A Midlife Crisis Hits College Campuses

A Chronicle survey finds dissatisfaction among employees in the middle of their careers

By JEFFREY J. SELINGO

With baby boomers on college campuses nationwide getting ready to retire, those next in line — professors, administrators, and staff members in the middle of their careers — feel somewhat dispirited. They are more likely than anyone else on their campuses to harbor negative feelings about their jobs, career advancement, and the fairness of the workplace, according to an extensive survey conducted by The Chronicle.

The findings come from more than 15,000 survey respondents at 89 colleges across the country that participated in The Chronicle's first-ever Great Colleges to Work For program, which recognizes institutions that have created exceptional work environments. (See campus results.)

The results show that, in general, academics are most upbeat at the beginning and at the end of their careers. Those who have been in their roles for less than two years, for instance, gave some of the highest marks to their institutions' career-development programs. The most-satisfied group of campus employees by age was composed of those 65 and older.

For university officials hiring top talent, the survey's conclusions are encouraging. "It says to me that the most-recent arrivals in academe come with great enthusiasm, despite what can seem like a difficult environment," says Barry Glassner, executive vice provost at the University of Southern California.

But at one point over the course of a career, the positive outlook darkens a bit. When employees hit their late 40s or after eight years in a campus job — just after many faculty members have come up for tenure — workers reach their lowest levels of satisfaction on several measures:

**Career development:** 64 percent of those who have been in their current roles between eight and 10 years gave positive marks to their institutions' programs. That compares with 74 percent of employees new to their roles and 80 percent of workers in their roles for 25 years or more.

**Fairness:** 69 percent of employees 45 to 49 years old said their colleges treated them fairly, compared with 74 percent of those 30 to 39 and 81 percent of workers 65 and older.

**Job satisfaction:** While a healthy 86 percent of those 45 to 49 years old said they were satisfied with their jobs, that age group still ranked among the lowest on the survey's satisfaction scale.

The percentages of positive responses were fairly high because the study was not a random national sample but instead was conducted only at institutions that felt confident enough in the quality of their workplaces to participate in the Great Colleges to Work For survey. Still, the midcareer blues reported by employees on these college campuses reflect the findings of previous studies of faculty members by the Higher Education Research Institute and the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education, as well as surveys of workers in the corporate world.
"The excitement wears off when the honeymoon phase ends," says Richard K. Boyer, principal and managing partner of ModernThink LLC, a Wilmington, Del., human-resources-consulting company, which managed the survey for The Chronicle. "Just like in corporate America, colleges need to focus on midcareer training so people don't get lost in the shuffle."

For faculty members especially, the midcareer point is fraught with anxiety about what's next. After receiving tenure, they are no longer protected from a heavy load of committee work. Some remain stuck as associate professors for years without a promotion. And unless they are superstars in their fields, it's not easy to get a job elsewhere.

"Faculty careers are flat unless you go into administration," says Saranna Thornton, a professor of economics at Hampden-Sydney College. "Even if you become a full professor, you essentially do what you did as an associate professor."

In the last decade, colleges and foundations have poured time and resources into helping young faculty members, sometimes at the expense of those further along in their careers. "There is a presumption that once you get to your midcareer years, you have figured it out," says Ms. Thornton, who chairs the Committee on the Economic Status of the Profession for the American Association of University Professors.

*The Chronicle* survey was completed in March and April by 5,840 faculty members, 4,003 administrators, and 4,262 professional staff members at 39 public universities and 50 private institutions. (See demographic profile of respondents and methodology.)

Over all, the results paint a positive picture of today's academic workplace: 71 percent of faculty members give high marks to collaborative governance on their campuses; 68 percent of tenured professors agree their colleges support a strong teaching environment; a nearly equal percentage of male employees (82 percent) and female employees (83 percent) say their institutions provide resources for work-life balance; and both groups are similarly satisfied with their jobs as a whole (86 percent for men and 88 percent for women).

But sharper differences appear when the findings are examined more narrowly. One particular point of divergence: public and private institutions.

Faculty members at public colleges have less confidence in their senior leadership than do professors at private colleges (65 percent to 56 percent). Among the more-senior faculty members — full and associate professors — the news is even worse for public-university leaders. Just under half of public-college professors in the top two ranks have confidence in their senior leadership, compared with 66 percent and 60 percent, respectively, at private colleges.

Ms. Thornton calls those findings "worrisome" and attributes them partly to the problems encountered by public-university presidents who lack academic experience, such as Michael S. Garrison, who recently resigned under fire as president of West Virginia University.

"It's not that privates don't have those problems, but to faculty, they seem to be happening more at publics," says Ms. Thornton.

In several other key categories as well, private colleges outperformed public institutions. Professors at nearly every rank gave their private institutions higher marks for research and scholarship opportunities. At private colleges, 79 percent of faculty members ranked their teaching environment positively,
compared with 71 percent at public institutions.

Employees over all at private institutions ranked their compensation and benefits better than those at public institutions did (66 percent to 63 percent), as well as their work-life balance (84 percent to 78 percent). One area where publics performed better than privates: health-care benefits (75 percent to 68 percent).

Because of their size and public scrutiny, state institutions are typically more constrained in terms of the work schedules they can offer, says Karen Cherwony, associate vice president for human resources at Temple University, a state-related institution.

"We feel like we need to be more careful in offering flex time," Ms. Cherwony says. "We don't want to be perceived by the public as being slackers. We don't want our legislature to think that our employees are getting a free ride."

The survey did confirm a widespread belief on college campuses that administrators typically think their relations with faculty members are better than they really are.

Eighty percent of administrators agreed that faculty-administration relations on their campuses were healthy, compared with 61 percent of faculty members. What's more, 85 percent of administrators gave positive marks to collaborative governance on their campuses, compared with 71 percent of faculty members.

"Administrators suffer from real-life disconnect from employees," says Roger W. Bowen, a former general secretary of the AAUP and a former president of the State University of New York at New Paltz. "Senior administrators are so externally focused, and there is a presumption that the faculty will manage themselves. The faculty oftentimes feel neglected from senior administrators."

Another reason is that faculty members usually pay little attention to governance issues until they need assistance with a personal matter that might leave them with negative feelings, observers say. Otherwise, they mostly leave the day-to-day issues to others. Among the different ranks of faculty members in the survey, department chairs were most likely to have a positive view of collaborative governance.

"Many faculty are very content to let their elected faculty representatives handle issues for them," says Rodney A. Erickson, executive vice president and provost at Pennsylvania State University at University Park.

Tenured faculty members were also more likely than nontenured faculty members to have a lower opinion of the health of faculty-administrative relations and of their teaching environments.

Sixty-eight percent of tenured faculty members gave positive marks to their teaching environment, compared with 77 percent not on the tenure track and 85 percent of faculty members classified as permanent status. Younger faculty members — those in their late 20s and early 30s, most of whom don't have tenure — also gave higher grades to teaching environment than did older professors. Mr. Bowen attributes the lower marks given by tenured professors to their yearning for the early years of their careers "when faculty were valued and students were brighter."

Of course, Mr. Bowen adds, "this is an imagined past." He worries that the somewhat negative outlook expressed by tenured professors compared with their nontenured colleagues will provide yet another reason for administrators to do away with tenure.
In the end, whether professors, administrators, or staff members are satisfied comes down to where they sit, literally. When overall job-satisfaction scores were correlated with employee responses to benefits and other policies, one area came out on top for everyone: physical work space and the condition of the campus.

WAYS TO WIN THE HIRING GAME

The drive to hire the best talent on college campuses will only become more intense as the baby boomers begin to retire. Based on some of the findings of The Chronicle's Great Colleges to Work For survey, here is what higher-education observers and human-resources experts suggest to help recruit and retain the best employees.

**Formal mentoring programs.** Employees need structured programs to help them map out their next steps, says Saranna Thornton, a professor of economics at Hampden-Sydney College. For instance, give faculty members relief from teaching a course so they can shadow an administrator to get a sense if that's a career path they want to follow.

**Midcareer awards for faculty members.** Recognition is important, even for midcareer employees, says Eve A. Riskin, associate dean of academic affairs at the University of Washington's College of Engineering. "Once you get tenure, the attention you get drops off," says Ms. Riskin. "All these new young people are coming in, and those who have been there feel left out."

**Support work-life balance.** Employees in the survey who rated their institution's work-life policies highly also said they would recommend a job at the college to their family and friends. Younger employees, in particular, expect to have work-life balance and expect their employees to support them, says Richard K. Boyer, principal and managing partner of ModernThink LLC, a Wilmington, Del., human-resources-consulting company, which managed the survey for The Chronicle.

**Build a culture.** Colleges focus on their brands to differentiate themselves among potential students, but many don't apply the same efforts with potential job candidates, says Mr. Boyer. Employees who said they had a strong sense of loyalty to their institution also agreed that their institution's culture is "something you don't find just anywhere."

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