

ADVANCING HIGHER EDUCATION

AUGUST 2009

FACULTY PERCEPTIONS OF WORK, THE ACADEMIC PROFESSION, AND UNIVERSITIES ACROSS CAREERS

Joseph C. Hermanowicz
The University of Georgia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How do academics account for the unfolding of their careers in light of the goals and aspirations that socially situate their profession? What continuities and changes—in aspiration, satisfaction, motivation, commitment, and identification with work—mark the careers of academics? What knowledge do academics acquire about themselves, their institutions, and the academic profession over time? Such questions were examined in a sociological study of 55 contemporary academic careers situated in varieties of the modern American university between 1994-95 and 2004-05. The study demonstrates how institutions shape careers and structure academics' evaluations of their experience. At the same time, organizational conditions of universities are brought to light by the patterned experiences of individuals.

Specific generalizations can be drawn about careers across cohorts of academics in three main organizational contexts. Diachronic change across the three prototypical academic institutions evinces reversals of career orientation, outlook, and attitude. Faculty at elite research institutions may be most dedicated throughout their careers, but most devastated at the end. Faculty at communitarian institutions that stress teaching may be less dedicated throughout their careers, but most satisfied and positive in their outlooks at the end. Faculty at pluralist institutions

stressing both research and teaching exemplify the greatest variability in their careers, but in the end find a satisfaction that overcomes previous ambivalence. Would academics pursue an academic career again? The notable trend is that while many would (as expected), there is also a large fraction of faculty members who say they would pursue another line of work, an indication of a profession's lack of vitality, conditioned by the circumstances that faculty members confront in their institutional environments.

Such findings pose implications for the advancement of fields of knowledge, the welfare and functioning of academic departments and universities, and the cohesiveness of the academic profession. The picture that emerges is far from sanguine. In what direction do the patterns seem to be headed? It can be argued that



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codified, less mature fields, less codified. Comparatively, fields such as physics and chemistry are recognized as highly codified. Fields such as sociology and history are recognized as weakly codified. Fields such as psychology and biology may be recognized as possessing an intermediate degree of codification.

An important aspect of codification is consensus, the extent to which practitioners of a field agree (see Braxton and Hargens 1996). Agreement may be understood to have many referents: problem choice, methods for research, theory selection to explain phenomena, and the like. One can surmise that another referent of agreement consists of a collective definition of career success. That is, the extent to which members of a field agree on what constitutes a successful career and on which members of the field are successful, given the qualitative and quantitative characteristics of their achievements. Following this logic, one would expect physics, as a high consensus field, to possess members with relatively clear and delimited definitions of success in the field. Correspondingly, one would expect low consensus fields, such as sociology and history, to possess members with relatively ambiguous and varied definitions of success in their respective fields.

One would expect members of high consensus fields, such as physics, to offer among the severest judgments about their careers. One would expect members of low consensus fields to find the greatest latitude in the judgments they could render on their careers. Put differently, members of low consensus fields have more chances to define themselves as successful because they can more easily find a sanctioned reference group against whom they favorably measure up. Members of high consensus fields have the chips stacked high; career success hinges on an ability and opportunity to satisfy relatively rigid collective understandings of achievement.

One might also therefore predict that low consensus fields offer the greatest opportunity for professional satisfaction; practitioners can do almost anything and find an outlet to be recognized for it. Professional satisfaction in high consensus fields is a scarcer commodity, since it is traded for scarcer talent. These formulations point out a further irony: *the chance of disappointment is greatest in fields with the clearest collective minds, whereas the chance of disappointment is lowest in fields in disarray.*

The *resource-dependence* of physics is another means by which it achieves particularity. To do their physics, physicists need money. Money is necessary for numerous components that comprise research in physics: laboratories, equipment, supplies, staffs of post- and pre-doctoral researchers, professional travel, release time from teaching, and an array of indirect costs.

Not all academic fields, of course, are resource dependent in the same ways or degrees. Other fields in the hard sciences, such as chemistry and biology, will approximate conditions of physics. Fields in the humanities are significantly less resource dependent or relatively resource independent. Fields in the social sciences compose a mix of resource dependence and independence. For example, anthropological work that relies on data obtained in distant field sites carries greater resource demands than sociological work that relies on observational data obtained on inner city street corners. There are also variations by specialty area within fields, some more resource dependent than others. Experimental social psychology, for instance, imposes greater resource demands than most research in the sociological study of social movements. Moreover, theorists in all fields are less resource dependent than experimentalists or other types of primary empirical researchers.

In addition, academic fields differ in their *mutability*, that is, the capacity of a researcher to change direction or research area entirely to a less resource dependent project should a more resource dependent line of research fail. Relatively speaking, sociology, for example, is highly mutable. In the absence of funding, most sociologists can turn to other projects that are less resource contingent, and often may be able to do so with few or no career costs. By

contrast, physics is relatively immutable. Virtually all physics research, save a fraction of purely theoretical work, is resource dependent. Doing physics of almost any kind requires a significant financial infrastructure.

Together, *the high resource dependency and immutability of physics establish notable constraints on academic careers in that field and in fields like it.* One would again expect practitioners in such fields to offer the severest judgments about their careers because, when these contingencies fail, the consequences for careers are likewise severe. But even when contingencies remain intact, the risk and anxiety about their collapse remains high, since practitioners can easily anticipate the consequences of failure. Even in good times, one is apt to find physicists (and academics like them) on edge because everyone knows money will run out at some point, and sometimes prematurely, and must be renewed through successive rounds of highly competitive and taxing grant application.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ACADEMIC PROFESSION

The picture that emerges is far from sanguine. In what direction do the patterns seem to be headed? Research on academic institutions offers a first step toward an answer.

Alternately called “mission creep,” “academic drift,” and “institutional upgrading,” the increasingly widespread phenomenon in which institutions of many types seek to embrace the model of the American research university has become a subject of higher education research (Finnegan and Gamson 1996; Henderson and Kane 1991; Neave 1979). The research emphasizes institutional benefits derived from this status change, including enhanced status and prestige that in turn can marshal additional resources, such as attractively credentialed faculty, students, and monies from legislatures, foundations, and other funding agencies; greater program offerings and correspondingly greater market shares of students; and increased tuition revenues and alumni giving.

By one view, these substantial changes in the organizational make-up of higher education institutions in the U.S. may spell greater research opportunity for individual academics than existed within the population of institutions at a prior point in time. This remains an empirical matter that merits systematic treatment. For example, while there may be a positive net change in research opportunity, this of course does not mean that there is congruency between the research expectations of individual academics and those of their employing institutions. This prompts a more general point.

While we cannot safely conclude that mission creep brings about greater research opportunity, we can say safely that it does entail a change in institutional expectations for careers. And the change, unsurprisingly, involves a greater emphasis on research productivity. This evolutionary process toward a more intensified stress on research has taken place amidst other changes in academe. Academics of all generations note a heightened competition for research funding. Pressures to publish are now more intense as tenure and promotion procedures have grown more formalized throughout the higher education system, and as the supply of labor replacements has increased, making it easy to substitute faculty members whose records prior to tenure may be deemed good, but not good enough to satisfy present-day performance realities. These conditions, already having become or well on their way to becoming institutionalized as to enter habits of thought and behavior, have altered what it means to lead an academic life (see also Blackburn and Lawrence 1995; Finkelstein, Seal, and Schuster 1998; Schuster and Finkelstein 2006).

Taking into account the longitudinal evidence of the study, organizational changes in institutions documented in the research cited above, and the omnipresent scarcity of rewards, we are drawn to the following proposition: *increased emphases on research will be accompanied by increased probabilities of dissatisfaction throughout the system of higher education.* As research is more greatly stressed, by institutions as by individuals, career expectations rise, in accord with attempting to satisfy external reference groups that are consistent with fulfilling the institutional goals of academe. As expectations rise, the likelihood of satisfying them decreases, because the expectations are defined by

that not yet achieved and, ultimately, by the unachievable. These conditions favor dissatisfaction and disaffection for the academic career, much as this study has found among the many academics who would seriously question seeking one again.

The present conditions of academe favor a decline in the attractiveness of the academic career. On many objective criteria, chances of success in academia across many fields are low and, where won, are hard-fought. They are also arguably more difficult to obtain across institutional types than in any other historical time in the profession: obtaining regular employment, obtaining tenure, obtaining promotion through standard ranks, publication, citation of work, competitive salary and competitive salary growth.

At stake on the one hand are individual satisfaction and moral commitment. These are significant stakes. When compromised, the institutional goals of the profession fail to be served. On the other hand, the overall welfare and functioning of the profession are at stake. The present work prompts the question of what types of people, with what levels of talent, the academic profession will be able to attract.

One scenario is that the profession will attract less talented individuals. More talented individuals, seeing the conditions under which academic careers are experienced, may increasingly enter other professions. It is conceivable that less talented individuals would possess lower expectations for achievement, thus muting the effects of dissatisfaction and leaving them more contented with work, and the profession “more stable” at a reduced performance threshold. But at such a reduced performance threshold, the net quality of academic work would decline. Public value assigned to the profession would erode further. This effect would also have to overcome the processes of induction, training, and socialization that are aimed at inculcating moral commitment and associated high levels of expectations, as well as organizational and professional norms that press for productivity. Short of organizational change, conditions appear to have developed to create an enduring crisis of meaning about work and satisfaction in the American academic profession.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joseph C. Hermanowicz is Associate Professor of Sociology and a Fellow in the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia. His research focuses on academic careers, the academic profession, and the study of reward systems in organizations. In addition to *Lives in Science: How Institutions Affect Academic Careers* (Chicago, 2009), Hermanowicz is the author of *The Stars Are Not Enough: Scientists—Their Passions and Professions* (Chicago, 1998), *College Attrition at American Research Universities: Comparative Case Studies* (Agathon, 2003), and an edited volume, *The American Academic Profession: Changing Forms and Functions* (Johns Hopkins, Forthcoming).