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The Corporatization of American Education: Analyzing the Relationship between Job Satisfaction and Productivity among University Professors

Benjamin Marte

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Introduction

The relationship between job satisfaction and productivity is one that has been examined at great length over the years. Consider Locke's claim that as of 1976, approximately 3,350 articles on this topic were in circulation (Okpara 2004). In 1992 Cranny et al. reported the existence of at least 5,000 of such manuscripts (Okpara 2004). Numerous studies have been conducted in this field of inquiry, and this paper endeavors to build upon that collective effort. Here, the focus is on the relationship between job satisfaction and productivity among the professors of a major research university in south Florida; while its scope is limited to the College of Arts and Sciences. More specifically, this paper asks: what is this relationship? And what effect might it have on the quality of higher education in America?

In order to adequately grasp the importance of asking such a question we must at least become familiar with the historic mission of the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) within the American university system. This College, in contrast with others, has aimed at providing students with a 'well rounded' education. Traditionally this has been accomplished by exposing them to a variety of classes that need not necessarily relate to their specific vocational aspirations. The efforts of the CAS have been, and still are, a celebration of the acquisition of knowledge for learning's sake, as opposed to learning merely for the attainment of some practical purpose or end. With noble guiding principles such as heightened awareness, responsibility/service to society and love of wisdom, CAS has proved an invaluable institution for the moral and intellectual development its student.

This institution, however, could not make its contributions without the professional faculty that enables the realization of its estimable ideals. For this reason it is important to understand the endemic realities these professors face daily. Gaining such insight would allow for the discovery and treatment of their problems/concerns, as well as facilitate the implementation of preventative measures. If we can accept that these instructors do an invaluable service to society then most assuredly it is a matter of wisdom to work towards keeping them reasonably content and enthused about their jobs.

Consider the results of a survey conducted in Nigeria that suggest the bearing of job contentment among teachers and professors is: (1) crucial to the "long-term growth of any educational system around the world" and (2) directly related to the performance of educators (Ololube 2004). It is also implied that the satisfaction of university professors has a powerful influence on the satisfaction and attitudes of students (Corporate Executive Board 2003). That is, when university professors are happy, they tend to treat their students well (Corporate Executive Board 2003). Conversely, a weak sense of job contentment and a frail morale among university professors may result in a "loss of concern for and detachment from the people with whom the professor works, decreased quality of teaching, depression, greater use of sick leave, efforts to leave the profession, and a cynical and dehumanized perception of students" (Lumsden 1998).

In short, there is ample evidence suggesting that satisfaction does lead to productivity. Thus, it is the

position of this paper that there are serious, long-term consequences for not attending to the satisfaction of our educators; they are two-fold: (1) we contribute to the climate of pessimism within which some professors currently operate, and (2) we compromise and adversely affect the quality of the educational experience our students are exposed to. As it were, both moral and practical implications are brought to the fore.

Literature Review

As part of an organized, sustained effort to gain insight into the relationship between job satisfaction and productivity, two types of literature were consulted: general as well as professor-specific material that treated those substantive issues. These issues are directly affected by various factors including, but not limited to, gender, status, external locus of control, and departmental pressures levied upon professors to emphasize one or more responsibilities over others.

Clark (1997) contributes to the more general type of literature, placing an emphasis on the sway of the gender factor upon job satisfaction. He argues that by and large women's expectations, relative to the extractability of occupational dividends, are markedly lower than those of their male counterparts. Perhaps contributing to these low expectations is the status problem, as reported by Clark, that women's job situations are worse than men's. This is facilely evidenced by pointing to the copious instances of sexual harassment complaints and 'glass ceiling' discriminatory practices (the un-written rule stipulating that women's advancement opportunities are pre-determined and limited as a consequence of their gender). Nonetheless, his studies have revealed that women consistently reported higher levels of job satisfaction. The implication: the probability of reaching job contentment increases with the decrease in job-reward expectations. This, however, begs an interesting question: as the status of women in the labor market improves (thereby causing their over-all expectations to increase) will they necessarily become increasingly dissatisfied? While the answer to this question may have serious implications for the work-force outside of academia, my research calls into question the applicability of the inquiry to female university professors. Since I've observed no evidence that a gender-based disparity in job-related expectations exists among PhD holders, I have no reason to believe that in this capacity gender is a mitigating factor here.

Kim (2002) found the "locus-of-control" factor remarkably influential with regard to job contentment and productivity. She argues that organizations ought to move away from the traditional hierarchical structure to a more inclusive or participative-management type of orientation. The point is to make employees feel empowered by offering them a bearing on strategic planning procedures. This, she argues, would serve to boost productivity and contentment. Kalleburge (1977) seems to echo this perspective when he posited that "t he extent to which workers are able to obtain perceived job rewards is conceptualized to be a function of their degree of control over their employment situations." In fact, research shows that high performing organizations (those with high levels of customer loyalty and financial success) usually have the same characteristics in common (Sachau 2007): their employees undergo extensive training, they are made to feel empowered, and they are usually involved in important decision making processes. That kind of environment usually fosters a more collaborative, engaged working staff; the result of which is a more productive, financially successful company.

My research adds to the validity of emphasizing locus-of-control as a key indicator of job satisfaction. I've discovered that most professors who scored high on the contentment index share the characteristics that they (1) are free to choose the courses they'd like to teach, and (2) they are

satisfied with the level of control they have over their work-environment. Thus, there is a strong correlation here between job satisfaction and environmental control.

Professors, however, have reported dissatisfaction as resulting from pressures placed upon them by the administration. In Cohen's study (1974), out of 222 college professors interviewed, two-thirds cited "administrative difficulties or pressures" as the strongest contributor to dissatisfaction on the job. One such pressure as discussed by Chan (1991) is the negative affect that a prohibitive teaching-load can have on a professor's sense of contentment. Although he found that low pay was the highest contributor to dissatisfaction among university professors in Hong Kong, the issue of high teaching- loads was not far behind in significance.

Fedler & Cauts (1982), as well as Bornheimer et al. (1973) call our attention to the reality that faculty are under a considerable amount of pressure to produce, in terms of research and publishing, but are often-times not afforded adequate research support or the much needed relief in teaching responsibilities that makes seeing these obligations through to fruition possible. This persistent pressure to publish is thoroughly examined by Taylor (2001) who coined the term "Goal Displacement" to describe the consequence this demand would inflict on university professors by and large. She asserts that academics are encouraged to focus on publishing, to concentrate their efforts on the acquisition of external research grants. Hence, incentives are placed on prolificacy and funds/grant generating while virtually none exist to promote excellence in teaching (Taylor 2001). The down-side: quality of instruction is not emphasized; arguably it is sacrificed on the altar of the "bottom-line" perspective, which values material gain over a climate most conducive to learning.

My research reflects these concerns as nearly all of the respondents in my study have reported having a difficulty managing the various responsibilities they have been charged with; namely, teaching, publishing, and service. Most have confessed that more often than not certain obligations must be neglected, at least temporarily, if they are to keep up with administration-based demands. Tenure becomes the practical aim for instructors, thereby establishing a set of priorities that does not necessarily have the interests of the students in mind. When asked to opine as to what type of working conditions would be most conducive to productivity, a respondent replied: " Not so many conflicting demands for compulsive publication. There's no time to do something well while you are doing it. Develop quality rather than quantity."

Methods

The data for this research was primarily derived from three sources: academic periodicals, interviews, and questionnaires. Review of the available literature served to offer a general orientation on both the salient and subtle aspects of the relationship that job satisfaction and productivity share. The interviews with professors, and the questionnaires they completed, offered a more substantive contribution that spoke to the research question directly.

Two professors, of whom I've had a personal affiliation with in the past, were selected to fill the role of interview subjects. Each one was met with independently, for approximately 15-20 minutes, on campus grounds. Although they both worked within the same department they each had vastly different backgrounds and work experience, a quality that served to enrich this paper's perspective.

The format of these interviews are best classified as semi-structured; that is, the line of questioning

was based on a general plan of inquiry, but the questions themselves were open-ended and allowed for exploratory tangents as they arose. Often times the subjects steered the interviews by making comments I felt compelled to explore. All responses were transcribed. The transcripts were later scrutinized, both individually and comparatively, for any discernable patterns or trends.

The survey instrument (34 out of 50 returned and completed) consisted of 15 close-ended and five open-ended questions. Most answer categories were in the form of Likert Scale responses, which made the responses amenable to bivariate and multivariate analysis. A small number of questions were prepared for the purpose of collecting some useful respondent-background information. This information was compiled and eventually entered into data processing software, Statistical Software for the Social Sciences (SPSS), which facilitated univariate analyses in the form of useful frequency distributions and averages—measures of central tendency among select variables.

There were a total of 11 job contentment indicators embedded in some of the survey questions. These indicators (in terms of scope) explored job satisfaction as measured by professor contentment with course-load, access to resources, colleague solidarity, advancement opportunity, influence over the work environment, and departmental expectations of service and publishing. Productivity, on the other hand, was measured by using 6 different indicators. These indicators explored professor performance levels in the areas of research/publishing and service.

Questions that aimed at measuring contentment and productivity were subjected to Cronbach's Alpha, an internal consistency reliability test. All multiple-choice responses were coded and entered into a spread-sheet from which frequency distributions were drawn and tabulated. Finally, measures of central tendency were computed for all responses to contentment and productivity-indicator questions, yielding a composite score for each of the two variables respectively. These two scores were then used to administer a Pearson's correlation—the correlation between two variables reflecting the degree to which they are related.

Data

The data revealed that overall, when balancing satisfactions with dissatisfactions, the particular cohort examined was generally content with its respective working conditions. Several problems or complaints, however, were unearthed. Most were in the areas of material accommodation, research support, and multi-faceted obligation maintenance.

Five out of eleven professors claimed that the classrooms in which they teach are inadequate and do not meet their needs. Chief among classroom-based complaints is the non-internet-friendly nature many of them are characterized by. Professors would love to access the internet and utilize on-line articles along with other helpful materials, but many cannot because scores of classrooms are simply not configured for such use. There are also similar grievances concerning a lack of basic writing instruments and non-existent allowances for the production and dissemination of pertinent photocopied materials in class. The following quote by one respondent is particularly demonstrative of this fermenting problem: "It's unconscionable... They pay for nothing. I've got to supply my own markers, the dry erase one's, to write notes on the board." The second respondent reports: "Photocopies weren't always a luxury. It used to be that professors had discretionary power when it came to those. Now, you can forget it. If you want them that bad you'll have to pay out of pocket. I post links now."

Nine out of eleven professors demonstrate discontent over what they consider a lack of adequate support for their research projects. They report having little or no access to teacher's assistants (TAs) or research assistants (RAs), and insufficient funding for activities like interview transcription and general data collection/processing. The overall sentiment of the cohort seems to be that productivity is inhibited by the lack of these resources. During an interview one professor expressed the following: "My department has relatively heavy teaching loads which are not supported by adequate teaching assistants ... teaching load does not include reading courses with graduate students and most... have one or more of these every other year. Thus additional TAs is a high priority. Additional RAs to help maintain the labs and collections would also improve productivity, as faculty need to spend time monitoring equipment, teaching supplies, and the labs themselves."

The multi-faceted and heavily demanding nature of professor responsibility was yet another area of concern. Professors report being overwhelmed with time-consuming obligations that include teaching, research/publishing, and service to their respective departments. For some, service must be done to the college, the university, and the community in addition to the department. A respondent, offering constructive criticism regarding the questionnaire, said: "You're not eliciting all the information you need... you also need to ask about service to the College and to the University. A professor (tenure-track or tenured) must do service to all of these parts of the University, as well as to the community, and to the profession. The requirements may be reasonable for a Department, but very high for the College and/or University. But in general, service expectations are too high."

This claim is substantiated by survey results, which show that eight out of eleven professors have been unable to surpass minimum publishing requirements, and ten out of eleven assert that during the course of the year some responsibilities must be sacrificed in order to meet others. That is, professors are at times forced to make 'executive decisions' as to which of their obligations they will have to temporarily neglect in order to fulfill those they judge to be of more import.

Most of the data hitherto collected represent indictments of administrative policies and the underlying attitude that serves to buoy their existence. There was, however, a general pattern observed among the interview transcripts that at first glance would seem unrelated to the actualization of administrative priorities. This pattern pointed the finger at contemporary students and called into question their academic ethic.

Professors seem to imply that an unhealthy pragmatism, a dubious efficiency has taken root in the minds of students and has somehow become the guiding principle by which they navigate their educational experience. Completion of courses, the acquisition of a college degree has become merely a means to an end. There is no love of learning per se. The idea is to obtain the requisite credentials in order to obtain the job that will afford students the luxuries they've been socialized to incessantly crave. These are among the sentiments professors seem to share. When asked to elaborate on the things that would make the job more pleasant and conducive to productivity, one professor replied: "students who were better prepared, and who actually cared about learning."

Discussion

Fraser and Hodge (2000) suggest two methods for studying job satisfaction: a "dispositional" approach and a "structural" approach. The latter entails the study of external conditions (the work environment) and the effects they have on an individual's ability to obtain job contentment. The former

considers an individual's psychological make-up, the values and life experiences that influence a person's ability to be satisfied at work. The ideal approach, according to the authors, is to combine both methods. They argue this method would incorporate all relevant areas of interest and provide a more comprehensive, robust study of the topic at hand. Although this idea has merit, it should be understood that this study is biased towards the structural model as it focuses solely on the effects external working conditions impose on professors.

The results from surveys used in this study establish a moderately high positive correlation between job satisfaction and productivity. That is, as professors become increasingly satisfied they are commensurately more productive. Thus, the answer to this paper's main question seems evident: more satisfaction equals more productivity. The problem, however, lies with the way in which productivity has been defined.

Thus, we must ask: who defines productivity? In this case the answer is most assuredly the administration. Who within the ranks of the administrative hierarchy is actually responsible for the content of this definition is of little consequence to this paper. What's of particular import is that the construction of this definition is by and large outside of the professor's sphere of influence. This arrangement, however, is not without its consequences; because the definition arrived at will reflect the perspective and priorities of its author/s. These priorities may in fact be counterproductive and may subtract from the overall quality of the educational experience, which they indirectly govern. It is these priorities that this paper calls into question.

On the surface, the current conception of productivity seems fitting. For, it covers scholarship, service, and teaching – a seemingly sound, reasonable, comprehensive account. This, however, is nothing more than a politically correct mirage as there is no consequential parity between the three descriptive aspects. Below the surface professors are receiving a “double message.” That is, teaching is emphasized but what matters most in terms of promotion and advancement opportunities is publishing and the acquisition of outside funding. Thus, while productivity is defined in the abstract as that which encompasses scholarship, service, and teaching, in the concrete it is defined in terms of quantity – quantity of service contributions, quantity of publications produced and quantity of external monies procured.

This kind of productivity, one characterized by the adulation of quantitatively driven pursuits, remains open to criticism even by the least scrupulous observer. The very premise on which it is grounded is perceivably steeped in dubiousness. Hence, it is my position that true job satisfaction (that which is professed with little to no qualification) is positively related to qualitative productivity. That is, professors who are truly content at work may not produce as much in terms of numbers, but that which they do produce will reflect a superiority of value, a higher caliber/quality of work that will have implications for the current and future state of the educational system.

So, why this disproportionate emphasis placed on numbers? Why does quantity seemingly trump quality when it comes to professor upward mobility? And, why at times are professors not afforded the requisite tools to produce in accordance with established expectations, regardless of how misguided these expectations might be? The answers to these questions are arguably found in the model proposed by distinguished professor of sociology George Ritzer: “McDonaldization Theory.” The following is a direct quote from Dr. Ritzer that summarizes in a general sense the meaning of his theory: the process by which the principles of the fast food industry are coming to dominate more and more

sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world.”

McDonaldization theory encompasses many points of interest; it enumerates many of the guiding principles that fast food restaurants subscribe to. Although several are not relevant to this study, there are at least two that are very useful. These are: calculability and efficiency.

The principle of calculability, Ritzer explains, “involves an emphasis on things that can be calculated, counted, quantified. Quantification refers to a tendency to emphasize quantity rather than quality. This leads to a sense that quality is equal to certain, usually (but not always) large quantities of things.” “Examples of this element include: the “Big Mac,” the Whopper,” Wendy’s “Biggie Meals,” and Taco Bell’s “8 ounce burrito” (Keel 2007).” Here we can see that the major selling point of these products is their size/quantity.

The principle of efficiency dictates that businesses ought to select the requisite means for reaching a desired end quickly, while minimizing as much cost and effort as possible. For illustrations we may refer to the famous ‘drive-through’ window at McDonalds or the fill-your-own-cup method it employs with walk-in customers. These innovations allow double the customers to be served by making available more stations of transaction and by passing on some of the work (traditionally done by employees) to consumers.

The principles of calculability and efficiency, as it were, seem to have made their way into the educational system, and they tend to effect the kind of influence Dr. Ritzer calls: the “irrationality of rationality.” That is, systems meant to be rational have a way of turning in on themselves leading to results that are actually irrational.

Consider the manner in which McDonalds prepares its food. We know that it will not spend its money, time, and resources in recruiting highly skilled chefs to prepare its staples. To do that would be to increase the quality of burgers at the cost of compromising the rate of production; for any company that purports to compete in the ‘fast food’ market, this would inevitably abate revenue. Therefore, McDonalds would do the “rational” thing; it will cut costs wherever possible (e.g. low quality meats and ingredients), hire low-skilled labor to perform mechanical tasks, and work to find new innovative ways to delegate non-traditional tasks to consumers (e.g. customers now procure their own condiments, refreshments, and utensils at a separate service station). In part, the irrationality of this is evident, however, in the obesity and general health problems this country is afflicted with. “The food we eat is often less nourishing, loaded with stabilizers and flavor enhancers, fats, salt and sugar. This contributes to the health problems of our society, a definitely ‘antihuman’ component. As our children grow up within these systems, they develop habits which insure our increasing dependency upon the systems (Keel 2006). Thus, what is rational and business savvy for one group is irrational and harmful to another. Here is where an exploratory parallel is drawn between the McDonalds mode of production and the educational system at the institution this paper examines.

Administrators seem to have adopted a corporate, McDonald’s type of model where quantity takes precedence over quality. They make this apparent by their indirect, yet, notably high emphasis on the acquisition of outside research dollars and publishing projects. In the same vein, they cut corners relative to supplies and research assistance—an exercise in corporate-like frugality that saves money but significantly curtails a professor’s capacity to meet established standards of performance. Professors have come to realize that teaching is “technically” important, but that prolificacy and funds-

generating is much more consequential, having a direct bearing on promotion opportunities and pay raise considerations. Thus, the university has virtually ensured its capacity for generating wealth, by creating a system of incentives that causes the upward mobility (the success) of professors to become dependent upon their ability to produce funds.

It is the position of this paper that, while the incorporation of the McDonald's model into university fiscal practices has had positive affects on university finances, there have been resultant adverse affects imposed upon the educational experience of both professor and student. Professors who are overwhelmed with responsibility are unlikely to perform at optimum levels, and are just as unlikely to offer students quality time—that careful attention needed to facilitate the most advantageous educational climate, both within and outside of the classroom.

Conclusion

This paper has endeavored to communicate the educational implications of incorporating corporate-style negotiations into administrative fiscal policy. Corners are being cut where they shouldn't be, and as a consequence professors are finding it increasingly difficult to perform their jobs thoroughly. This arrangement not only affects professors; it also affects the climate in which students pursue their studies. When taking into consideration our declining international academic ranking (as compared to Finland, Korea, Japan, Canada and Belgium) the practical implications are made evident; we simply can't afford to loose any more ground. "Productivity" has been erroneously conceptualized as a virtue that ought to be mostly (if not solely) gauged in quantitative terms. This is a misguided and dangerous exercise in reductionism, which causes professors to shift or adjust their priorities accordingly. They are, at times, forced to compromise and become pragmatic in areas that are best left unalloyed. In the end, the educational experience of students and instructors is dealt a powerful blow, the resultant bruise of which will arguably be tender for countless semesters to come.

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