

Regional

Faculty retention becoming a serious issue

In the last few years we have heard a lot of discussion on how important it is for colleges and universities to retain students, to increase graduation rates and to reduce the burden of student debt.

However, with all of the problems that are affecting institutions of higher education we are now witnessing another equally serious one – an increasing number of faculty members leaving their institutions and sometimes their careers in higher education altogether. This is a problem because increased faculty turnover increases the cost of hiring and retaining good faculty while disrupting long-term plans by academic units that wish to elevate their reputation in the long run.

According to a study by the National Bureau of Economic Research, a U.S. based private, non-profit organization that conducts economic research among public policymakers, business professionals and the academic community, family issues are a major consideration for faculty when contemplating leaving their institutions or their careers. Published earlier this year, the study surveyed life scientists in the U.S. The authors found that academics are less likely to relocate at the time when their children are in high school. The study also shows the quality of the peer environment in their institution, as well as funding opportunities, are important factors when making decisions about moving elsewhere.

Although the study was conducted only among life scientists, many of the responses seem to be applicable to at least most college professors. These findings are consistent with what we hear in

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the halls of colleges and universities all the time. The immediate effect of this migration is that it increases the quality gap between wealthy institutions and those that are not. For a number of years now we have been seeing how many top research institutions – mostly private – have been able to “steal” good faculty from poorer ones. They are able to offer better deals to incoming faculty and to offer better working conditions in terms of money, facilities and a better group of peers.

The study, which surveyed more than 10,000 life scientists in the U.S. from the moment they got their first academic position until 2006, showed that more than a third of them had moved to a new institution that was more than 50 miles away at least once during their careers. That is a lot of mobility for a career where the historical trend is for the vast majority of its members to end their careers where they started.

According to this survey, faculty showing the least mobility were those with high school age kids. This is not surprising given that one would expect faculty to emphasize the educational life of their kids and to be as least disruptive as possible. This finding also explains another result of the study, and that is that most faculty move either just before their oldest child had started high school or just after their youngest child had fin-

ished it. This makes sense because according to a number of studies, high school is usually the time when potential disruptions to the social networks of children are the greatest.

This may also be a very important factor for women academics. They tend to be more sensitive to issues such as maternity leave and income inequality. According to a recent study by the American Association of University Professors, women in academia earn on average 10 percent less than their male counterparts. Other studies show that their contributions are oftentimes less recognized than those of their male peers. Thus, institutions that are smart enough to offer more equitable financial packages and better institutional recognition will be better placed to attract and retain good female faculty.

When it comes to respondents’ opinions on the quality of their peers at their home institutions, this study generated some revealing information. Based on number of data, the report concluded that “all else equal, scientists are more likely to move (than not) in a given year if the peer environment at home is not very good.” Given the increasing reliance on adjuncts and the diminishing funding in many institutions of higher education, particularly public ones, that helps to explain the increase in mobility we have been seeing lately. Sometimes the funding issue goes beyond the home institution. Some major federal grating institutions such as the National Institute of Health and the National Science Foundation, both major sources of external funding for life scientists, have been restricting the ability of grant

recipients to move money and equipment, making scientists want to move to well-to-do institutions that provide better start-up funds for their research careers. Also, being in more supportive institutions increases the chances to win bigger grants because of the infrastructure already in place, along with the institution’s reputation.

Obviously, decisions that have to do with moving from one institution to another, particularly for faculty with families, are complex ones. Institutions that want to advance their reputations need not only the kind of data generated by the NBER study, but also to pay closer attention to personnel issues.

That means that administrators, from department chairs to presidents, need to be more involved with their faculty by showing a closer personal touch with them and demonstrating a sincere interest in their scholarly activities.

We also need better funding for higher education, including higher start-up research funding. Better funding will help attract and retain good faculty, will improve the ability to hire more tenure-track professors, and will provide better infrastructure. This funding will allow faculty to be more competitive when looking for external funding. In academia, like in many other areas of life, you get what you pay for. At the end of the day, better faculty means better education for students.

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