

A QUALITATIVE METHOD FOR ASSESSING FACULTY SATISFACTION

Susan Ambrose,*† Therese Huston,** and Marie Norman*

Universities attempt to hire the highest quality faculty they can, but they are not always successful at retaining them. Furthermore, some faculty members who do remain may not function as engaging colleagues who make others want to stay. This study investigates why some faculty members leave and why others stay by illuminating the complexities of individual experiences. Using semi-structured interviews rather than surveys, a matched cohort of 123 faculty members (half current and half former) from one institution was interviewed. Although some of their primary reasons for satisfaction or dissatisfaction (e.g., collegiality, mentoring) were predicted by general survey research, there were also unforeseeable issues that strongly influenced satisfaction and decisions to stay or leave, demonstrating the importance of institution-specific research. This paper provides a method for collecting institution-specific information as well as several arguments for conducting interviews instead of pre-defined surveys.

KEY WORDS: faculty retention; faculty satisfaction; qualitative research; collegiality; mentoring.

INTRODUCTION

Universities go to considerable effort and expense to hire new faculty, but how successful are they at retaining the faculty they hire? Are the faculty members they retain satisfied, and do they function as the kind of engaged colleagues who make others want to stay? Finally, how can colleges and universities most effectively confront the problem of faculty dissatisfaction and increase retention?

*Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA, USA

**Seattle University, Seattle, WA, USA.

†Address correspondence to: Susan Ambrose, Office of the Associate Provost for Education, Carnegie Mellon University, 5000 Forbes Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15213, USA. E-mail: sambrose@cmu.edu

While some amount of faculty turnover is both necessary and healthy, too much turnover can be expensive at multiple levels. Not only do universities lose valued faculty, searches for new faculty rob departments of time and resources that could be used more productively elsewhere (Johnsrud and Rosser, 2002; Solmon and Fagnano, 1993). Moreover, the financial costs of turnover are considerable, particularly at research institutions where start-up packages can reach a half million dollars or more (Ehrenberg, Rizzo, and Jakubson, 2003; Harrigan, 1999).

Faculty turnover rates vary from approximately 2–10% per year at well-established research universities (Harrigan, 1999). Smaller public institutions and two-year colleges lose faculty at a slightly higher rate (see Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2001), and turnover rates are higher for women than for men (e.g., Tolbert, 1995). These numbers, however, may be deceptively low because they report retention rates only on an annual basis and not over time. In one of very few comprehensive studies, the University of Wisconsin–Madison found that after 10 years, the mean retention rate for faculty at all ranks was only 55% (Harrigan, 1999). While Wisconsin's low retention rate may in part be explained by the quality of that institution's faculty (i.e., they are likely to be recruited aggressively by other institutions) and its high performance criteria (i.e., many faculty do not make it through the promotion and tenure process), the number remains disturbingly low and suggests that the issue of faculty retention is one that demands closer study within the contexts of particular academic institutions.

In light of these statistics, as Johnsrud and Rosser (2002) note, "Institutions would benefit from a clearer understanding of what contributes to faculty decisions to leave" (p. 518). However, it is equally important to understand the subtler dimensions of dissatisfaction that can lead even established faculty to feel disinvested and apathetic. These sorts of morale issues have implications for the retention of still other faculty, who by virtue of their colleagues' withdrawal from the institution may not receive adequate mentoring or experience the sense of intellectual community they require.

The present study was conducted at a small, private Research I university over a period of 2 years (2002–2003). We sought to gain a deeper, more contextual understanding of the ways in which various events and perceptions shape faculty decisions to stay, go and (if staying) contribute or withdraw from their immediate academic community. This paper will (1) argue for the importance of collecting institution-specific, qualitative data concerning faculty morale and retention, (2) describe the issues impacting faculty satisfaction and retention at this particular institution, and (3) discuss the relationship of our research to Matier's

1990 study of faculty retention and adapt Matier's classification framework to suggest ways in which other institutions might prioritize their efforts to address faculty morale and retention (Matier, 1990).

The Faculty Morale and Retention Literature

There is a robust literature that discusses the variables that determine faculty members' intentions to stay at or leave an institution (e.g., Barnes, Agago and Coombs, 1998; Bowen and Schuster, 1986; Johnsrud and Rosser, 2002; Lee and Mowday, 1987; Manger and Ekeland, 1990; Matier, 1990; Olsen, Maple and Stage, 1995; Smart, 1990; Weiler, 1985), and a second, partially overlapping set of findings that identifies the prominent "stressors" that junior faculty experience (Fink, 1984; Sorrelli, 1988, 1992; Turner and Boice, 1987). Some studies have focused on the particular issues affecting women and minority faculty (Olsen et al., 1995) and others examine the impact of financial austerity on faculty morale (Kerlin and Dunlap, 1993; Williams, Olswang and Hargett, 1986). Matier's (1990) work has been particularly valuable in establishing a framework for predicting faculty decisions to leave an institution. We will discuss the connection between our research and Matier's in the Discussion section below.

The studies above, including Matier's, seek to illuminate issues relevant to faculty morale and retention nationally, and as such their focus has been broad rather than deep. While informative on a number of levels, studies such as these are of limited use in helping colleges and universities identify the particular features of their own institutions that influence faculty morale and retention. Because of its broad, normative nature, prior research has also offered little insight into the complex interaction of events and experiences in the lives of individual faculty members that shape their perceptions and ultimately their decisions to stay or leave. The current research speaks to these shortcomings.

Institution-Specific Data

Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman and Vallejo (2004) have pointed out the limitations of national-level research for illuminating the local conditions that shape faculty experiences. They, along with other researchers, acknowledge that differences among institutions in regard to institutional culture, mission, financial and administrative structure, student bodies, funding sources, etc. have distinct implications for faculty morale (Bluedorn, 1982; Clark, Corcoran and Lewis, 1986;

Johnsrud and Rosser, 2002; Wimsatt, 2003). The university that was the focus of this study, for example, is in a medium-sized city with a relatively low cost of living, a somewhat stagnant job market, and an older population. It has a low endowment in comparison to many of the Research I institutions with which it actively competes for students and faculty, yet it has had a successful record of attracting research funding. Additionally, in contrast to otherwise comparable universities, it has a highly decentralized administrative structure, such that power is concentrated in the hands of department heads.

Clearly, these characteristics (and many others) shape faculty experiences and influence morale profoundly. Housing is affordable – a feature of the local area which contributes to faculty satisfaction – yet it can be difficult for faculty spouses to find suitable work and for single faculty members to find partners. Likewise, the university's stellar reputation among funding institutions can work to a faculty member's advantage, but the heavy reliance on soft money creates intense pressure to produce grants, taking time away from the research itself, and creating a culture which some faculty describe as "money-grubbing." By the same token, the university's decentralized administrative structure, when working properly, can reduce bureaucratic delays and streamline new research projects, but it can also exacerbate the problem of ineffective or autocratic department heads and lead to frustration and bitterness on the part of faculty members.

The specific contexts in which faculty members live and work, in other words, matter, and it is to the benefit of colleges and universities to understand how their particular institutional features (e.g., large or small, rural or urban, teaching or research focused) shape faculty morale and retention. As Johnsrud and Rosser (2000) observe, "[t]o make a difference at the institutional level ... it may make most sense for an institution to measure faculty members' perceptions specific to their campus" (p. 537). Without such data, universities cannot effectively target their problems, identify their strengths, or fully understand where their own experiences intersect with or diverge from the experiences of other institutions. This research provides both an in-depth look at faculty morale and retention within the context of a specific university culture and also a model that other institutions might follow to study the issues that confront their own faculties.

A Qualitative Approach

Most previous studies on faculty morale and retention have relied heavily on survey data that, while permitting researchers to more easily

tabulate and rank reasons for faculty satisfaction and dissatisfaction, limit the range of possible responses from participants and isolate subjective perceptions from the objective events and experiences that have shaped them. We chose instead to collect detailed personal narratives from faculty. This approach capitalizes on what Maxwell has identified as the principle strengths of qualitative research: its capacity to examine (1) the *meaning* for participants (in this case, faculty members) of the events, situations and actions in which they are involved, (2) the particular *context* within which participants act and how the context influences their actions, (3) *unanticipated* phenomena and influences, which emerge spontaneously in open-ended interviews in ways that cannot in structured surveys, (4) the *process* by which events and actions take place and (5) complex *causal* relationships (in this case, the varying and interacting causes of faculty satisfaction) (Maxwell, 1996, pp. 17–20).

Like survey data, qualitative data can be coded and aggregated to reveal university-wide patterns, yet it goes beyond survey data in clarifying the particularities of a given issue (for example, what faculty mean when they talk about an "incompetent" or "power-hungry" department head, what a productive mentoring relationship entails). Narrative data, moreover, provide context and detail, revealing the chronology and interaction of events that shape the professional lives and influence the decisions of faculty members.

METHOD

Sample

Over the two-year study, a total of 123 faculty members were interviewed. They represented two groups: former tenured or tenure-track faculty members and a matched cohort of current tenured or tenure-track faculty members (hereafter referred to as "former faculty" and "current faculty", respectively). In the spring of 2002 we interviewed former faculty who left the institution between 1991 and 2000, excluding individuals who had moved from faculty to administrative positions before leaving the university, as well as individuals engaged in past or current litigation. Seventy-seven former faculty members were asked to participate, selected to form a representative sample of colleges and departments within the university. Seventy-three of these 77 faculty members agreed to be interviewed. Of them, 61 were available for interviews during the necessary time period (others were on sabbatical, traveling, or proved to have scheduling conflicts that prohibited participation). It should be noted that of the former faculty interviewed, 54%

had left the institution of their own accord (i.e., they were faculty the university had tried unsuccessfully to retain) and 26% had received tenure prior to their departure. They were not, in other words, professionally unsuccessful nor did they necessarily leave under duress. In fact, to date 43 of the former faculty are tenured at their new institutions and 11 left academe of their own volition to go into industry or to found their own companies; all in this group report success and satisfaction with their lives outside of academe. Three have not yet received tenure, and we have lost track of the final four.

From fall of 2002 to spring of 2003, we interviewed current faculty who were matched by date of appointment, department and college with the former faculty group. The two groups were also matched by gender and race whenever possible. They were not, of course, matched on tenure status since some former faculty had left the institution without tenure, whereas many of their colleagues who had stayed were now tenured. Letters of invitation were sent to 70 current faculty members, followed by a phone call or e-mail message, and 62 agreed to be interviewed. In this cohort of current faculty, 42 were tenured.

Procedures

Conducting the Interviews

The interviews were conducted over the phone² by an anthropologist and a social historian, employing a semi-structured interview protocol (Chilcott, 1987; Fetterman, 1990; Maxwell, 1996; Merriam, 1998, 2002). Respondents were asked to describe their experience at the institution and any significant factors or critical incidents that affected their experience. They were encouraged to tell their own "stories" in their own style. As a result, faculty participants did not necessarily raise the same issues (for example, one person might describe his mentor in great detail, but another might not mention a mentor at all) and thus some comparability across interviews was lost. However, we believe that a non-directive approach yielded data that accurately reflect the priorities and concerns of the faculty themselves.

The interviews ranged from 20 to 120 minutes, averaging approximately 45 minutes. They were not audiotaped. Although our preference was to do so, the university's legal counsel advised us not to record the interviews because of a pending lawsuit against the institution and the possibility that the tapes could be subpoenaed. Because our primary concern was to protect the confidentiality of respondents, we chose to have the interviewers take notes by hand (it was less likely that interviewer notes would be

subpoenaed). Following the interview, each respondent was assigned a number based on the order of the interviews and was referred to by that number, never by name, on all of the paperwork and coding sheets. No identifying information, not even the respondent's department, appeared anywhere on the typed notes from his/her interview.

Coding

Unlike coding in quantitative research, in which a pre-established set of categories are applied to the data, the goal of our coding was to rearrange the qualitative data based on categories that emerged from faculty's narratives (Maxwell, 1996). As a result, the coding is solidly grounded in the data.

Two independent coders (a cognitive psychologist and a social historian, different from the interviewers) coded each set of interviews to identify the common issues. For each set of interviews, the two coders independently read and coded an initial set of 10 interviews and then discussed the categories that were emerging. When there was a decision to be made about having one general or two specific categories, we opted to preserve as much detail as possible. The coders agreed upon general categories based on this initial subset and used this mutually agreed upon, emergent coding system to recode the initial 10 interviews and to code the remaining interviews. The inter-rater reliability between the two coders was 93% for the former faculty and 95% for the current faculty.

Limitations of the Method

We recognize that the two groups of participants have a somewhat different perspective on the same institution because one group chose to stay and the other chose to leave. The narratives of former faculty reflect a distance from their experiences at the university that may not characterize the narratives of current faculty. A former faculty member might, for example, explain his decisions to leave the university in slightly different terms at the time of the interview than he would have at the time he left: his account might be colored by a sense of nostalgia, feelings of regret, or a need to justify his decision; it is also likely to involve comparisons with his current job. However, since both current and former groups of faculty were asked to comment on their experiences over a period of time and explain decisions that took place in the past (i.e., whether to leave or stay), both sets of narratives must be understood as having been filtered through the lens of memory and retroactive sense-making.

Another limitation to the methodology was that the interviews were not audiotaped, for reasons already explained. In making the decision not to audiotape, we sacrificed the ability to collect all but short, direct quotes from faculty participants. However, an unanticipated compensation was that faculty – perhaps because they knew they were not being audiotaped – told their stories with surprising, sometimes even shocking, frankness. Although it would have been optimal to verify the accuracy of interview notes by conducting member-checks (i.e., asking faculty participants to read and comment on the accuracy of the interview transcripts as reconstructed from the interviewer's notes), we were limited by time and resources from doing so. In the context of the interviews, however, the interviewers frequently asked clarifying questions to ensure that they were recording narrative details correctly, getting an accurate chronology of events, and preserving the nuances of faculty experiences and perceptions. In several cases, respondents corrected details of the narrative when the interviewer reviewed the notes over the telephone. The interviewers also transcribed their notes immediately following the interview to maximize accuracy.

RESULTS

Overall Experience of Current and Former Faculty

At either the beginning or the end of most interviews, faculty summarized their experiences at the university by saying "generally" or "overall" it was a positive or negative experience. If faculty did not provide an overall assessment of their experience, the interviewer prompted them at the end of the interview with a question to the effect of "So how was your experience overall?" It is significant that in these overall assessments, faculty members who left reported being just as satisfied as faculty who stayed. For former faculty, 54% of the 61 interviewees said that their overall experience was positive and 43% said that overall it was negative. Similarly, 53% of the 62 current faculty reported that they were quite satisfied and planning to stay and 39% concluded that their overall experience has been negative. (The remaining faculty described mixed sentiments and could not be decisively coded as positive or negative). General levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction thus proved to be a poor predictor of faculty decisions to stay at or leave the institution.

There are several possible explanations for this apparent lack of correlation between satisfaction and retention. First, it is important to note that faculty members do not only leave an institution because they are dissatisfied. A number of the former faculty in our study left to pursue

new professional opportunities, to be closer to family, or to accommodate a spouse's career, not because they were unhappy with their jobs. By the same token, not all faculty who stayed at the institution stayed because they were happy. Some remained, despite reporting low satisfaction, because of a spouse's job, the desire to live near family, etc. Consequently, it is necessary to look not only at job satisfaction but also at broader issues to determine the circumstances under which faculty leave.

Second, summative assessments may be a poor index of actual faculty experiences. We were struck by the fact that participants' stories often seemed to contradict their overall assessments; for example, a respondent might recall an almost exclusively negative or frustrating series of experiences but conclude by saying: "Overall, it was a good experience." The discrepancy between summative assessments and particular experiences (reported in survey research in general and in student evaluation research, see Arreola, 1995; Tourangeau, Rips, and Rasinski, 2000) suggests that there are layers of satisfaction and dissatisfaction which overall assessments obscure and which institutions would benefit from understanding in greater depth. Thus, in analyzing our data we concentrated on the experiences faculty emphasized in their narratives and the perceptions and decisions that arose from these experiences. Our principal focus was on identifying the patterns that link individual experiences across the university community. The section below describes the most commonly cited issues impacting faculty morale across the university. Although we include sources of satisfaction (i.e., those elements of professional life and institutional culture that lead faculty to feel invested and content), in the interests of space and perhaps the more pressing need to pinpoint problems that negatively impact faculty morale, we have devoted more attention to identifying sources of dissatisfaction.

Commonly Cited Reasons for Satisfaction or Dissatisfaction

Respondents' sources of satisfaction or dissatisfaction clustered into seven general categories. Five of these (salaries, collegiality, mentoring, the reappointment, promotion and tenure process, and department heads – see Table 1) correspond to areas widely recognized in the literature on faculty satisfaction (Boyer, Altbach and Whitlaw, 1994; Mairer, 1990; Manger and Eikeland, 1990; Olsen, 1993; Olsen, Maple and Stage, 1995; Smart, 1990; Sorcinelli and Austin, 1992; Tack and Patitu, 1992; Weiler, 1985). The other two categories were more unique to this particular

TABLE 1. Primary Reasons Cited for Satisfaction or Dissatisfaction by Current and Former Faculty

Issue	Reason for Satisfaction		Reason for Dissatisfaction			
	Current Faculty (N = 62)	Former Faculty (N = 61)	Current Faculty (N = 62)	Former Faculty (N = 61)		
Collegiality within Department	Collegiality	47%	33%	Lack of collegiality	27%	67%
Surrounding city, Local Region	City an advantage (low cost of living, etc.)	48%	21%	City a disadvantage (poor weather, etc.)	10%	26%
Reappointment, Promotion and Tenure Process	Effective process	30%	20%	Flawed process (arbitrary, unfair, political, etc.)	50%	28%
	Regular, helpful feedback	11%	7%	Lack of regular, constructive feedback	21%	31%
	Clear and consistent criteria	15%	13%	Unclear and/or inconsistent criteria	15%	30%
Salaries	Competitive	3%	-	Not competitive	16%	34%
Leadership: Department Head	Effective department head	27%	23%	Ineffective department head	26%	39%
Mentoring	Effective mentoring	18%	23%	Lack of or ineffective mentoring	26%	34%
Interdisciplinary Nature of Institution	Support for interdisciplinary work	34%	10%	Lack of support for interdisciplinary work	10%	16%

Notes: The dashes (-) indicate that none of the faculty in this group (i.e., Current or Former Faculty) raised this issue in their interviews. It might appear from the above table that 100% of the former faculty raised the issue of collegiality (i.e., 33% satisfied + 67% dissatisfied = 100%), but as mentioned in the text, some faculty members were coded twice. Because former faculty members expressed a change in the collegiality of their department, from welcoming and collegial to non-collegial or vice versa, these faculty were coded as being both satisfied and dissatisfied on the issue of collegiality.

university as they involved regional issues and the university's interdisciplinary focus.

(1) Salaries

At the university where this study was conducted, a number of administrators believed that salaries were the primary reason faculty members left the institution. Faculty interviews, however, did not bear this out. While about one-third of the former faculty respondents mentioned that their salary at the institution had not been competitive, no one claimed to have left the university because of low salary, and most respondents who mentioned the issue did so at the end of the interview almost as an afterthought (e.g., "So I ultimately left for X, where, by the way, my salary was 25% more"). Their narratives, moreover, did not focus on salary but rather on issues such as collegiality and departmental leadership (see Table 1).

Although it is certainly possible that salaries played a bigger role in decision-making than faculty cared to admit, our findings in this regard are consistent with the literature on faculty retention in suggesting that salary alone is rarely the prime mover in faculty decisions to leave (Caplow and McGee, 1958; Gartshore, Hibbard and Stockard, 1983; Johnsrud and Rosser, 2002; Matter, 1990; Smart, 1990; Toombs and Martier, 1981). Salary is clearly important to faculty, but our data indicate that it generally acts as a catalyst in decisions to leave when compounded by other, more powerful sources of dissatisfaction. We turn to these in the section below.

(2) Collegiality

The issue of collegiality stood out *by far* as the single most frequently cited issue by both former and current faculty, a common finding in research on faculty satisfaction (Barnes et al., 1998; Manger and Elkeland, 1990; Oisen and Sorcinelli, 1992; Smart, 1990; Turner and Boice, 1987; Walvoord et al., 2000). The presence or absence of collegiality was an issue raised by 99 of the 123 respondents, making it the most popular topic for discussion in the interviews.³ As shown in Table 1, almost half of the current faculty members interviewed were satisfied with collegiality within their departments and/or the university, but former faculty were not. The direction of causality comes into question for former faculty: it is not clear whether an inherently non-collegial environment provoked these faculty to leave, or whether in some cases their departments made early determinations that these colleagues would not be retained,

