

The Institutional Marketplace and Faculty Attrition

By Marilyn J. Amey

To say that faculty are a national resource imperiled¹ is one thing; to raise an institution's awareness that *its* faculty may be at risk is quite another. In the last decade, studies have begun to document a changing set of realities for faculty. Yet institutional policies and practices related to these new realities have been slow to change.

One new reality: an increased number of faculty are likely to retire in the next decade, bringing the potential for faculty shortages. But we know little about how to retain those faculty we presently have and how to successfully recruit new people into the academic ranks. This study aims to fill this void in our knowledge by examining the realities, policies, and practices related to faculty attrition and retention.

The increasing costs of recruitment, coupled with the increasing costs in salary and benefits associated with a positive tenure decision, magnify the institutional impact and implications of each hiring and tenure decision.² Yet studies indicate that the selection process is not a good predictor of long-term job success.³

What happens to assistant and associate faculty as they move through probation and beyond that impedes or facilitates progress? Why do some assistant professors leave the institution before their tenure review? Why do some tenured associate professors continue to see their careers tied to single institutions, while others pursue advancement in other institutional settings? Are the circumstances of departure specific only to the individual or are there institution-

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al or cultural barriers that need to be addressed? Can the reasons some faculty leave be analyzed in any meaningful way? Do academic decision makers have access to this information? The answers to such questions become even more important as universities attempt to retain women and minority faculty.

Recent studies provide some baseline information relevant to these questions. For example, in the reasons for departure given by assistant professors in arts and sciences, other than denial of tenure, Burke finds that money was not generally as important as “quality of life” issues—intellectual isolation, intellectual incompatibility with senior colleagues, and spousal employment, or lack thereof.⁴ Matier’s research reveals similar findings across faculty ranks. He notes that six of the seven primary reasons faculty give for leaving research universities speak to “intangibles”: the congeniality of associates, rapport with departmental leadership, research opportunities, and the reputations of the department, institution, and associates.⁵ National data on postsecondary faculty also indicate that, among untenured faculty at public research institutions, only 56 percent are satisfied with their salary—indicating another potential reason for departure.⁶

Large-scale surveys do provide us with important general perspectives on faculty careers, but also needed are institutional profiles of departing faculty. We conducted a study at one research university. This study offers a basis for discussing faculty attrition and its relation to institutional myths, policies, and practices.

Data Sources

Data on faculty are often not uniformly collected by colleges and universities. As a result, the first and often most difficult step in this process is the generation of a useful data base built from myriad collections of institutional records stored in various offices around campus. Initial appointment information, annual promotion and tenure reports, and termination/resignation reports, collected by most institutions, can serve as initial data sources for compiling a cumulative faculty data base. We used these sources for this study.

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With the use of these data come the limitations of secondary data analysis: Institutional records are not always complete, and the information may not include all the variables relevant to a study of faculty retention and attrition. Much of the data is also self-reported, bringing another set of limitations. Researchers don't always have the opportunity to easily follow-up with faculty, to clarify or expand on responses. Despite these limitations, institutional data can provide us with insights into faculty career decisions.

Institutional Attrition Trends

The institutional profile of reasons for faculty departure at the public research university we studied provide some important insights for policy development. Across the institution during the 10-year study period of 1978-1988, some 465 faculty left this research university. The institution hired approximately the same number of faculty into the system during the study period, although these were not necessarily direct replacements. Since this research was undertaken to inform institutional policy and practice, two reasons for departure—retirement and death—were removed from the statistical analysis following the first analysis.⁷

The primary reason for leaving? One-third of the faculty gave salary as the reason they left. Retirement was the second most frequent reason for leaving, and professional advancement, the third. "Professional advancement" reasons included promotion in academic rank, advancement to academic administrative positions, and promotion in private sector organizations.

The institutional profile also provides some basic information about why faculty left this university. In most instances, senior administrators and policy makers would not be surprised to learn that salaries and professional advancement/promotion opportunities can lure faculty away from state universities, especially during a decade of slow growth in salaries.⁸

The importance of salary as a reason for leaving reinforces the national study findings and the need for sound compensation policies and practices.⁹ What was surprising, and warrants further

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investigation, is the number of faculty in our study who left for what we term “institutional issues,” sometimes referred to as “professional quality of life issues.”¹⁰ Within this category fall responses such as concern with the balance between teaching and research, lack of support for programs (attitudinal and financial), disenchantment with institutional or departmental policies, concerns about departmental interpersonal relations, lack of intellectual stimulation, and inability to find research collaboration opportunities. When retirement and death are removed from the analysis, institutional issues are the third most frequently cited reason for leaving among all faculty at this university.

As useful as institution-wide analyses can be, without further investigation into more discrete faculty categories, it is likely administrators and policy makers would be derailed from wholly constructive policies to deal with faculty attrition. The literature clearly indicates that faculty values, needs, and concerns vary over time and by discipline. There is also reason to believe that attrition varies by gender, race, and ethnicity.

We conducted analyses separately by gender, rank, and discipline to determine if there are differences in the reasons faculty identify for leaving the institution. Faculty race and ethnicity data were not collected consistently, so we could not analyze these variations.

Academic Rank Variations

Examining all faculty who left the institution during the 10-year period, the data show somewhat different trends by academic rank. Full professors are most likely to leave for reasons of professional advancement or difficulties with the university, including conflict with senior administrators and institutional policies/practices (professional quality of life issues).

Excluding salary, associate professors were most likely to leave the institution for issues related to resources and the balance of teaching and research. This group was the least likely to give salary as a reason for leaving, although salary was still an important consideration.

TABLE 1

Number and Percent of Departing Faculty
Citing Each Reason for Leaving

| | Assistant Professor | | Associate Professor | | Full Professor | | Total | |
|-------------------|---------------------|-----|---------------------|----|----------------|----|-------|-----|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Tenure | 59 | 98% | 1 | 2% | 0 | 0% | 60 | 18% |
| Salary | 54 | 38 | 42 | 29 | 47 | 33 | 143 | 43 |
| Prof. Advancement | 26 | 27 | 23 | 25 | 44 | 47 | 93 | 28 |
| Inst. Issues | 26 | 36 | 26 | 36 | 21 | 29 | 73 | 22 |
| Private Sector | 27 | 44 | 22 | 36 | 13 | 21 | 62 | 19 |
| Dual Careers | 12 | 48 | 7 | 28 | 6 | 24 | 25 | 8 |
| Personal | 20 | 40 | 15 | 30 | 15 | 30 | 50 | 15 |
| Geography | 11 | 50 | 7 | 32 | 4 | 18 | 22 | 7 |
| Total Departing | 160 | | 83 | | 87 | | 330 | |

Note: Percentages do not sum to 100 percent, since faculty could give multiple reasons for leaving. The table excludes the reasons of retirement and death.

Assistant professors account for almost one-half of all faculty who left the institution for reasons related to dual career couples, and only a slightly lower percent of those who left to take a position in a field outside of higher education.

Analyses within each faculty rank shed new light on institutional myths of faculty life. As in Burke's 1987 study, tenure and tenure-related concerns are the reason for departure given by the largest percentage of assistant professors at this research university, but salary is the next most frequent reason given. Private-sector advancement opportunities are third and, in most cases, this involved a substantial increase in salary. Professional quality of life issues (institutional issues) and spousal employment opportunities individually account for less than 20 percent of the reasons for departure, but, together, they account for almost 25 percent of the variance, making this combined factor the third most important reason for leaving.

Professional quality of life issues identified by assistant professors range from disenchantment with academic and institutional life and the quality of colleagues to philosophical differences with the department or institution and lack of resources. Professional quality of life and spousal employment are combined here for two

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reasons. First, both professional quality of life and spousal employment are, in part, related to issues of “fit” often explored in prospective candidate interviews; second, both of these factors can be influenced by institutional practices and policies.

Analyses within each rank also show the impact of various institutional issues on associate and full professors’ decisions to leave the university, in part supporting Matier’s 1990 study of two research universities. Many of these issues are a function more of departmental and disciplinary cultures than institutional culture, so academic decision makers may want to look more closely at policies and practices within various units on campus as they affect faculty at these ranks. This is especially important for addressing concerns of associate rank faculty who are most concerned about the balance of teaching and research, interpersonal relations, intellectual stimulation, and opportunities for collaboration. This group represents the smallest number of faculty in this study, and, overall, little is known about associate rank faculty at this university, or at other similar institutions.¹¹

Given the findings presented in this study, more careful scrutiny of associate rank faculty is in order, especially if leaving decisions are made in close proximity to promotion/tenure decisions. In times of restricted finances, universities cannot afford to write off investments in newly promoted associate faculty. If there is also an out-migration by full professors, a university’s inability to retain quality associate rank faculty becomes an even more important concern.

Gender Variations

Our study shows that men and women leave for somewhat different reasons. Salary remains the most important factor for male faculty, but they also frequently cite professional advancement as a reason for leaving—and often move to private-sector positions associated with promotion and increased salaries or to administrative positions in other academic settings. Institutional issues are the third most important reason cited by men, more important than tenure and tenure related decisions.

For women, the reasons for leaving, beyond salary, are quite different than those for men.

For women, the reasons for leaving, beyond salary, are quite different. Personal reasons and professional advancement issues are listed equally as often, and only slightly behind salary in importance. At all ranks, women who leave for professional advancement opportunities most often stay within the academy and in full-time faculty positions. Among women associate rank faculty, institutional issues are the most important reason given for leaving, of greater importance even than salary. Women express serious concerns about interpersonal dynamics, collaboration opportunities, and personal support from colleagues. Their male counterparts share some of these concerns but frame them as issues of institutional/departmental policy or programmatic financial support rather than issues of connectedness. Women also tend to label interpersonal conflicts and lack of support as personal issues, accounting for some of the frequency of this response. This is especially true for women in disciplines where the climate for research agendas or lifestyle choices is not particularly favorable. As with their male counterparts, women cite these institutional issues far more frequently than tenure and tenure-related decisions as reasons for leaving.

Salaries are often considered central to negotiations to retain faculty. The gender differences in reasons for leaving suggest that salary adjustment alone may not be sufficient to retain faculty.

Disciplinary Variations

Differences also exist in the reasons faculty leave the university when analyzed by school (the organizing structure used at this institution and a more logical unit of analysis for policy development than discipline).

Salary remains an important consideration, but not always *the* most important factor. The data support local contentions that certain groups of faculty are more likely to leave the institution for professional advancement opportunities and for the private sector than others. Yet the data also counter specific myths about mobility. For example, faculty from medical fields and pharmacy rarely move to private-sector employment opportunities.

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Institutional issues do affect academic units differently, in some playing a more important role in the decision to leave. Replacing faculty who have left for institutional reasons may not be difficult in fields such as education, but may present a challenge in fields such as engineering and business where alternative employment sectors exist. Equally difficult, but for other reasons, may be the ability to retain and replace faculty in the traditional humanities fields, regardless of why they leave. Given the potential shortages of faculty in these disciplines, university administrators may want to be more aware of the impact of professional quality of life concerns on this group of faculty, especially if those being lost are considered among the most valued.¹²

Discussion and Conclusions

This study and institutional studies like it are important for several reasons. One outgrowth of the study has been the development of an institutional faculty profile from which pertinent trends and information can be drawn, monitored, and updated. Conducting the study illuminated, for us, how little coherent information a major institution collects about faculty attrition and institutional careers. Pieces of this information were regularly collected, but these isolated pieces were never collapsed into a central data base for report construction, policy review, or proactive practice. In the early stages of this project, correspondence with comparable institutions indicated that few public research universities collect comprehensive exit data or have developed similar data bases for policy development.

With the construction of a useful data base, it is possible to track faculty institutional careers, noting on an individual, department, and school level the ways in which various factors affect the success and satisfaction of faculty. Such a data base also allows for comparisons between those who leave the institution and those who stay.

Our study does not identify those faculty (by rank, gender, and school) who came *into* the institution during this time period,

Our study challenges organizational myths that abound in this research university.

either in newly created positions or as replacements for those who left. While we were able to construct a preliminary profile of faculty hires, noting tenure and retention rates by rank and gender, it was difficult to connect these data trends with those used in the attrition study since there was not one comprehensive faculty data file. Each has to be separately constructed and analyzed.

Despite these study limitations, we believe that we have learned some lessons about attrition and retention across faculty rank and gender. In addition to the specific reasons for leaving and their variation, the study indicates some factors associated with leaving that may be outside the realm of institutional control, such as geography and salary.

Despite their importance as a cause of attrition among faculty, salaries are often outside the realm of institutional control. But accurate documentation of their importance to departure might be used as leverage with the legislators who do control them.

At the same time, the study shows that the traditional institutional response to a faculty member's prospective loss—a counter-offer of increased salary—may not be sufficient justification for a faculty member to stay, particularly among women. The findings from this study also identify many other issues as reasons for leaving, especially those associated with professional climate. These professional climate issues *can* be addressed by faculty and academic administrators. Salary adjustment does not address a woman's concern about lack of structural and policy support for research, instructional collaboration within or across disciplines, or lack of spousal/partner accommodation. But different policies or practices can address these problems.

Our study seriously challenges organizational myths that abound in the specific research university we studied. Similar research universities are likely to hold similar erroneous perceptions. One frequent myth: that faculty are content. Many administrations do not fully recognize the erosion of professional climate on their own campuses.

This study also shows that it is possible—and important—to develop a faculty career stages profile on a campus, identifying

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issues that accumulate, dissipate, and remain constant over the career of faculty. A career stages profile can provide a more data-based foundation for policy analysis and formulation.¹³

The percent of faculty leaving as a result of tenure-related reasons (especially those not staying for formal review) is higher than we expected. As part of the ongoing study of recruitment and retention at this university, it will be important to look more closely at the tenure process. We need to examine the mid-probationary review, and the level where a negative decision is made, to determine if there are institutional or cultural inhibitors to the success of junior faculty.

The level of attrition among junior faculty may also argue for a stronger, more intrusive mentoring role for senior faculty and department chairs. A program of instructional support, sponsored by an ad hoc faculty committee, was initiated at this institution to support teaching concerns and interests of faculty across ranks. Similar initiatives might mitigate some institutional problems facing faculty. Central university financial support of such efforts would suggest at least a symbolic value placed on addressing faculty needs.

Spousal/partner employment, while not a new phenomenon, is an issue of growing importance and affects a much higher percentage of faculty men and women across rank than we anticipated. Institutional practices related to employment assistance may need to be reviewed.

It is clear from this data that the “one size fits all” approach to personnel policies may not be as effective as in previous decades. Issues vary by rank, by gender, and by school, making university-level policies almost inapplicable from the start.

The range of variation across this university suggests that policy making may have been largely relegated to the individual level—negotiated between faculty members and their department chairs or deans. Neither of these options seems most judicious, although both are in effect at this university and many of its counterparts. What may be warranted are institutional guidelines that allow for negotiation at the unit level (school) so that certain idio-

synchronies of internal and external labor markets may be more fully addressed.

This may not be a grand revelation at many research universities, and, in fact, some within this particular institution say that such practices already exist. But many decision makers, department chairs, faculty, and deans argue that flexibility is lacking in an organization where many policy decisions and most resources remain highly centralized.

It is also apparent that, given the internal variation, effective decision making must be based on more comprehensive understandings of institutional environments. To do so requires the collection and maintenance of a data base appropriate for policy decisions. This data base may differ from that generally constructed for report formation and may require more significant involvement from faculty and faculty governance bodies in its construction. Such climate studies and data gathering might prove more effective if initiated by internal faculty governance structures, either institutionally or at the school level, than if developed administratively in response to external cries for accountability.

Creating new and effective institutional personnel policies that more fully support faculty lives may indeed be time consuming, politically tenuous in an era of growing external accountability, and, at some point, costly. But the other side of the argument at this research university, and others like it, is that the cost of high rates of turnover, especially in the junior and mid-career ranks, can be a far more expensive practice. ■

Endnotes

- 1 Bowen and Schuster, 1987.
- 2 Dooris and Lozier, 1988; Hansen, 1985; Schuster, 1990.
- 3 Burke, 1987.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Matier, 1990.
- 6 NCES, 1990.
- 7 The institution had no formal early retirement programs until the end of the study period, so it is assumed that retirement decisions were made in the normal course of a faculty member's career and not as a result of any specific initiative, program, or institutional concern. As a result, retirement is not subjected to detailed analysis. Similarly, death of a faculty member, while tragic, cannot be prevented by institutional policies and procedures to. We did some initial analyses including faculty who retired or were deceased to provide useful demographic information related to faculty attrition. Both factors primarily affected full professors, retirement to a significant degree. We thought that removing geography from further analyses would also be warranted, since the institution has no control over where it is located. However, as a factor in faculty attrition, it seemed useful to examine whether geography

played a greater role in decisions to leave among certain groups of faculty, indicating some need for better or different approaches to recruitment.

⁸ American Association of University Professors, 1990.

⁹ NCES, 1990; Moore and Amey, 1993.

¹⁰ This is a hybrid categorization for what Burke, 1987, calls "quality of life" and Matier, 1990, terms "intangibles."

¹¹ Boice, 1992.

¹² Schuster, 1990.

¹³ See Baldwin, 1990; Baldwin and Blackburn, 1981; Blackburn, 1985.

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