

Faculty Quality of Life: Results of Focus Group Interviews in the University of Minnesota School of Public Health, Spring 2006

Background and Aims of the Study: In 2006, the School of Public Health Faculty Consultative Committee (FCC) convened a series of focus groups to assess the current quality of life among faculty members. The ultimate goal was to identify factors that could be changed to help retain and support existing faculty members, and to recruit highly qualified new faculty in the School of Public Health.

Process: Initially, a pilot test was conducted with 5 faculty members to determine whether faculty would easily respond to the four proposed probing questions and that a diversity of responses would be elicited by them (the four questions are highlighted below, see Results). Then, a random sample of faculty from the four Divisions of the School were identified in each of three strata (Assistant Professors, Associate Professors, and Full Professors), as well as a group of female faculty of all ranks. One focus group composed of Assistant Professors and two focus groups composed of Associate Professors (each having 6-7 faculty in attendance) were convened in April and May of 2006 with the support of the Dean's office for ~1 hour discussions facilitated by Mr. Tim Delmont (then Director, Center for Human Resource Development (CHRD)). The focus group among Full professors was not convened due to difficulty in finding a mutually agreeable time, and the focus group among female faculty was also not convened.

Results: In general, faculty indicated that they were reasonably satisfied with the quality of their work life, but that competing demands for their time (in particular the time required for grant submissions) created stress and reduced time for collaboration. The lack of a single building for the SPH was seen as an obstacle to collaboration between working groups across the Divisions of the School. The following is a summary of the results reported in May, 2006 (written by Tim Delmont), organized by each of the four questions/topics addressed in the interviews.

1. How would you define the “quality of faculty life” in the School of Public Health? What does that mean to you?

Workload Expectations

Expectations about faculty performance in research, teaching, and service roles are very high. Meeting these expectations requires hard work and long hours. The cultural imperative is “Am I keeping up?” This imperative is experienced across all faculty ranks. Assistant professors are usually expected to focus on creating a viable research agenda, for which support is given and “more protected time” offered, somewhat lessening their attention to teaching

and service roles. With research productivity a priority for most faculty, attention to the creation of new courses, preparation and teaching of existing courses, student advising, and participation in governance activities suffers.

Frequent comments about workload were “There is too much to do,” “Things are done much less well than I’d like,” “I love what I do; but the volume pulls you down;” and “Competing demands cause stress – I love the job, but it is draining.” In general, however, faculty indicate that they are coping reasonably effectively with these expectations and burnout is rare.

Research Productivity and Funding

The School policy that nearly all faculty members will cover about 80% of their annual salaries from outside grants results in multiple, sometimes conflicting, outcomes. Writing grants in an increasingly competitive environment, may require a faculty member to commit 50-100% of his/her time to this effort. Where three to four applications per year once sufficed, now six to eight are not uncommon. With salary viability at stake, faculty may seek research funding for topics in which they are not personally interested. In this environment, research achievement drives the workweek, leaving less time for all other work and outside commitments.

The quality of staff support for grant writing is very good, although the availability of more staff with specialized skills is desirable. Faculty mentoring on research projects and co-authorship on scholarly publications is common, and valued.

Buildings

Having School faculty, students, and staff spread over four buildings on two campuses reduces opportunities for interdisciplinary research and teaching projects; undercuts the development of collegial relations; and tends to isolate many people, confining them in smaller work areas and groups. Working in WBOB does not feel anything like being in a campus setting. Mayo classrooms are very unappealing and inefficient.

Morale

There is much that is positive and appealing about faculty life in the SPH: lot’s of research opportunities; quality colleagues to bounce ideas off of; autonomy, flexibility, and independence; excellent students; and opportunities to lead. The faculty career path is very appealing at such a strong School.

There are some unmet needs: for more respectful communication, recognition of past accomplishments, and a fairer merit pay policy based on evidence that differential workloads and accomplishments exist.

2. From your perspective, is the quality of faculty life improving? Why do you feel that way?

Most said it was about the same; not much is changing. Some question whether the research funding policy is a viable one in the future, as competition for grants increases, tenure pressures intensify, and more faculty seek a better work/life balance. Many specifically say it is increasingly difficult to balance work demands against family needs. "Time at the water cooler" has disappeared. A few are wondering about whether the present faculty career – with its emphasis chiefly on competitive research productivity – in a School such as Minnesota is a healthy choice. An additional concern expressed is for the viability of the SPH itself: can it survive and prosper if built on the present funding model?

Several initiatives will enhance quality: school or division-wide social events; strengthening of the Climate Committee's communications efforts; finding ways to streamline use of faculty time (two rather than three faculty on review committees or developing a Plan C Masters Degree Program?); adjusting reward system to better recognize teaching and service achievements; and a single physical center to enhance collaboration and collegiality.

3. As a faculty member, are you generally satisfied or dissatisfied with the quality of faculty life?

Faculty are "reasonably satisfied" with the quality of faculty life, despite its high work expectations and time pressures. Faculty feel pride over their grant funding successes and scholarly achievements. They make tradeoffs on work priorities; set guidelines for family and personal commitments ("not to work past noon on Saturdays; not miss birthdays or important outings"); find a comfortable pace; build coping mechanisms; and exercise as much control as possible over research topic choices.

Administrators could emphasize more the value of faculty work to the School, the AHC, and the University – feeling "vital", being recognized as contributors, is important to many faculty. The quality and efficiency of meetings need improvement. Setting meeting goals and modeling civil behavior will help morale.

4. In your judgment, are there tradeoffs between the quality of faculty life and the expectation for school ranking among peers? What are key tradeoffs?

The SPH shares a high reputation with Harvard, Pittsburgh, and others. These peer schools are perceived to use a similar research funding policy and have similar cultures to the SPH. Because of constraints on the number of new faculty lines and salaries, SPH divisions may have more difficulty than they do recruiting the best newcomers. Consciously setting differential workloads, supported through new non-research funding streams, would be a useful if difficult tradeoff to make. More specialized grant writing support from staff would help. A number of key tradeoffs involve availability of more money. However, SPH could strengthen the quality of faculty life by improving monetary and other reward systems, collegiality, and communication.

Indications for future studies:

The results presented here provide a qualitative grounding for the continued monitoring of faculty quality of life in the SPH, including faculty evaluation of the supportive role of Division chairs and deans. To that end, the School of Public Health FCC is planning an anonymous, internet-based quality of faculty life survey for distribution in Spring, 2009. The goal of this survey is to build upon the focus group interviews conducted in 2006 to compare quality of faculty life indicators across Divisions, across academic ranks, and between male and female faculty members, and to provide useful feedback to Division chairs and deans. Three areas have emerged from the recently published University-wide PULSE survey 2008 as areas of concern for faculty in the University at large: satisfaction with pay, work- family conflict, and inadequate support from Department Chair or Responsible Administrator. Through the FCC's 2009 Faculty Quality of Life Survey, we aim to address these and other areas so as to identify and more deeply analyze the specific concerns and ideas for change from our own faculty members.