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Faculty Careers: Satisfactions and Discontents

Mary Deane Sorcinelli

Indiana University

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in academic careers. Attention has focused on how and why faculty choose such a career, how they first see the career, and how their needs and interests change over time (Baldwin & Blackburn, 1981; Entrikin & Everett, 1981; Rice, 1984; Stumpf & Rabinowitz, 1981). Others have focused on the institution's role in shaping career attitudes and behaviors. Given limited resources, declining enrollments, and lowered faculty mobility, how do institutional policies encourage or impede professional growth? (Baldwin, Brakeman, Edgerton, Hagberg, & Mahar, 1981; Corcoran & Clark, 1984; Furniss, 1981; Lovett, 1984). Still others have speculated about the effects on faculty careers of such social trends as changing student demographics, shifting academic interests, questions about the value of a liberal arts education, and forces of the marketplace (Mortimar et al., 1984).

The findings in these studies suggest that individual faculty interests, institutional expectations and policies, and a variety of broader social trends interact and influence

the ways in which faculty define and pursue their careers. It seems likely that faculty will be more satisfied with their careers when these forces are in harmony and less satisfied when they are in conflict. Thus, efforts to understand or to enhance academic careers must acknowledge the full range of individual, institutional, and social influences and must make room for faculty to express satisfactions or concerns in these areas.

Guided by these assumptions, Indiana University's Dean of Faculties Office initiated a study to investigate its faculty's perceptions of their careers. How do professors define their interests and responsibilities? What do they find satisfying? What are their discontents? What would they like to change? The following pages describe the methodology used to conduct the study, report some recurring themes in professors' discussions of their satisfactions and concerns, and offer recommendations for enhancing faculty careers.

METHODOLOGY

A sample of 112 faculty was randomly selected from four of Indiana University's academic units: one department in the humanities, one in the natural sciences, and two professional schools. The sample was stratified by academic rank and sex.

Information was collected through in-depth interviews followed by administration of a questionnaire. The interview, which required one to three hours to complete, was designed to permit faculty to express perceptions and feelings about aspects of academic and/or nonacademic life. An interview guide (Appendix), consisting of ten open-ended questions, provided an entrée to discussion of academic careers but put a minimum of restraint on how faculty responded.

Procedures for collecting and analyzing interview data were suggested by qualitative methods of interview interpretation (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Wolf, 1979) and included: (1) tape recording and extensive note-taking during each interview; (2) sorting a sample of interviews for issues,

concerns, and factual information; (3) conceptualizing a model that visually represents major issues and concerns; (4) designating the coding unit as the entire interview due to the free-flow nature of responses offered to questions (and, in many cases, to unasked questions); (5) formulating alternative response categories for content analysis of the interviews; (6) testing the coding instrument for inter-coder agreement; (7) transcribing extensive quotations and examples from the tapes in order to maintain the integrity of each interview against the threat of abstraction.

After each interview, the faculty member completed a questionnaire which sought additional information about work and life away from work. The questionnaire included items suggested by studies of careers (Baldwin, 1979; Blackburn & Havinghurst, 1979; Kanter, 1977; Sarason, 1977) and by studies of work and non-work satisfaction (Near, Rice, & Hunt, 1980; Near, Smith, Rice, & Hunt, 1983).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Although questionnaire data are still being analyzed, the information provided by faculty during the interviews touched a broad range of topics, was rich in detail, and revealed the complexities in academic lives. Nonetheless, some issues emerged as recurring themes during the analysis of interview data; these themes will be used to provide the focus and organizational framework for discussing the study's preliminary findings.

The discussion of findings begins by examining faculty perceptions of their academic responsibilities and strengths. The sections which follow report sources of faculty satisfaction and frustration. The discussion of findings concludes with a summary of the recommendations faculty offered during the interviews.

Faculty Perceptions of Their Academic Responsibilities and Strengths

Many of the satisfactions and frustrations which faculty reported reflected the extent to which the individual's

definitions of career roles, responsibilities, and strengths matched the institution's definitions—or, faculty perceptions of the institution's definitions. Thus, before identifying the sources of faculty satisfaction and discontent, some attention must be given to these definitions and perceptions.

On the surface, all appeared to be harmonious. Most faculty said their interests and responsibilities included research, teaching, and service. Indiana University characterizes itself as an institution with a tradition of excellence in research, states that teaching is equally important and complementary to scholarship, and expresses a commitment to service.

Beneath the surface, things were not that simple. Although all faculty talked about research, teaching, and service, most expressed a primary interest in one of the three roles. Nearly half of those interviewed rated research as their greatest strength. About a third named teaching as a primary strength. Less than a fifth identified service as a major interest or strength, but there were some faculty for whom it was most important. An institution equally committed to research, teaching, and service would find it hard to please all of its faculty all of the time.

A closer look also revealed that faculty did not perceive the institution to be equally committed to research, teaching, and service. Several faculty thought the institution valued and rewarded research more than teaching. Indeed, some believed that substantial investments in teaching inhibited opportunity, reward, and recognition: "Sometimes the phrase, 'He's a good teacher,' is used as a euphemism for 'He's not a publisher or scholar or researcher.' That's unfortunate, but it's clearly the atmosphere in which you function." Few faculty believed that the institution valued service. Except for administration, service was seen as a way to close the door on career advancement. Not surprisingly, those most interested in research felt this was as it should be; those most interested in teaching found it a major source of frustration; those most interested in service seemed resigned to look elsewhere for recognition and reward.

At the same time, a university committed to research, teaching, and service—in whatever combination of priorities—is likely to please all of its faculty some of the time. Thus, each of the faculty members interviewed found satisfaction in some domain.

Sources of Satisfaction

Many faculty identified a “non-work” feature—the location of the university—as a source of satisfaction. They liked living in a small and attractive southern Indiana town. For some, the location served as a major incentive to stay at the university. Several faculty with families mentioned that it was “a nice place to bring up children.” Others said the semi-rural atmosphere and the convenience of travelling from home to office to community made it a pleasant setting in which to pursue a career. Although some faculty—especially those who were single or who came from urban areas—found the town parochial and longed for the sophistication and pleasures of cities, more faculty delighted in the conveniences and security of small town life.

The ambience of the university was also important. The intellectual life of the campus and the national prominence of individual faculty, departments, and schools were attractive. As one person observed, “I enjoy being involved in a campus that has some strength of tradition behind it. There is something solid about this place that, because of my experience elsewhere, I appreciate very much.”

Institutional support for professional activities was also a major source of satisfaction. However, the particular supports identified varied considerably and probably reflected individual career interests. Approximately a third of those interviewed named institutional resources that supported their scholarly activities. For some, recent enlargement of classroom and research facilities better adapted to new technologies had improved the physical environment. Others appreciated internal grant money and research services. “I’ve already benefited from grants-in-aid,

summer fellowships, and research development programs." Some faculty identified supports for teaching: possibilities for interdisciplinary teaching, assignments to honors or graduate seminars, course development grants, and resources for teaching improvement. As one faculty member reflected, "There are more perks for teaching."

Finally, opportunities to pursue activities which interested them were a source of faculty satisfaction. However, given the differences in strengths and interests, individuals appreciated different kinds of opportunities.

Those primarily invested in research focused on opportunities for scholarly activities. Generating and working with knowledge provided "a sense of progress of the mind." Some found the "positive atmosphere for scholarship" helpful; it enhanced their abilities to secure professional awards, outside funding, and other job offers. "I feel like I'm constantly progressing. I get invited to lots of meetings, I'm on grant panels, and I feel I could get a job almost anywhere. That's a very optimistic feeling that a lot of academics don't have." Others talked about how respect from colleagues, status, and advancement in the department and in the university had risen with their ability to attract grants, fellowships, or generate scholarly publications. One professor concluded, "That's a kind of reward . . . how you feel your colleagues perceive you."

Opportunities to pursue teaching activities were also mentioned as sources of satisfactions, although the rewards were often less tangible. For some, the intellectual challenge of transmitting knowledge and experiences gave a sense of accomplishment: "In my field, the lifetime of a research paper is short. Turn out a student who knows how to think, and you've offered society 50 years of a thinking person. What is more lasting?" For others, working with graduate students was most satisfying: "I've had a lot of excellent students who have become leaders in the discipline. It's been stimulating to interact with them in their professional careers. Here, my teaching and research are so closely meshed that it's difficult to tell where graduate education leaves off and research begins."

Although fewer faculty spoke about opportunities for

service, those who did found it a major source of satisfaction. They mentioned working for the needs of minority students, for state agencies, for professional organizations; they found that these opportunities provided outlets for creativity, leadership, and action that were not always available in research or teaching activities: "I feel as if I'm in a position to make a difference. My service affords avenues for impact." Administrative service carried some added benefits: "There is no doubt I had better increments than I would have had if I continued as a professor." Others mentioned "writing articles that stem from service activities" or "getting additional income from consulting."

In sum, all faculty interviewed found something in their lives which they could name as a source of satisfaction. However, the particular satisfactions varied considerably with differences in individual interests in teaching, research, and service. Thus, any efforts to use faculty reports of "career satisfaction" as a basis for determining what might increase morale will need to reflect these differences. It seems unlikely that any single support or opportunity will be universally or equally appreciated.

Sources of Concern

The same differences in interests were reflected in faculty discussions of their frustrations. Time, money, and, to a lesser degree, governance were sources of frustration for many faculty. Here, however, the tensions between research, teaching, service, and life outside the university came into sharper focus.

"Finding enough time to do my work" emerged as one of the most pressing concerns of faculty. Almost half those interviewed mentioned the problem of not enough time for research. As one professor explained, "I love the research, and I'm jealous of time taken from it. The most frustrating thing is the lack of blocks of time to concentrate. A lot of times, you can't really get to the heart of something until you've thought about it for two or three hours." A related concern was the lack of adequate support services—clerical help, computer support, released

time, research assistants—which faculty felt might ease the strain: “Scholars in this place waste their time in laboratories and libraries, doing things like reading proofs or monitoring equipment, when they really should have a research assistant.”

Faculty’s efforts to find enough time also heightened the conflicts created by multiple responsibilities and surfaced some resentments toward institutional demands. Some felt that required teaching loads, administrative activities, and service were a “tremendous drain” on time needed for research: “I don’t dislike teaching, but it takes a lot of time. The university requires us to spend our time teaching undergraduates and then rewards research. You can’t do everything well and be very honest about it.” Others, who might have preferred more time for teaching or service, resented the institution’s emphasis on research: “My classes and evaluations would be better if I felt that was how I should spend the bulk of my time. I could probably figure out how to teach them or get help. But what should you spend time doing when you’ve got tenure hanging over you? Not doing much on teaching doesn’t hurt.”

Trying to balance time also created tensions between work and non-work responsibilities that faculty in non-traditional households seemed to feel most keenly. One of the single parents interviewed attributed the deferral of a sabbatical and publications to the responsibilities of raising a child: “When my promotion didn’t go through, I kind of expected someone to criticize my spending time being a parent.” Another respondent with primary responsibility for young children in a commuter marriage reflected: “My career has taken a lot of deflections for family reasons over the last few years. If I had to take a chairmanship somewhere in order to be at a place where she could do something . . . well, we’d like to live together. I would not say, ‘No, that will interfere with my career research plans’.” These faculty wished the university would be more flexible in work assignments, hiring policies, the granting of leaves, and sabbaticals.

In the end, “not enough time” was a concern of nearly

everyone. A junior faculty member viewed tenure as "a clock that's always ticking, even as we sit here talking." A colleague nearing retirement lamented, "I just have so many things that I'd like to do. In fact, I've got two or three books in mind. My fear is running out of time." Another explained, "The toughest thing is to do a good job with a career that could consume all available time, pay attention to a spouse and children, publish or perish, teach well, lead an examined life, and keep out of debt."

While time was a universal frustration, money for salary and resources was, for many, the most serious problem. One faculty member cautioned, "I think the study will fail to direct attention to the fundamental problem. The fundamental problem is money." Well over half the faculty members interviewed perceived present salary levels and the ways in which salaries were determined to be inadequate, and over three-fourths expressed concern over declining resources.

In their discussions of salaries, faculty were quick to acknowledge that financial reward is not the reason anyone pursues an academic career. Nonetheless, faculty were very concerned about low salaries: "I think we're going to lose younger people because our salaries are so very low. You can't get good people that way, and you can't keep good people." Moreover, faculty worried about attracting good graduate students: "We can't compete unless we have a terrific faculty and money to offer graduate students to come here. Now, what we've done over the past years is build a terrific faculty here, but unless we do the latter, we're not going to succeed." Finally, faculty were concerned about their families: "You start thinking about what college your kids will go to, about dollars and cents, and your responsibility as a parent. You have to say, 'What does this mean to my family?'"

Faced with inadequate salaries, some were forced to supplement their incomes. Some increased their salaries through summer teaching or outside consulting, but viewed such activities as distractions from research and deterrents to career advancement. Although "fishing for outside offers" was another way to increase one's salary, nearly

half the respondents felt this strategy had produced an uneven distribution of rewards within and among departments, had strained collegiality, and had lowered morale. And, some of those interviewed had found it necessary, but nonetheless distracting, to take on administrative responsibilities in order to supplement their incomes: "The institution can assist in the development of my career by giving me a high enough salary so I don't have to take on an administrative position to be able to make ends meet. I'd rather be doing my research and writing, but only by becoming a chair will I be able to get a competitive salary."

While some faculty were worried about making financial ends meet, others were concerned about more subtle pressures that could be traced to a shortage of funds. For example, some felt the competition for research support had taken on an unsavory character. They suspected that their departments and the university responded most favorably to highly visible publications and marketable research. They charged that this emphasis on the popular and the lucrative had led to "a pursuit of laurels rather than excellence" and that it pitted the "popularizer" against the "specialist," the "star performer" against the "yeoman-like worker," the basic against the applied researcher, and the "faddish" against the more traditional. These faculty wished that, instead of catering to narrowing avenues for outside funding, the university would set aside more internal funds for research. "There needs to be a few dollars available for that interim financing of research, when a person has a good idea and no other way to get it on the lab bench or out of the library books." Another respondent explained, "The funding agencies are becoming less creative and supportive. It would be nice to think that there was some way on campus to compete for a substantial source of funds at a critical point in your career."

The shortage of funds also created additional pressures in teaching: "I suppose my greatest contribution is as a teacher. I put a lot of effort into teaching, and I try to make my courses not simply appealing to students but rigorous. But this semester, I had over 600 students, which

is crazy." More than a third of the faculty indicated such problems as large classes, heavy teaching responsibilities, not enough help with grading, a shortage of materials, and inadequate classroom facilities.

Perhaps the most disturbing insight gleaned from faculty members' discussions of salaries and other forms of financial support was that competition for funds had created conflicts between research and teaching. To most faculty, the distribution of university funds represented a tangible symbol of what was expected, valued, and esteemed. It was clear to most of these faculty that teaching was not the way to promote one's career. Those with strong commitments to teaching, including several who had received distinguished teaching awards, confided that they were among the "lower paid professors in the department." While incentives for research might be reflected in the salary base, good teaching more often received "a plaque or one-shot cash reward." Further, because teaching and service do not bring widespread recognition, faculty who invested heavily in their teaching found it more difficult to secure the "outside offer." One respondent confessed, "If I knew how to go about getting these offers, I might consider playing the game. But again, it's not why we, theoretically, are professors." In one of the more candid descriptions of the conflict, a professor explained, "If someone said, 'You will be rewarded if you develop courses and work hard with undergraduates,' I would do it in the best of all worlds. But in the real world, I will continue to stress research and publishing. And that's really not selfish because, like most people, I support a family. That's the hidden side of careerism. It's not as individual a pursuit as some make it out to be." Although teaching was not as high a priority as research for many faculty interviewed, these comments suggest that teaching might receive greater attention if the reward structure were different.

Administrative leadership was a third area of faculty concern. Most faculty expressed relief that they did not have to make the difficult financial decisions confronting the university and sympathy for administrators who did.

Nonetheless, about a third of those interviewed felt that an increasing distance between the faculty and the administration had hindered the work of both: "One thing they could do for career development is to maintain and improve the quality and vitality of the university. The administration lacks the understanding of what it means to be a professor. They have no real understanding of scholarship or teaching."

Others criticized the administration for failing to articulate forcefully a clear mission for the university. One proposed, "We never say, 'In the last ten years, Stanford has taken the number one ranking from Harvard, and in the next ten years, we want to take it from Stanford.' We just don't have that push for excellence." Another suggested, "We are a state university, not a Stanford or Harvard; we're not in that league. We can talk about a great research university, but our primary responsibility is to undergraduate teaching. We have not made that an issue when we talk about the excellence of this university." Yet another urged, "We need a structure which rewards and encourages not only highly specialized research and teaching, but also synthesis and cooperation, innovation, and risk-taking. We need to send clear signals that success means something besides a Guggenheim." Although faculty differed in their notions about the content of a university mission statement, several felt the university needed some strong statement which would harness imagination and direct efforts toward common goals.

In sum, faculty concerns surfaced around three issues. Competing demands left them with inadequate time to pursue avenues of greatest interest and difficulties in balancing time at work and away from work. Inadequate financial support created frustrations in several forms: low salaries and noncompetitive stipends for graduate students threatened to undermine the university's ability to attract good people; insufficient support for research diminished scholarly productivity; insufficient support for teaching placed increasingly unreasonable demands on faculty; and competition for limited funds produced a variety of subtle and insidious tensions. Finally, while

dissatisfaction with administrative leadership was not expressed as frequently, two issues were registered often enough to be noted. First, administrators seemed not to understand the pressures in faculty lives. Secondly, the administration had failed to issue a clear and forceful statement about the university's mission.

Recommendations

As faculty discussed their satisfactions and frustrations during the interviews, they often suggested ways the university might encourage and support their work. Their recommendations are summarized below.

Released time. Faculty at every academic rank recommended that the university seek ways to provide released time at different stages of academic careers—a “sabbatical summer” or a “research semester” for junior faculty to complete research prior to tenure, for mid-career faculty to acquire new skills or pursue new research directions, for senior faculty to write a synthetic piece. Similar arrangements were suggested, albeit less frequently, to enable faculty to develop teaching skills or service projects, to take short-term assignments or internships in administration, or to develop new courses and curricula. Many faculty suggested that released time—from time to time in one's career—would ease pressures and increase productivity.

Internal research grants. Because external funding had diminished, faculty recommended the university increase its internal funding of research activities. Most were interested in relatively small grants to cover costs of xeroxing, typing, travel, postage. Some, however, stressed the need for a few substantial grants to support important, but less “marketable” research.

Leaves and sabbaticals. Faculty felt that traditional policies governing leaves of absence and sabbaticals were too restrictive. They pointed out that temporary work in industry, business, government, or other institutions might be more attractive and more feasible if there were options for longer leaves and sabbaticals without jeopardizing salaries or promotions. At the same time, “mini-sabbaticals”

taken at more frequent intervals during a career might better suit the needs of some faculty. Increasingly, flexibility was needed. Faculty also suggested that advice on moving, finances, and other practical matters would be helpful.

Retirement options. Senior faculty urged more flexible retirement options. Some spoke for more incentives to retire early and make room for young faculty "with enthusiasm, freshness, and new perspective." Others wished for opportunities to research, teach, or somehow contribute to the university after they reached 70. One professor compared his university career to a marriage, explaining that his investment in the institution had been so great that it would be difficult to break the ties. Similar sentiments prompted another to suggest a central office where retired faculty could meet, serve as research mentors to other faculty, or work with administrators to solve institutional problems.

Opportunities for spouses. Dual career families found the university's location and isolation a major problem, because spouses were unable to find suitable work. Several faculty urged that the university become more sensitive and more assertive in addressing these problems by adopting more flexible hiring policies, by providing counseling, and by advertising local talents to surrounding areas.

Evaluation of faculty. Given differences in the ways faculty defined their responsibilities and interests, it's not surprising that they wanted changes in the criteria governing reappointment, tenure, and promotion. However, there was no consensus on how the current system should be changed. Some sought more uniform policies and procedures, more precise guidelines for dossier preparation, more systematic evaluations of teaching, and more continuous assessment of faculty after tenure. Others argued that current practices do not respect differences among academic disciplines or the extraordinary variation across colleges and schools. They urged more flexible criteria to reward traditional academic activities (research contributions, outstanding teaching) and to encourage an expansion of activities (research outside one's academic specialty,

creative projects). Some acknowledged an unresolved dilemma. They saw a need for consistent policies, so that faculty would be treated equally, but they wished for more flexible policies that rewarded and encouraged different talents and interests.

Colleague support. Several faculty found support from colleagues sustaining and invigorating. They urged more active and public attempts to identify volunteers willing to read a manuscript, to review a grant proposal, to visit a classroom. Some suggested the creation of more formal arrangements—mentoring systems or networks—which cut across disciplines and supported a variety of research and teaching activities.

Recognition. To be sure, faculty wished the university would recognize and reward their achievements through salary increases. However, a surprising number of faculty longed for less tangible recognition. Junior faculty confided that they felt “totally invisible” to the people making decisions about them, and it made them uneasy. Senior faculty reminisced about days when the university was smaller and they received notes of recognition whenever they published books or received awards. Now, they observed, professors might enjoy regional or national acclaim but receive no local acknowledgement. Faculty seemed to be asking that someone—colleagues, administrators—pay attention to individuals, notice their achievements, and congratulate them.

CONCLUSION

This study was undertaken as a first step in the search for ways Indiana University’s Dean of Faculties Office might encourage and support faculty in their careers. A stratified random sample of 112 faculty were surveyed through in-depth interviews and a written questionnaire. Analysis of interview data revealed several recurring themes in faculty perceptions of their career responsibilities, in their satisfactions and frustrations, and in their recommendations for change.

Most faculty defined research, teaching, and service

as primary professional responsibilities. However, they expressed preferences for one or another of these responsibilities. Moreover, these different preferences were reflected in individual discussions of satisfactions, concerns, and recommendations.

For example, most faculty mentioned institutional support for and opportunities to pursue professional interests as sources of satisfaction. However, the particular supports and opportunities discussed varied considerably with individuals' different interests in research, teaching, and service.

Similarly, not enough time, insufficient financial support, and concerns about administrative leadership were identified as major concerns. However, those primarily interested in research felt that teaching and service took too much time, were distressed about inadequate supports for research, and urged the administration to pursue its research mission more forcefully and energetically. Those interested in teaching resented the pressure they felt to spend more time on research at the expense of teaching, were frustrated by the absence of rewards and supports for teaching, and urged university administrators to increase their commitment to teaching.

As faculty talked about their satisfactions and frustrations, they offered several suggestions for easing time pressures, reducing financial strains, and increasing opportunities for career development. Faculty urged the university to provide released time at different career stages, less restrictive policies for leaves and sabbaticals, internal research grants, more retirement options, revisions in faculty review practices, attention to problems of dual career families, more systematic efforts to promote collegiality, and acknowledgements—both tangible and intangible—of faculty achievements. Again, the details of their recommendations reflected the emphasis they wished given to research, teaching, and service.

At one level, then, the study found some recurring themes in faculty members' discussions of their careers. However, more interesting and, perhaps, more illuminating were the variations on those themes. Efforts to use

faculty reports of satisfactions and discontents as the basis for determining what might raise morale, increase productivity, or promote career development will need to respond to the differences among faculty as well as to the similarities. It seems unlikely that any single program or opportunity or resource would be universally well-received. On the contrary, again and again throughout the interviews, faculty recommended more flexibility—in defining academic careers, in developing policies, in allocating resources, in providing opportunities, and in dealing with faculty members.

APPENDIX

Faculty Career Interview Guide

1. How did you come to choose an academic career?
2. Could you briefly describe your career—the major responsibilities and interests from your first to your current position?
3. What are your major strengths as a faculty member?
4. How does the university recognize or reward your strengths? If not, how might they capitalize on and reward your skills?
5. What skills or abilities would you like to improve? Are there ways the university could assist you to develop or improve the areas mentioned?
6. How can the university assist faculty in developing or enhancing their careers?
7. What are both your short and long term career goals?
8. Did you ever think of making a career change?
9. How has life outside of work made an impact on your career development?
10. If you were able to start all over again, do you think you would still choose an academic career?

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