

Disciplinary and Institutional Commitment: Professor's Views

Jesús Francisco Galaz-Fontes

Jesús Francisco Galaz-Fontes is professor of education at the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, Mexicali, Baja California, Mexico. E-mail: galazfontes@gmail.com.

This article is one in *IHE's* series focusing on the Changing Academic Profession Project, an 18-nation survey of faculty attitudes worldwide.

Amid increasing expectations for socioeconomic relevance, higher education confronts, in many countries, a similar set of challenges: declining general-support levels linked with more performance-based funding, expanded enrollment demand, an increasingly knowledge-based and global economy, and a more intense managerialism. While giving unprecedented centrality to academic work, deteriorating conditions of work and of increased accountability has placed more performance pressure on the faculty.

More than 20 years ago Burton R. Clark wrote that academics live in small and different worlds, defined by the elements of their disciplines and institutions. This article explores the faculty's commitment and involvement, which constitute a critical dimension of their work

International Comparisons

As part of the 2007 Changing Academic Profession International Survey, faculty from 18 countries were asked to rate the importance they ascribed to their academic discipline or field and to their institution. In countries with higher education systems

that can be considered “mature” (Australia, Canada, Finland, Germany, Hong Kong, Italy, Japan, Korea, Norway, United Kingdom and the United States) or “emerging” (Argentina, Brazil, China, Malaysia, Mexico, Portugal and South Africa), 80 percent or more of full-time academics (except for Italy, 78 percent), indicated their disciplinary affiliation to be very or fairly important. On the other hand, faculty from none of the 11 mature countries ascribed a similar importance to their institutional affiliation. In contrast, 80 percent or more of the faculty from 4 of the 7 emerging countries reported their institutional affiliation as very or fairly important to them.

So, while faculty from all surveyed countries are highly committed to their disciplines, an average of 89 and 91 percent for mature and emerging countries, academics in these countries differ considerably in terms of their self-reported institutional commitment: first, on average 57 percent of the faculty in mature countries rated their institutional affiliation as very or fairly important; and second, 78 percent of faculty in emerging countries did so. The academic profession has long been associated with disciplinary specialization and involvement, so the first result is to be expected. However, how can we explain the diversity in the reported affiliation to institutions? In this note we explore a “pull” and “push” model that has been used previously in explaining student international mobility.

Factors External to Institutions

Several aspects associated with mature countries are making academics increasingly responsive to our contemporary knowledge-based and global society and, therefore,

less centered on their institutions. Such factors can be seen as “pulling away” academics from their institutions.

The outside job market. Among faculty in mature countries, more recently hired ones are willing to work outside higher education. When grouped according to periods in which they obtained their first full-time appointment, as an increment in nine mature countries, 10 to 33 percent of faculty reported considering, during the last five years, the possibility of going to work outside higher education. Among emerging countries, in contrast, faculty from only two countries manifested a similar tendency.

The interinstitutional nature of research. When asked about their research activities, an average of 64 percent of faculty from mature countries reported to collaborate with colleagues from other institutions within their own country, while 57 percent of those from emerging countries did so. This difference widens when faculty are asked about collaborating with colleagues from other countries: on average, 52 percent from mature countries reported to do so, while an average of 36 percent from emerging countries did so.

National cultural, economic, and organizational variables. Faculty in mature countries have considered, more than their counterparts from emerging countries, the possibility of moving to an academic position in another institution, whether in the same (32 vs. 22%) or in a different (22 vs. 14%) country. Linked to this potential mobility, 43 percent, on average, of the faculty in emerging countries reported to hold a doctorate, while 72 percent of academics in mature countries did so. So, faculty in mature countries appear to be more external-oriented and, potentially, less fixed to their institutions.

Factors Internal to Institutions

Factors that disengage and “push” faculty away from their institutions can also be found inside higher education institutions. Related to the increasing managerialism of the sector, the following aspects are examples of this, particularly in the case of mature countries.

On average, faculty in mature countries consider, less often than their counterparts in emerging countries, that top-level administrators provide a competent leadership (36 vs. 44%). Also, less faculty in mature countries indicated a good communication between management and academics (26 vs. 36%), and less collegiality in decision-making processes within their institutions (26 vs. 35%). Additionally, they observed a stronger performance orientation in their institutions (55 vs. 45%) and, possibly associated to such orientation, they also reported more frequently to consider their jobs as a source of considerable personal strain (46 vs. 34%). Finally, faculty in mature countries saw more of a cumbersome administrative process in their institutions (63 vs. 52%) while, at the same time, they considered less frequently that the overall working conditions in higher education have improved (22 vs. 44%).

While figures for the previous management aspects are not positive in general, it is indeed telling that faculty in mature countries have a more pessimistic perception of what is going on in their institutions. They see less of an improvement in higher education working conditions since they started their career, and at the same time, they perceive a more antagonistic management milieu. In both cases, a normal consequence could be academics’ wanting to look for alternative and better work environments.

Conclusion

During the last three-to-four decades, the internal and external context of higher education has changed quite dramatically. Living in a world defined by their disciplines and institutions, academics' commitment to both can be seen as a barometer of their adjustment to change. As it turns out, not discipline but, rather, institutional commitment is the most sensitive to these disruptions and developments, particularly for faculty in mature countries. Parallel to this institutional commitment change, faculty, again particularly in mature countries, report that doing work outside higher education is becoming more attractive. Are we to see an exodus of faculty from higher education in the near future? Will the quality of academic work suffer? Care should be taken to monitor these developments and turn national attention toward assessing their implications for the continued and future "relevance" of the national higher education system, in general, and of the academic profession, in particular.