.

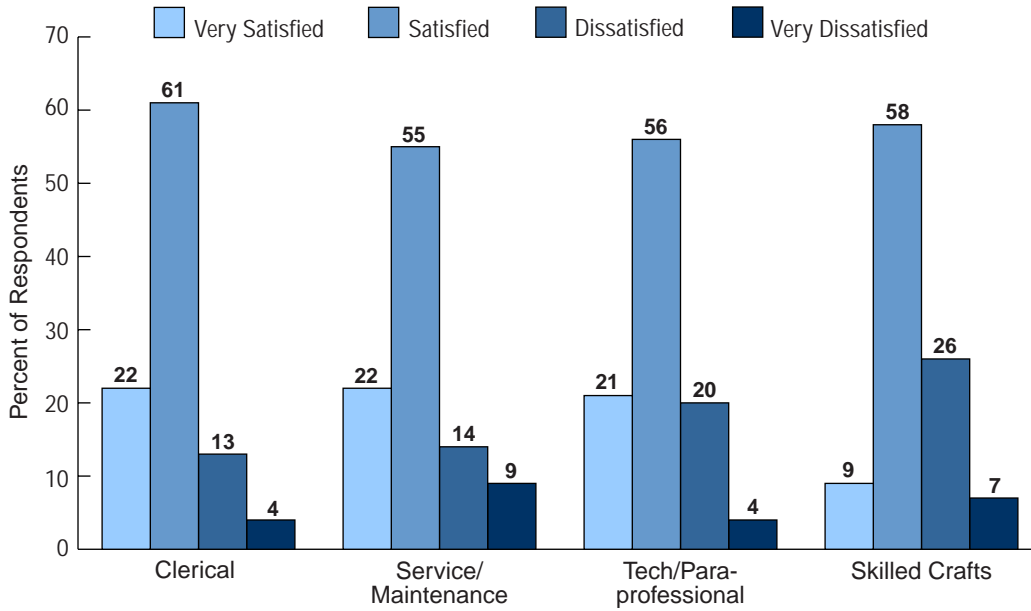
Technical/paraprofessional: Technical/paraprofessionals reported relatively high levels of satisfaction. The three related exceptions: opportunity for training to improve skills, opportunity to retrain and develop new skills, and opportunity for promotion and advancement.

Skilled crafts: The responses of skilled crafts workers mirrored the major concerns reported by the service/maintenance group regarding contracted work and threats to health and safety. In addition, the skilled crafts group expressed most concern about job security, support from their local association, and the lack of opportunities for promotion and advancement. Skilled crafts workers were somewhat less concerned than their service/maintenance colleagues about involuntary transfers and work outside of their assignment.

These results are not idiosyncratic. For example, all groups saw the lack of opportunities for promotions and advancement as a major concern, despite significant differences in the absolute levels. But not all groups saw contracting out and job security as major concerns.

Figure 9

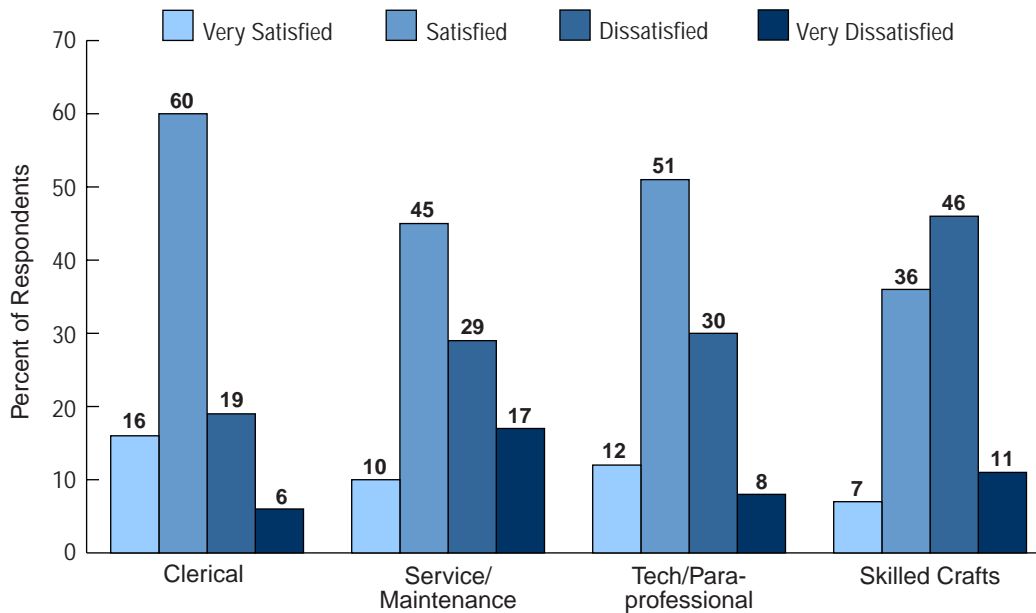
Job Security*



*Chi-square = 20.70, significant at $p < .014$

Figure 10

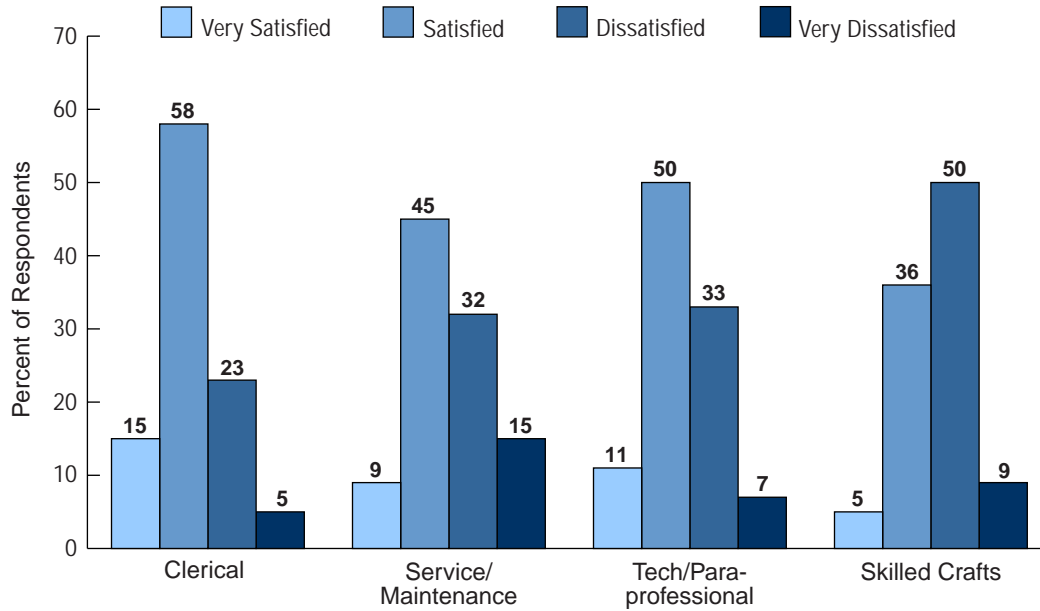
Opportunities for Training to Improve Skills*



*Chi-square = 53.92, significant at $p < .000$

Figure 11

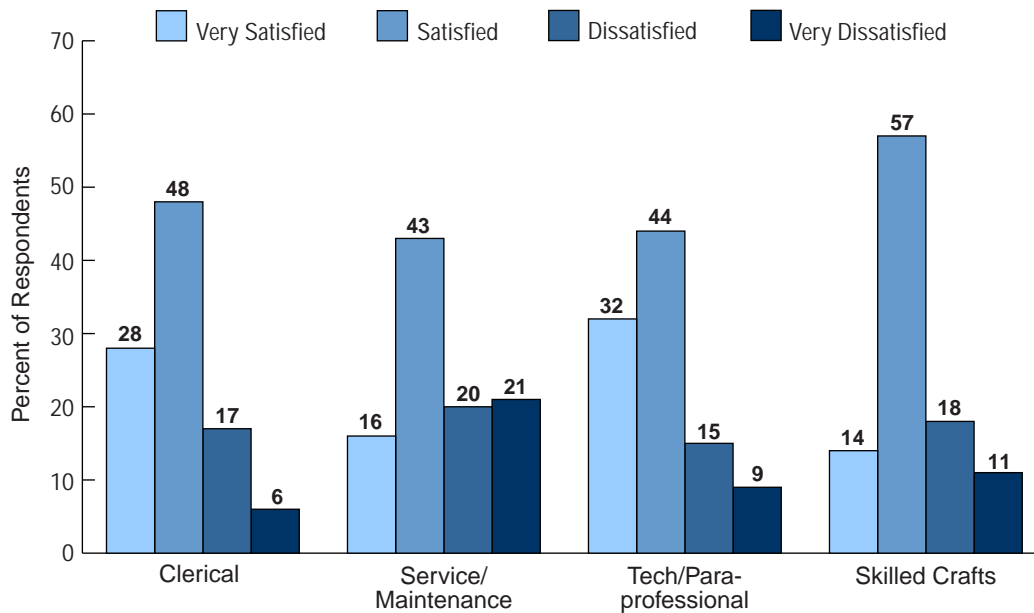
Opportunities to Retrain/Develop New Skills*



*Chi-square = 47.85, significant at $p < .000$

Figure 12

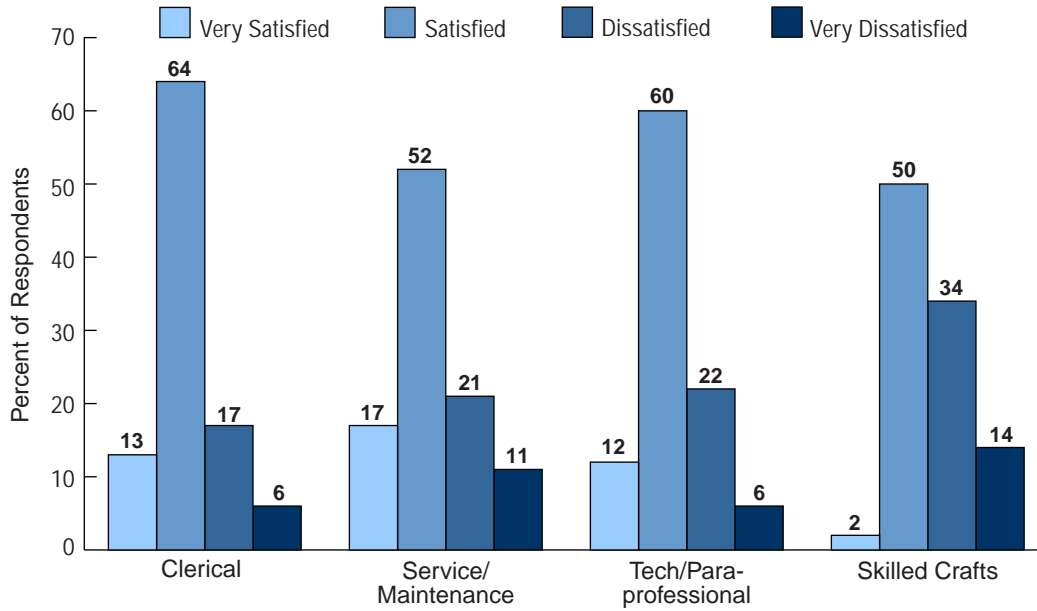
Support From Supervisor*



*Chi-square = 42.70, significant at $p < .000$

Figure 13

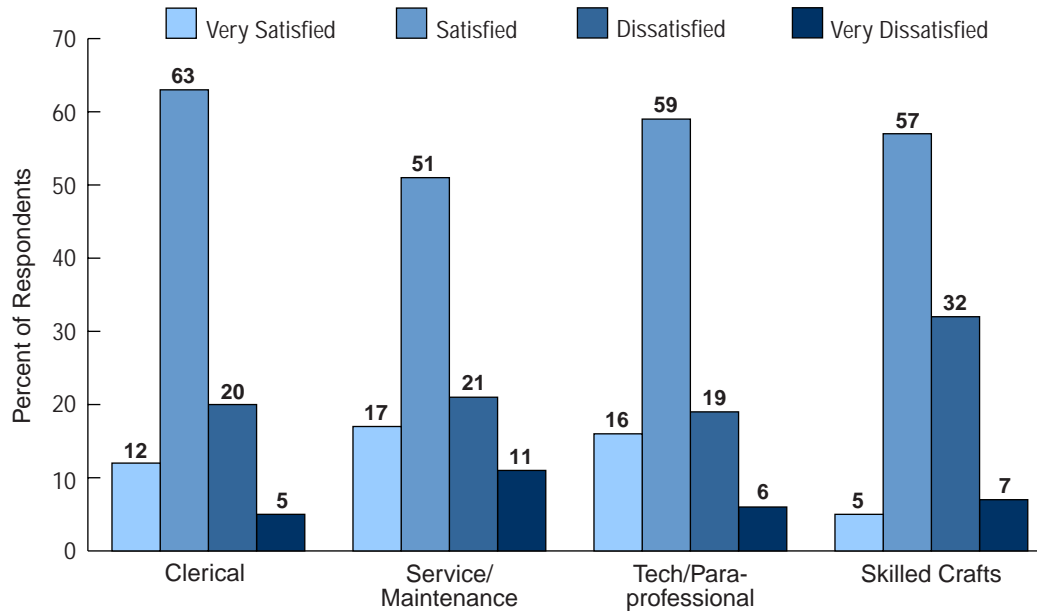
Support From Local Association*



*Chi-square = 23.29, significant at $p < .006$

Figure 14

Support From Faculty*



*Chi-square = 16.91, significant at $p < .05$

Table 4

Percent Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction by Occupational Group*

Occupational Group	Satisfied	Dissatisfied
Clerical	75.4%	24.6%
Service/Maintenance	67.0%	33.1%
Technical/Paraprofessional	72.2%	27.8%
Skilled Craft	64.2%	35.8%

* Percents rounded to the nearest tenth

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES

Administrators and bargaining units usually focus on worklife issues that concern the majority of their employees. Responding to differences within groups is not always possible; policies and practices are expected to be equitable and fair to all groups. The variance in degree of union representation makes responses even more difficult. Nationally, 50 different unions represent the one-third of support personnel that are unionized.⁵ But unionization rates varied by occupational group: technical/paraprofessionals showed the lowest rate (14.8 percent), clericals are next (37.2 percent), and the service/maintenance and skilled crafts are highest (42.8 percent).

A chapter in the *NEA 1998 Almanac* analyzed provisions for outsourcing support staff work in the 149 ESP contracts in NEA's Higher Education Contract Analysis System.⁶ Many universities contract out services to cut costs and balance budgets. Managers, noted the report, have considerable discretion to subcontract work, and ESP personnel bear the brunt of outsourcing.⁷ Contracts, the analysis suggested, should allow administrators to invest in training and developing support personnel. These findings reinforce the concerns expressed by the service/maintenance and skilled crafts respondents in the NEA study. Bargaining units must give these concerns high priority when they negotiate contracts.

Administrators and bargaining agents must look deep within their units to discover the worklife issues of concern to ESPs. Some generalizations may obscure key differences

in sources of satisfaction and frustration. Take wages, for example. When asked about their earnings, 56 percent of the respondents reported satisfaction. But 57 percent noted concern that their wages did not reflect changes in their jobs. Respondents also expressed concern about workplace changes at a time of dramatic declines in the number of new hires (service/maintenance = 35 percent, skilled crafts = 57 percent, clericals = 52 percent, technicals = 54 percent).⁸ Too often, the amount of work increased while the number of support personnel who perform the work decreased.

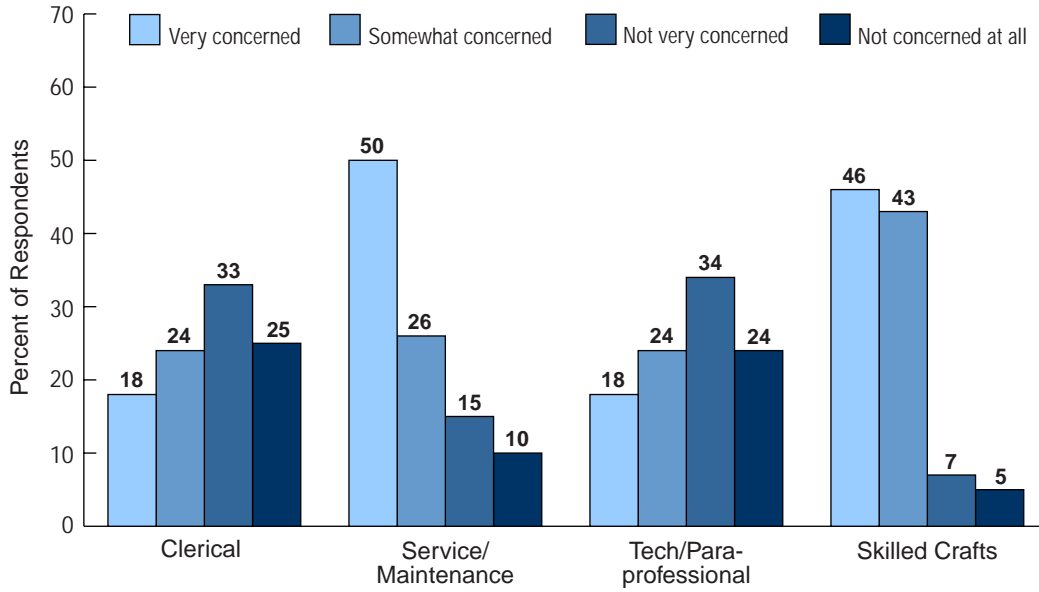
CONCLUSION

The NEA survey describes a national random sample; realities on any campus may differ. The best decisions about improving the worklives of education support personnel are therefore likely to emanate from specific institutional data. Colleges and bargaining units should survey their employees to discover the key campus-wide and group-specific issues.⁹ The survey—and the follow-up—should identify differences that matter; employees do not attribute equal importance to all differences, nor can colleges simultaneously address all differences.

The NEA survey, by identifying vital issues, merits the attention of bargaining units and campus administrators. Improving the work lives of the personnel who support the mission and activities of higher education should have high priority.

Figure 15

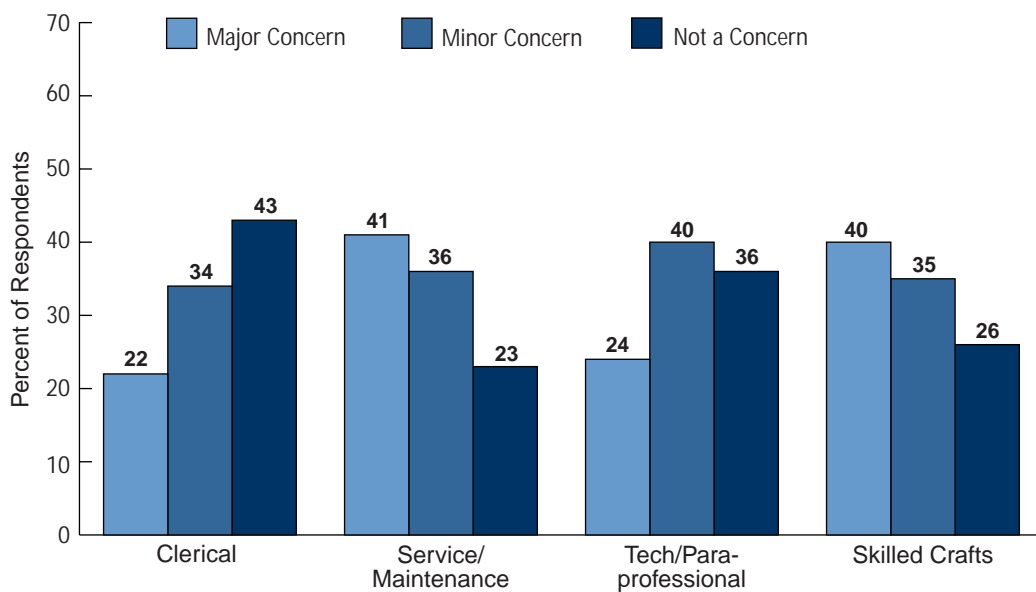
Concerned with Contracted Work*



*Chi-square = 108.89, significant at $p < .000$

Figure 16

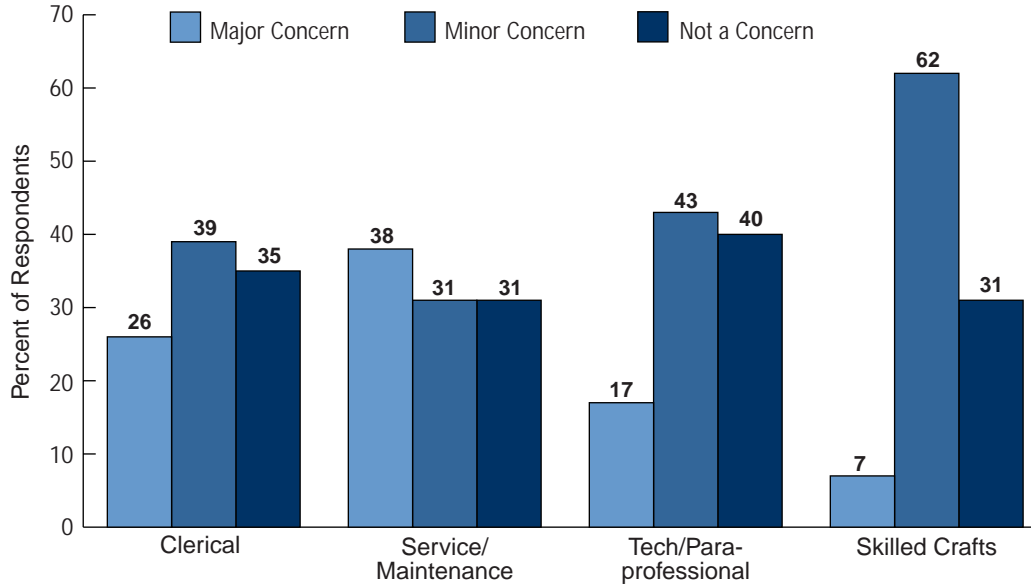
Threats to Health and Safety*



*Chi-square = 34.97, significant at $p < .000$

Figure 17

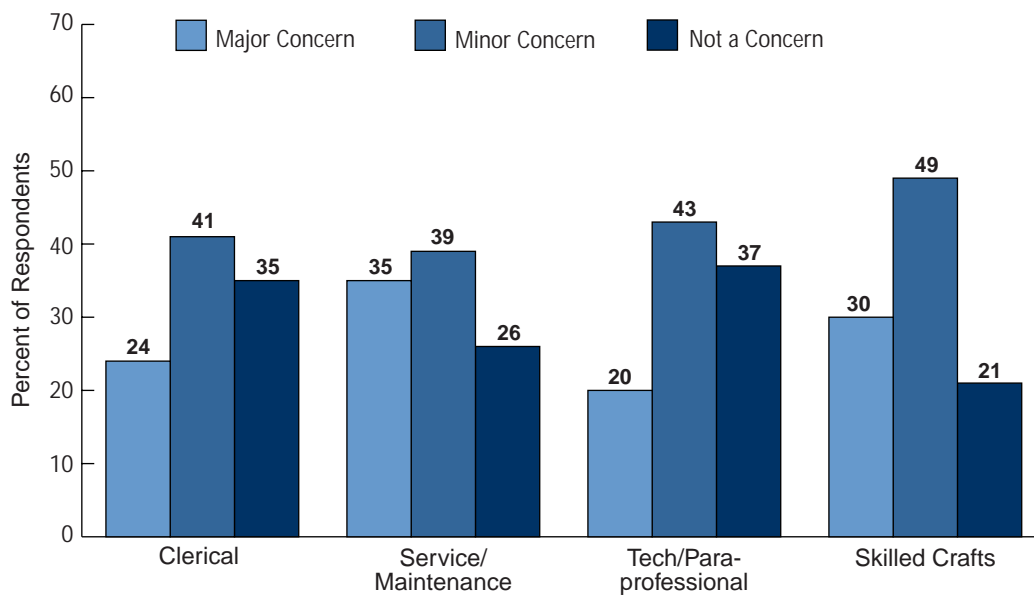
Involuntary Transfers*



*Chi-square = 29.81, significant at $p < .000$

Figure 18

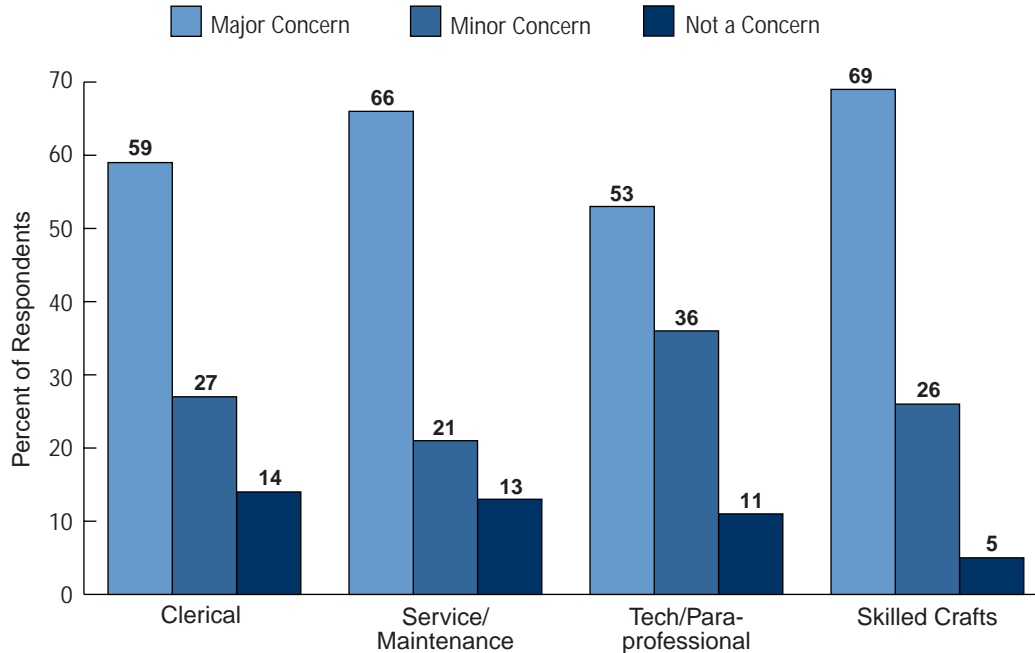
Work Outside My Assignment*



*Chi-square = 14.51, significant at $p < .024$

Figure 19

Lack of Opportunities for Promotion/Advancement*



*Chi-square = 12.53, significant at $p < .05$

NOTES

¹ Data source is the 1995 Staff Survey, part of the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), an annual survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.

² Johnsrud, 1999.

³ National Education Association, 1996.

⁴ Kulis, 1997.

⁵ Rhoades and Maitland, 1998.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Johnsrud, 2000.

⁸ National Education Association, 1998.

⁹ Johnsrud, 1996.

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