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Academic Rank: The Impact on Full-time Faculty Salaries at Public Rural Community Colleges

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Introduction

Although traditionally associated with four-year colleges and universities, academic rank has increasingly become an organizational fixture at many two-year institutions. As early as 1977, Brown noted that almost one third of public community colleges providing faculty salary information for a National Education Association study used academic rank systems similar to those found in larger institutions. In a 2003 study of faculty salaries, the American Association of University Professors identified 485 community colleges that used academic rank and 582 that did not (Lane, 2003). More recently, the “2008-09 Two-Year College Faculty Salary Survey” indicated that just over 61% of the 183 responding institutions reported using academic rank (College and University Professional Association for Human Resources [CUPA-HR], 2009). It would appear, as Brown (1977) predicted, that academic rank systems have gained prominence in public community colleges.

Purpose

This study examined academic rank systems and their impact on full-time faculty salaries within one of the most economically challenged sectors of American public higher education: the rural community college. Two research questions guided this examination:

1. What are the average annual salaries for full-time faculty members at rural community colleges that do and do not use academic rank?

2. What differences, if any, exist between the annual salaries of full-time faculty members at rural community colleges that do and do not use academic rank?

Rural community colleges provide an appropriate setting for this analysis because they routinely face issues markedly different from those of their urban and suburban counterparts. High levels of unemployment, illiteracy, and poverty, a low tax base, and the absence of—and distance from—big-city amenities all impact the recruitment, retention, and compensation of qualified faculty members (Glover, Simpson, & Waller, 2009; Murray, 2007; Pennington, Williams, & Karvonen, 2006). Since academic rank typically provides a promotion structure that “results in an upgrade of status and salary” (Tien & Blackburn, 1996, p. 2), the adoption of such a system may serve to enhance faculty recruitment and retention efforts at rural community colleges. However, given the economic plight of many of these institutions, the increased salaries so often associated with academic rank may prove too costly to shoulder.

Literature Review

Academic rank is a time-honored tradition within higher education, and the procedures surrounding it carry “tremendous social, civic, and political influence” (Brown, 1977, p. 262). According to Townsend and Twombly (2007), this tradition serves two vital functions. Academic rank motivates faculty
members to contribute to the organizational mission, and then rewards them for their efforts. These
rewards typically involve a promotion (e.g., from assistant to associate professor) that provides
additional status, prestige, and increased pay. Since institutions are committed to the promotion of
productive faculty members, individuals that advance in rank can be regarded as “academic ‘winners’”
to academic rank as a key indicator of success and a crucial characteristic of a good job in a college
or university setting. This duo indicated that “salary is highly correlated with rank” (p. 188).

Herzberg (1966) also examined the relationship between motivation and reward. In his Two Factor
Theory, Herzberg posited that certain “intrinsic factors” or “motivators” related to “what the person
does” (p. 74), and “extrinsic factors” or “hygienes” (p. 75) associated with the environment in which the
person works, influenced job satisfaction. Although this theory did not focus on higher education
institutions, Rosser and Townsend (2006) applied academic examples to both types of factors. These
authors labeled promotion as an intrinsic factor and compensation as an extrinsic factor. Rosser and
Townsend (2006) also indicated that, because extrinsic factors are external to the work actually being
performed, they “do not contribute to job satisfaction but rather to job dissatisfaction” (p. 127). Intrinsic
factors can “lead to job satisfaction but their absence does not lead to job dissatisfaction” (p. 127).

Blocker, Plummer, and Richardson (1965) listed six positive attributes for academic rank in two-year
institutions. These authors indicated that community college administrators adopt a personnel policy of
academic rank for the following reasons:

1. to conform to the university system; 2. to link salary and teach [sic] proficiency; 3. to increase the
status and morale of the faculty; 4. to recognize and reward service; 5. to motivate graduate study by
the faculty; and 6) to attract better faculty. (pp. 153-154)

Brown (1977) stated that the implementation of an academic rank system could improve the image of a
community college “from that of the secondary school to one of an institution of higher education” (p.
264). This shift in professional image, in his opinion, offers enhanced interactions with various
constituents—especially those involved in providing financial support.

Drawing on the work of Blocker and Wolfe (1964-65), Townsend and Twombly (2007) stressed that
many community colleges began adopting academic rank systems in the 1960s. The reasons for their
adoption included “emulating universities, improving faculty, and increasing two-year colleges' status”
(p. 74). Much of this overriding concern for enhanced organizational status can be seen in the following
declaration: “Not having ranks linked the institution to secondary education, while having ranks seemed
to make its faculty part of higher education” (p. 74). Nonetheless, some community colleges still refrain
from using a traditional rank system for their faculty. These institutions simply refer to their faculty
members as instructors; “hence, there is no advancement in rank” (Townsend & Twombly, 2007, p. 73).

Despite offering these potential enhancements, academic rank may actually cause problems for
community colleges. Citing research by Thornton (1972), Brown (1977) stated that the adoption of an
academic rank system could shift the mission of two-year colleges away from effective teaching and
more toward research and publishing. Brown (1977) also expressed concern regarding two issues that
have surfaced in other types of higher education institutions: “substitution of academic rank for money,
which downgrades both academic rank and quality and morale of faculty, and . . . the possibility of
percentage limitations on ranks which eventually limit advancements” (p. 265).
Kievitt (1986) questioned the need for academic rank in two-year colleges. Referencing the work of Monroe (1972), he indicated that rank systems can encourage community college faculty members to see themselves as professors instead of teachers. Kievitt (1986) also reported that, in institutions where academic rank existed, the in-place standards for promotion were frequently vague and too generalized. These factors often made longevity the primary determinant for faculty advancement through promotion. Kelly (1990) echoed this comment by stating that “Ranks and salary are typically determined automatically through years of service rather than through achievements in teaching or in the discipline” (p. 1). Townsend and Twombly (2007), however, noted that performance measures other than longevity frequently determine faculty promotions. These measures include a minimum time in the “previous rank, educational credentials, and teaching performance” (p. 74).

Although some community colleges use the same traditional structure of four-year institutions for determining faculty pay (i.e., rank and discipline), others often employ totally different methodologies. For example, some institutions “use discipline alone, with faculty unranked.” Others “base their pay structure on level of education/degree or on rank, independent of discipline” (CUPA-HR, 2009, p. 5). Unionization of faculty members may also impact institutional salary scales. Townsend and Twombly (2007) indicated that salaries in states allowing faculty members to unionize seem greater than in states not permitting unionization. Cohen and Brawer (2003), however, argued that unionization may not explain this salary disparity. Instead, the difference may occur because some states pay better than others.

Although salaries may vary from state to state, Townsend and Twombly (2007) indicated that community college faculty pay is “the lowest in academe” (p. 78). Among the various types of community colleges, salaries at rural two-year institutions typically lag behind their urban and suburban counterparts. Rural community colleges must contend with a variety of localized fiscal challenges—many of which can serve as constraints on faculty pay. Besides low property tax bases (Glover, et al., 2009; Murray, 2007), these community colleges also face low levels of personal income and population and high rates of unemployment (Gillett-Karam, 1995). These factors can preclude a rural institution from offering adequate salary levels, thus detracting from the effective recruitment and retention of qualified faculty. To counter these problems, rural community colleges must be innovative and work diligently to offer fair compensation, if they are to attract and keep qualified faculty members (Murray, 2007).

**Methodology**

This study utilized national data extracted from the Integrated Post-Secondary Education Data System (IPEDS) to explore the aforementioned research questions. Since IPEDS information is self-reported, it is subject to all of the limitations typically associated with self-reported data. The most current data available at the time of the study were for the 2006 academic year (AY 2006).

The researcher segmented all public rural community colleges in the United States into two groups: (1) those with academic rank and (2) those without academic rank. For the purposes of this study, academic rank refers to a system that uses any or all of the following titles for full-time faculty members: assistant professor, associate professor, and professor. “Instructor” was omitted from this segmentation effort because some institutions use the term as a universal title for all full-time faculty members, regardless of their seniority. When used in this manner, there are no promotional
advancements (Townsend & Twombly, 2007).

Extracting institutions from the data base involved the use of the three IPEDS rural urbanization categories: fringe, distant, and remote. IPEDS defines these categories as follows:

Rural: Fringe: Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster. Rural: Distant: Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural. Rural: Remote: Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster. (National Center for Education Statistics Degree of Urbanization, 2006)

The researcher used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to obtain descriptive statistics and to conduct a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) based upon the differences between average annual salaries for full-time faculty members at rural community colleges that do and do not use academic rank. Examination of these differences utilized a significance level set at 0.05.

Findings

Research question 1 examined the average annual salaries for full-time faculty members at rural community colleges that do and do not use academic rank. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics associated with this question.

Table 1

| Average Annual Salaries for Rural Public Community Colleges with and without Academic Rank |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Rural Colleges                    | N               | Mean            | Std. Deviation  | Std. Error      | 95% Confidence Interval for Mean |
| with Academic Rank                | 294             | 54318.36        | 11452.610       | 667.930         | 53003.82         | 55632.91        |
| without Academic Rank             | 194             | 46344.36        | 12627.912       | 906.631         | 44556.18         | 48132.54        |
| Total                             | 488             | 51148.37        | 12544.682       | 567.871         | 50032.59         | 52264.15        |
Of the 488 rural community colleges included in the 2006 IPEDS data, 294 institutions reported the use of some type of academic rank system. For these institutions, the average annual salary was $54,318. The remaining 194 rural community colleges that did not use an academic rank system reported an average annual salary of $46,344.

For research question 2, the author conducted a one-way ANOVA on the average annual salaries of full-time faculty members at rural community colleges, grouped by those that do and do not use academic rank. A significant difference in salaries existed between institutions that do and do not use academic rank, $F(1, 486) = 52.188, p < .001$. Table 2 reflects data associated with this ANOVA.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>7.432E9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.432E9</td>
<td>52.188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>6.921E10</td>
<td>486</td>
<td>1.424E8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>7.664E10</td>
<td>487</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusions and Recommendations
The findings of this study indicate a significant difference between the annual salaries for full-time faculty members at rural community colleges using academic rank—versus those institutions that do not use academic rank. Despite the absence of research specifically focused on academic rank systems and their impact on full-time faculty salaries at rural community colleges, several possible explanations exist for the findings herein. The first of these involves geography. In compiling salary information for this study, the researcher chose to only segment the data according to the three IPEDS categories for rural urbanization (i.e., fringe, distant, and remote). Although it yielded valuable information, this strategy overlooked any regional and/or state differences in how rural community colleges remunerate their full-time faculty members. A different segmentation strategy might reveal that, as Cohen and Brawer (2003) suggested, some states really do pay better than others. Additionally, it is quite possible that many of these better-paying states permit community college faculty members to unionize (Townsend & Twombly, 2007).

Institutional image may also help to explain why rural community colleges with academic rank systems have higher full-time faculty salaries. Several authors (Blocker et al., 1965; Blocker & Wolfe, 1964-65; Brown, 1977; Townsend & Twombly, 2007) indicated that, during the 1960s, community colleges began adopting academic rank systems to enhance their status and prestige, and emulate their four-year counterparts. While academic titles such as assistant, associate, and full professor may provide some degree of prestige, they can also ring hollow unless accompanied by a commensurate salary increase. To assist in their image-building efforts, rural institutions may have felt compelled to initially boost their faculty salaries to higher levels than similar colleges without such systems—levels that continue to this day.

Efforts to improve faculty recruitment and retention may also help to explain the findings. As previously mentioned, rural community colleges routinely struggle in procuring and, more importantly, keeping full-time faculty members. By offering the prestige, status, and increased pay traditionally associated with academic rank (Tien & Blackburn, 1996; Townsend & Twombly, 2007), it is possible that some rural institutions have actually enhanced their faculty recruiting and retention efforts and, in the process, realized actual cost savings—as compared to dealing with costly personnel turnovers.

Academic rank offers the potential to improve the image of a rural community college, and enhance the morale and aid in the recruitment and retention of faculty members. However, the decision to adopt academic rank requires serious organizational commitment. Rural institutions are economically challenged, and an academic rank system that increases faculty salaries will likely exacerbate this problem. Perhaps more importantly, however, the use of academic rank may threaten—or at least give the perception of threatening—the mission of the rural community college. Constituents may view the adoption of an academic rank system as an institutional effort to become more university-like, rather than holding true to the teaching and learning mission of the community college.

To shed further light on the positive and negative attributes of academic rank systems in rural community colleges, the researcher suggests the following items be considered for follow-on studies:

1. What issues lead a rural community college to consider implementing academic rank, and who participates in this decision-making process?

2. Does the implementation of an academic rank system adversely affect the mission of the rural community college (Brown, 1977) and, if so, what is the impact?
3. What impact does unionization have on full-time faculty salaries at rural community colleges with an academic rank system?

4. Does academic rank influence recruiting and retention rates of rural community college full-time faculty members?

References


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