

A Survey Tool, Retrenchment Blues and a Career Alternatives Program†

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Abstract

Two-thirds of the faculty of Canadian universities will reach the traditional retirement age of 65 between the years 2000 to 2010. As a result there will be little academic or financial flexibility for at least another decade. A questionnaire is presented as a tool for measuring the personal and professional characteristics of this age group with respect to three considerations: (1) their level of career satisfaction, (2) their interest in a career alternatives program, and (3) their plans to retire either before or by the age of 65 or to continue to work after 65 if mandatory retirement is abolished. A significant proportion of academic faculty are no longer finding satisfaction in their academic work and would consider an alternative career if that were feasible. Those who are not interested in leaving academic life early tend to be happy and productive. A career alternatives program could be an effective way to begin the renewal process within higher education now, not after the year 2000.

Résumé

Les deux tiers des professeurs d'université canadiens atteindront 65 ans, l'âge de la retraite prévu par la loi, entre les années 2000 et 2010. Ceci veut dire qu'il y aura toujours aussi peu de flexibilité, tant dans les cours que dans l'organisation financière, pendant les dix prochaines années au moins. On a tenté, à partir d'un questionnaire, de mesurer certaines caractéristiques personnelles et professionnelles de ce groupe d'âge dans les trois domaines suivants: 1) leur niveau de satisfaction vis-à-vis leur carrière, 2) l'intérêt qu'ils pourraient avoir pour une formation en vue d'une autre carrière, et 3) leur désir de prendre leur retraite avant 65 ans, à 65 ans ou plus tard si la retraite obligatoire à 65 ans était abolie. Un grand nombre de professeurs d'université n'éprouvent plus de satisfaction à exercer leur métier et aimeraient

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entreprendre une nouvelle carrière si cela était possible. Quant à ceux qui ne souhaitent pas arrêter de travailler tôt, ce sont, dans l'ensemble, les plus productifs et les plus heureux. La conclusion que l'on peut tirer de cette étude, c'est qu'un programme d'intégration à d'autres milieux professionnels pourrait être un bon moyen de rajeunir l'enseignement supérieur dès maintenant, et de ne pas attendre l'an 2000 pour s'en préoccuper.

Demographic studies (e.g., Pfaffenberger, 1989; Renner, 1986c) of the academic faculty in Canada have shown that roughly two-thirds will reach the traditional retirement age of 65 between the years 2000 to 2010. Given the possible end of mandatory retirement, it is not yet clear what will be the average age of their actual retirement. In the United States, the end of forced retirement appears to have resulted in a gradually increasing average age of retirement (Lozier & Dooris, 1990). Based on a review of the TIAA/CREF records, the current expectation is that 25% of those faculty teaching at four year colleges and universities at the age of 60 will still be teaching at the same institution at the age of 70 (Heim, 1990). The Canadian situation is less clear; although there are local experiences at most Canadian universities, these have not found their way into archival literature.

A variety of financial and academic implications can be derived from these demographic factors for higher education. There is a large age group who are tenured and moving to top of the salary scale; and, because current retirement rates are low, there are relatively few junior faculty at the bottom of the pay scale. As a result, salary budgets of universities will rapidly escalate over the next decade or more, putting higher education under even more severe financial pressure than it is currently (Renner, 1986c; 1988b). In addition, the academic specializations of this age group, hired in the 1960's, no longer match the emerging needs of higher education (Renner & Skibbens, 1990). Finally, an observation, based on surveys in both the United States (e.g., Jacobsen, 1985) and in Canada¹ (Timmons, 1989), is that many of the faculty are no longer satisfied in their work.

Thus, the prospect is for a static academy continuing to do what it already does, less and less able to change as rising costs further reduce academic and financial flexibility at a time when there are new demands and expectations (Renner, 1988a; 1988c). To break this vicious circle, Renner has proposed replacing the current retrenchment policies of higher education with ones which begin, now, the renewal process of replacing older expensive faculty with young new faculty (Renner, 1988b). To accomplish this, he has proposed (Renner,

1986b) providing “Career Alternatives” for those faculty who wish to leave academia. The savings to the salary budget more than cover the costs of young replacement faculty, thus creating both academic and financial flexibility (Renner, 1986a).

The unique feature of this analysis is that the problems facing higher education are defined as structural in nature, requiring solutions which respond to the primary problem of the age distribution of the faculty, rather than to its symptomatic expressions of retrenchment policies and financial restraint (Renner, 1988a). However, before such solutions can be seriously considered, it is necessary to have the means to begin a local self-examination process of the academic and personal characteristics of Canadian faculty. The purpose of the present study was to provide an illustrative use of a methodology for evaluating the local impact of three central considerations for such proposals: Who would be interested in a Career Alternative? Who feel trapped in their work? And, who and how many plan to continue teaching beyond age 65?

Method

Two hundred and eighty nine full Professors and senior Associate Professors in the Faculty of Arts and Science at Dalhousie University were solicited by mail to participate in the survey. Of these, seven were returned by name as no longer on campus, leaving a total of 282 possible responses (including an undetermined number who may not have been on campus). Of the total group, 30 were asked to provide individual face-to-face interviews, and 259 were asked to return the questionnaire by campus mail. Of the 282 potential responses, 74% (20/27) of those approached for an individual interview and 30% (77/255) of those solicited by mail provided data. The overall rate was 34% (97/282).

The questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section contained 13 questions on beliefs about a specific Career Alternatives program (see Renner, 1986b). The second contained 26 questions drawn from the two national surveys about academic career satisfaction and retirement plans, thus allowing local comparisons with Canadian and U.S. norms. The third section contained 24 questions to provide personal profiles of the individual respondents.²

Table 1
Summary of Survey Findings

Dependent Variables	Independent Variables		
	Interested in Career Alternative	Feeling Trapped in Work	Retire 65 versus Continue
I would be interested in a Career Alternative		r= .23 (n 93) P= .012	r= .16 (n 87) P= .072
I feel trapped in (my) profession	r= .23 (n 93) P= .012	r= .28 (n 88) P= .005	
Normal retirement by 65 or continue to work after 65	r= .16 (n 87) P= .072		r= .28 (n 88) P= .005
Career Variables			
I am no longer as enthusiastic about my work	r= .36 (n 92) P= .000	r= .34 (n 93) P= .000	r= .12 (n 87) P= .134
I am considering another line of work	r= .28 (n 89) P= .004	r= .51 (n 91) P= .000	r= .25 (n 86) P= .009
Would still choose academic career again	r= -.31 (n 94) P= .001	r= -.39 (n 95) P= .000	r= -.17 (n 90) P= .054
Quality of Life Variables			
Feel under pressure to do more research	r= .01 (n 93) P= .455	r= .33 (n 94) P= .001	r= .25 (n 89) P= .008
Academic career is not moving along well	r= .15 (n 91) P= .081	r= .54 (n 92) P= .000	r= .12 (n 86) P= .136
Do not receive recognition I deserve in my department	r= .15 (n 90) P= .083	r= .47 (n 91) P= .000	r= -.05 (n 86) P= .339
Academic job is source of considerable strain to me	r= .08 (n 94) P= .220	r= .34 (n 95) P= .000	r= .20 (n 90) P= .032

Table 1, continued

Dependent Variables	Interested in Career Alternative	Feeling Trapped in Work	Retire at 65 versus Continue
Professional Variables			
Number of articles published in academic journals	$r = -.12$ (n 93) P = .133	$r = -.11$ (n 94) P = .147	$r = -.14$ (n 90) P = .097
Number of articles published in the last two years	$r = -.14$ (n 93) P = .086	$r = -.23$ (n 94) P = .012	$r = -.12$ (n 90) P = .137
Received Federal research grant in past 12 months	$r = -.06$ (n 88) P = .284	$r = -.14$ (n 89) P = .098	$r = -.30$ (n 85) P = .003
Currently have graduate students	$r = -.04$ (n 91) P = .351	$r = -.04$ (n 92) P = .368	$r = -.17$ (n 88) P = .053
Interest lies primarily in research rather than in teaching	$r = -.18$ (n 93) P = .042	$r = -.15$ (n 94) P = .079	$r = -.27$ (n 90) P = .005

Results

"I would be interested in a Career Alternative..."

To this question 40% (n=38) replied Yes and 60% (n=56) No. Statistically significant differences between those who expressed an interest in a Career Alternative, and those who said they were not interested, occurred on those questions asking about career satisfaction. Those who were interested in a Career Alternative were more likely to feel trapped in their profession. They were less enthusiastic about their work than they used to be, would consider another kind of work, and, if they could start again, would be less likely to choose an academic career or their present discipline. They were not, however, dissatisfied over the quality of their academic life.

In terms of professional productivity, the two groups were quite similar on most questions. However, to the extent that there were differences, those interested in a Career Alternative had been slightly less productive, had fewer

recent publications, were more interested in teaching than research, and had fewer research grants and graduate students. (See Table 1 for a summary of these relationships.)

“I feel trapped in a profession with little opportunity...”

On this question, 19%(n=18) replied Yes and 81%(n=77) No. Of those who self reported feeling trapped in their profession, 70% also expressed an interest in a Career Alternative, in comparison to 34% who did not feel trapped. Those who felt trapped were less likely to plan to work beyond age 65.

Feeling trapped in their profession was significantly related to a long list of negative attitudes and beliefs about their career and the quality of academic life, including: considering another line of work, no longer as enthusiastic, not choosing their career or discipline if they had it to do over again, feeling under pressure to do more research than they would like, career not moving along, department not giving recognition they deserve, and their academic work being a source of strain. Similar to the previous question about a career alternative, those who felt trapped were quite comparable in their professional work to those who did not feel trapped. However, to the extent that there were differences, it was that those who feel trapped tend to be less productive. (See Table 1 for a summary of these relationships.)

“If you had a choice would you retire at 65...(or) continue to work?”

On this question, 28%(n=25) said they expected to retire at 65, 29%(n=26) were not sure, and 43%(n=39) thought they would work longer. Of those who expected to retire at 65 or who were not sure, 70% said they would consider retirement before the age of 65 if an adequate financial plan were offered. These individuals feel that they are under pressure to do more research than they would like to do and that their jobs are a source of stress, in comparison to those who expect to work after 65. This latter group rates professional activities (e.g., research, teaching, access to colleagues) as important reasons for preferring to work.

This variable forms a continuum ranging from those who would retire early to those who will not retire unless forced to do so. There is a tendency for those who wish to stay past 65 to be relatively more interested in research than teaching, to have received research grants and to have current graduate students, relative to those who plan to end their career by age 65. (See Table 1 for a summary of these relationships.)

Discussion

Institutional and National Data

With survey data, the first tendency is to assume that its primary value is to provide reliable national norms derived from large random samples. However, given the demographic fact that, for most institutions, two-thirds of their faculty will reach age 65 over a ten year period starting around the year 2000, normative attitude data about their collective beliefs and attitudes are the least valuable of the three types of analysis for which such information may be used.

While national norms are, of course, of some value for establishing a national educational policy, they also obscure the *intra-* and *inter-*institutional variations which are critical for using the information. The statistical patterns, factors or discriminates that result from large aggregate data reflect only what is shared, not what is unique. Aggregate data simply dilute significant sources of within cell variation (i.e., genuine institutional factors), treating them as error variance or measurement noise. Rather, they are the very substance of local issues.

Of greatest value are the *intra-*institutional responses of the faculty at individual institutions, which provide a description of the range and diversity within one place. National samples which include one or two people from any given department do not help when the unit of analysis is an institution. For example, there are many purely local considerations, such as the whether the degree of satisfaction over the level of pay at a particular university is contributing to the feelings of being trapped. Each institution must either assess all of its faculty, or a sufficiently large sample of them, to construct an accurate internal picture, department by department, of its own dynamics. This is the raw data which is needed immediately by every institution to make internal policy decisions.

Next in value are some *inter-*institutional comparisons of identical data obtained from specific other institutions which have similar missions and which compete for the same faculty and students. Information about the situations and experiences of others which are appropriate for comparison may provide a basis for some useful generalizations.

Thus, the present questionnaire is presented as a tool for the construction of local norms for local initiatives. The subset of questions taken from the national surveys allows for a normative reference point of where the individual institution stands with respect to the North American academic market; but, most important, it is the *intra-*institutional data which describe the severity of the institutional crisis and provide the ingredients out of which each institution must forge its own responses (Renner, 1988a).

Evaluation of the Impact of Career Alternatives

With only one-third of the faculty responding in the present survey, generalizations can not yet be made about the implications of such a program for the Faculty of Arts and Science at Dalhousie. However, such a description was not the purpose of present research. Rather, it was to provide a generalizable methodology for responding to a particular problem.

As such, the questionnaire should be seen as both an assessment tool and as an intervention strategy. When administered internally as one step of responding to what will be a continuing crisis in higher education, rather than simply as a research project, the official assessment of all faculty will elicit involvement as well as provide information. The tool is an example of beginning the transition process from reacting to the crisis in higher education as if it were external, national and general, to actively responding to it as internal, local and specific (Renner, 1988a). The acceptance of this latter definition is required to restore purpose and direction to higher education. To date, individual faculty have remained remarkably aloof from assuming responsibility for raising a new vision of higher education (Renner, 1988c) and of beginning the new academic revolution (Edgerton, 1989; 1990).

From the data in hand, there is no reason to believe that a Career Alternatives program would selectively cost a university its best people. On the contrary, those who expressed an interest in a Career Alternative represented a cross section of the faculty on professional and demographic variables. They differed from those who were not interested in a Career Alternative only on their current level of personal dissatisfaction with their work. The 40% who expressed some desire to leave academe is consistent with other faculty survey data in North America. There appears to be a group of faculty who would like to step aside, if that were made financially feasible, thus making room for new young faculty. The resulting reduction of the financial pressure on the budget and the academic flexibility it could achieve provides one way for higher education to begin to restore the vitality which is needed to meet the educational challenges of a new era (Renner, 1988b).

Footnotes

¹ A national survey in Canada, very similar to one carried out by the Carnegie Foundation in the United States, has been conducted by Jos Lennards, Department of Sociology, York University. The results have not yet been published, but are expected to be released in the near future.

² A copy of the questionnaire used for the present research is available from K. Edward Renner, Department of Psychology, Dalhousie University, Halifax, N. S., Canada, B3H 4J1.

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