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The use of faculty as a human resource: The emeritus college as a new uses for an old idea

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Abstract

Higher education institution's largest expenditure is human capital, specifically, faculty members. As faculty members retire, their expertise, experience, and value have the potential to create a value-added academic environment if they can be strategically engaged. The purpose for conducting the study was to explore the uses of emeritus faculty as a human resources asset for higher education institutions. Using a research-team developed survey instrument, academic leaders were asked about their perceptions of how emeritus faculty might be engaged with their former institutions, and what a structure for engaging them might look like. Using the framework of the emeritus college, survey respondents identified specific areas for engaging former faculty members. The study concludes that former faculty members can play an important role in assisting their former institutions, and that there are identifiable activities that these emeritus colleges can play in meeting the needs of both the retired and current faculty.

Keywords: College faculty, human resources, faculty load, retired faculty, emeritus college

Introduction

Context of the Study

Faculty are perhaps the most critical element in determining a college or university's success, and as a result, institutions and their leaders invest heavily in these employees^[1]. The institutional investment in faculty is often seen in at least two distinct areas: institutional benefits awarded to employees, such as health insurance, retirement benefits, discounted tickets to university events, access to cultural activities, etc., and the protection of their positions through the awarding of tenure and the protection of academic freedom. Although faculty portability among institutions has increased and fewer faculty spend their entire careers at one institution, these individuals have extraordinarily high levels of expertise and content knowledge that through their professional lives and work to share through teaching, conference presentations, and publication^[2, 3].

As faculty members progress throughout their careers, they play different roles in their professional lives, including in their relationships on campus, in their academic communities, and with their students^[4]. In the later stages of their careers, faculty often assuming mentoring-like relationships with junior faculty in an attempt to share what they have learned from their careers. Such behavior is suggestive of the role that faculty can play and the resource-rich experiences that can help to build both effective and successful academic units and careers by other faculty members.

This deep knowledge of faculty members in the later stages of their careers is a predecessor to the concept of an 'emeritus college.' These units take on different meanings and roles dependent upon the institution^[5], but they have their roots in the academic movements of the late-1960s when a generation of academic scholars were retiring and leaving the academy during a turbulent period of higher education evolution. Many of these faculty members had distinguished careers throughout the first half of the twentieth century and may have been ill-equipped to effectively navigate the Cultural Revolution that impacted higher education and the conceptions of knowledge transfer, and institutions struggled with what to do with these retiring faculty members. Institutions for the first time were faced with mass retirements and faculty departures, and their valued maturity was put into use through the creation of retired faculty societies and emeritus colleges.

Emeriti colleges were developed to provide an avenue for faculty members to continue to contribute to their colleges^[6, 7].

These associations provided office space, research space, opportunities to lecture and publish, and even continue working with students. Institutions found that although these faculty members were of an age when their productivity and immediacy were no longer at the highest of levels, they still had creativity and knowledge to contribute.

Emeritus colleges ultimately gave way to retired faculty associations, and in some instances, retired faculty and staff associations. In these environments, retired faculty became less central to the institution for a variety of reasons, including the potential costs associated with hosting non-payroll faculty members. These retired faculty associations became gateways to soliciting estate planned gifts from retired faculty and typically provided social-gathering opportunities for retired faculty.

The idea of an emeritus college, however, does carry with it the possible benefit of serving as a contingent labor force with extreme expertise and experience. These individuals, with a deep knowledge of their disciplines and their institutions, can step into a wide variety of environments and offer assistance⁸. Specifically, these rosters of emeriti faculty can serve as guest instructors, lectures, fill-in faculty members, and can even add instructional depth to an active faculty. Therefore, the purpose for conducting the study was to explore the uses of emeritus faculty as a human resources asset for higher education institutions.

Background of the Study

There has been a growing debate about the titles, functions, and activities of college faculty members. The once fairly singular approach to hiring tenure-track faculty has given way to a variety of new titles and roles. There are “research professors,” “professors of practice,” “clinical faculty,” and an assortment of non-professorial titles such as instructor, lecturer, and even senior and master lecturers. All of these titles reflect the growing complexity of higher education as an industry that undertakes and values a wide breadth of activities and rewards a widening array of services. And as these titles and functions have changed, so have the credentials and expectations of faculty members, along with classifications for their compensation and benefits. The result is a highly complicated, complex system that bears little resemblance to the academy’s workforce of 100 years ago.

As institutions struggle and evolve in their work with academic labor, they continually explore business-like efforts to maximize worker output with minimal expense. These types of activities can be seen in the low-pay of part-time faculty who exclusively teach courses on a contractual basis and in the hiring of faculty with guarantees of a title and job, but not a salary. In these later positions, a faculty position is promised and provided, but the faculty member must generate an entire salary through external grants and contracts, often providing a high ceiling for a salary, contingent on the faculty member’s ability to generate the revenue necessary for self-payment.

As institutions make use of part-time faculty, they are increasingly less restricted in terms of the geographical location of faculty, as many online programs make use of these part-time faculty teaching courses and supervising student work. In such environments, faculty have little exposure to the culture, mindset, or attitude of an institution and its students, resulting in at times disjointed academic programs that are mostly a compilation of courses rather

than programs of study.

An area that institutions have been slow to capitalize on is use of retired faculty^{9, 10}. Although retired faculty associations and organizations are often seen as gateways for planned or estate gifts, and play important roles in providing lifelong learning and socialization opportunities for former faculty members, they are generally treated as separate entities to the core academic enterprise. This is a fundamental shift in thinking about these groups than 50 years ago when their collective expertise was organized into a manner that supported the research and instruction of a campus.

Retired faculty associations can provide a talented and experienced pool of expertise that can often be accessed at a low cost to the institution^{11, 12}. These individuals often continue to reside in the towns and communities in which they spent their academic careers, and these individuals can be easily accessed sometimes at very short notice. With low costs and a relative ease of access, these retired faculty members can contribute directly to an institution in both offering instruction, consulting and working with grants and research programs, and even assisting with program accreditation, program assessment, and faculty hiring. This framework of retired faculty as an academic contributor to the campus has been described as an ‘emeritus college.’ Auerbach¹³ in specific described this relationship between retired faculty and current academic work, highlighting the emeritus college at Southern Illinois University.

Baldwin and Zeig¹⁴ explored retired faculty associations and offices online, identifying nearly 200 such organizations. In specific, they identified 4 that were titled “emeritus colleges,” and differentiated the emeritus college from retired faculty organizations by an emphasis on “mission to academic and intellectual matters” (p. 358). They further identified that the majority of emeritus college models are based on a relationship with a provost’s office and were headed by an individual with a title such as ‘dean’ and each made use of an advisory council. With modest funding, they noted activities such as support for submitting grants or conducting research, engaging with the academic community and the public, awards programs, and continued learning opportunities.

Materials and Methods

Data for the current study were gathered from academic leaders responsible for working with retired faculty in four-year comprehensive and research universities in the United States. These leaders were identified by typically the vice president for academic affairs/provost or a vice president for human resources. First, a listing of 300 four-year colleges and universities was selected at random from a prominent higher education directory. These 300 institutions were explored online in an attempt to identify the name of an individual with responsibility for retired faculty organizations. If no one with that express title was identified, then the senior academic officer of the institution was recorded as a possible study participant. These individuals were electronically sent a research-team developed survey instrument, with the notation that if the provost was not the most appropriate person to complete the survey, to please forward it to that person at the institution. The survey used in the study was created in four sections and was based on describing the institution and its expectations or possible areas of collaboration with retired

faculty. The instrument was based on literature around faculty work and was pilot tested with a group of retired faculty members who meet regularly near the researchers' institution. Modifications were made based on these retirees' recommendations, and again submitted to them for feedback.

The survey was distributed during the summer of 2021 using an online survey software program. Three email reminder messages were sent to the 300 identified academic leaders identified for inclusion in the study.

Results and Discussion

With three email reminders, a total of 134 usable survey responses were received for a 44.6% response rate. Based on exploratory nature of the study and the precedence of online survey work, the response rate was considered

appropriate and usable for the data analysis.

In the first section of the survey, respondents were asked to use a 5-point Likert-type scale to rate their perceived agreement (1=Strongly Disagree progressing to 5=Strongly Agree) that the role identified would be an appropriate activity in which to engage emeritus faculty. Respondents agreed most strongly that emeritus faculty could be used as Guest Lecturers in class (\bar{x} =4.83), as co-Principal Investigators on grant submissions (\bar{x} =4.77), as Interim Departmental Leaders should the need arise (\bar{x} =4.68), and Peer Teaching Reviewers (\bar{x} =4.54; see Table 1). They agreed least that these emeritus faculty should provide Grading Assistance (\bar{x} =3.80), serve in Other Academic Leader positions (\bar{x} =3.66), and serve as Professional Development Trainers (\bar{x} =3.40).

Table 1: Agreement on Possible Emeritus Faculty Roles N=134

Possible Role	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Guest Lecturer	4.83	.6231	3
Grant Co-PI	4.77	.4867	3
Interim Department Leader	4.68	.7829	4
Peer Teaching Reviewer	4.54	.8273	4
Short-Term Teacher	4.44	.8472	4
Fill-In (Full-Term) Teacher	4.36	.4351	4
Research Collaborator	4.35	.6281	4
Grant PI	4.29	.9827	4
Dissertation/Thesis Committee Service	4.25	.3156	4
Special Committee Assignments	4.25	.3784	4
Fundraiser with Alumni	4.18	.5981	3
Curriculum Design Assistants	4.01	.3496	4
Mentor for New Faculty	4.00	.8463	5
Provide Accreditation Assistance	4.00	.7654	4
Impartial Reviewer on Grievances	3.87	.9827	5
Grading Assistance	3.80	.6622	4
Interim Academic Leader	3.66	.9292	4
Professional Development Trainer	3.40	1.2329	5

The second section of the survey asked academic leaders to indicate the value that emeritus faculty could have in assisting the institution in the primary areas of faculty work. As shown in Table 2, 87 respondents (65%) indicated that emeritus faculty could have high value in conducting "Research" for the institution. Just over 30% (n=41) indicated that these emeritus faculty would have "No Value" in providing "Service" to the institution.

Table 2: Perceptions of Emeritus Faculty Contribution Value N=134

Service Area	High Value	Some Value	No Value
Teaching	53	62	19
Research	87	35	12
Service	49	44	41
Advising	61	40	33

The third section of the survey asked responding academic leaders to indicate their perceptions about the role of an emeritus college as an organization. A total of 11 possible functions were identified for inclusion in the survey. Respondents indicated the elements that should be included in an emeritus college were things like Social Get Togethers (n=93), Speaker Series (n=88), use of campus Facilities (n=87), and Academic Support for research and publication (n=79). The responding academic leaders were less likely to perceive activities such as Book Clubs (n=66), Master

Classes (n=44), Group Travel (n=36), and providing Health Benefits (n=29) as elements of an emeritus college.

Table 3: Elements of an Emeritus College

Organizational Element	Should Be	Should Not Be
Social Get Togethers	93	41
Speaker Series	88	46
Facility Use (including Recreation facility)	87	47
Academic Support (editing, article proofreading, etc.)	79	55
Grant Writing Assistance	77	57
IT Support	73	61
Material Subscriptions	71	63
Book Clubs	66	68
Master Classes	44	90
Group Travel	36	98
Health Benefits	29	105

Conclusion

Higher education institutions must continue to find ways to innovate and build upon the resources that they currently have. With few additional public resources expected to be allocated by cash-strapped state governments, using retiring or retired faculty could be an effective financial strategy. And more than simply protecting finances, developing programs and procedures to capitalize on experienced

scholars can add to the potential of institutions [15]. This addition can be in the form of research expertise being added to departments and academic teams. This experience and history with an institution can also be valuable in helping institutions remember where they have come from. The value of higher education is rooted in its ability to effectively marshal its human resources. Investing in the instructional labor of an institution is perhaps the greatest investment that an institution can make. After investing in these resources for entire careers, it makes sense for institutions to maximize their investment. This means that after a faculty member's development and use, an emeritus college structure might be a highly effective way to continue to draw returns on this investment.

Study participants expressed their perceptions about emeritus faculty and the structures that might engage them, perceived some distinct activities and roles for these former faculty. As emeritus colleges come upon a half-century of existence, it may indeed be an appropriate time to reimagine them as an extension of the campus that capitalizes on former faculty as a value-added element of institutional human resources.

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