

ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF TURNOVER:
PREDICTING THE INTENTIONS OF STAYERS AND LEAVERS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the demographic, structural and perceptual variables that predict the intent of administrative staff to stay or leave their current position within the university. Seventy percent of the members of the mid-level administrative staff employed across a ten-campus system responded to a survey designed to assess their perceptions of their worklife. A discriminant analysis was used to separate those administrators who intend to stay from those who leave. The findings indicate that individual perceptions are powerful variables that have an impact on the turnover intentions of administrative staff.

ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF TURNOVER: PREDICTING THE INTENTIONS OF STAYERS AND LEAVERS

Staff turnover in colleges and universities is both a cost and a benefit. Turnover costs the institution in human resources, that is, the experience, job knowledge, and skills to effectively and efficiently manage the institution. Concomitantly, turnover can have a positive effect on the institution. Periodic turnover provides opportunity to re-think existing structures and to bring in new staff members with fresh strategic perspectives that will contribute to the institution's energy and vitality. In this era of accountability in higher education, it is, however, critical to maximize the use of resources and minimize costs. Thus, it is timely and relevant to identify and address the issues that contribute to staff decisions to stay or leave. The importance of an experienced and committed staff as well as other costs of turnover underscore the need to identify those factors that predict turnover (Johnsrud and Rosser, 1998). This study will examine those work related issues that affect the intent of administrative staff to stay in or leave their current position.

The Study of Turnover

Turnover--the movement of employees into and out-of positions--is one aspect of career mobility. Turnover may be voluntary or in-voluntary; it may result from promotions or demotions or exit from the organization. Such changes in status between and within an organization or occupation are important events in most people's work lives (Rosenbaum, 1984). Much of the literature that examines administrative mobility explores the structure of positions and the opportunity for movement within and between organizations. These studies have emphasized the impact of historical effects and status attainment on career paths (Rosenbaum, 1984); career advancement through position change (Moore and Sagaria, 1982; Sagaria, 1984; Sagaria and Johnsrud, 1988) the

power of prior position and gender on promotion outcomes (Johnsrud, 1991); and the impact of gender over time on returns to promotion (Johnsrud and Heck, 1994a).

Mobility in these studies has encompassed upward, downward, and lateral movement within and between organizational structures. What the literature suggests is that administrative mobility, through organizational advancement and position change, is the means by which individuals accumulate skills and knowledge, experience, and build careers. The extent to which institutions promote from within or hire from external markets determines individual opportunity for advancement within an institution. For example, Johnsrud, Sagaria, and Heck (1992) found that within one university there was a slight tendency to promote from within for all administrative positions. This pattern varied, however, by administrative unit and level of position. In business affairs, the majority of positions at all levels were filled from within; while in student affairs, there was a tendency for the highest positions to be filled by external candidates. Such findings suggest that administrative staff have to determine their opportunities for advancement by looking at the level of their position, the unit within which it resides, and their willingness to move between institutions. Similarly, institutions need to recognize that their decisions to promote from within or to hire externally have an impact on the opportunities for employees within their institutions. Turnover decisions reflect the perceptions held by employees regarding their current work situation and their opportunity for future advancement.

Much of the research on turnover in higher education has focused on faculty and presidents; with few exceptions, there has been little or no research on the turnover rates of administrative staff (Blum, 1989; Sagaria and Johnsrud, 1988). Mid-level administrators are the largest administrative group within the college and university system, and they may comprise as much as 64 percent of the

total administrative staff positions in a college and university system (Sagaria and Johnsrud, 1992). The administrative staff as defined here excludes senior-level administrators such as vice-presidents and deans and other positions for which faculty rank or tenure is required such as associate deans and chairs. The target population includes such titles as directors, managers, coordinators, supervisors, advisors, assistants, counselors, technical and other specialists.

Throughout the 1980's colleges and universities hired more than twice as many administrators as faculty (Grassmuck, 1990; 1991). The national data indicate a 62 percent increase from 1980 to 1990. In fact, during the substantial growth of higher education in the 70's and 80's, the ratio of administrators to faculty was as high as 2 to 1. Blum (1989) examined data from 3,500 two and four year public and private colleges and universities which included 34,500 administrators in 32 job categories. The survey compared persons who held positions in 1987 with those in 1988; the result was a 24 percent turnover rate for administrators (Blum, 1989). Blum contends that when such a large proportion turns over, the institution experiences inefficiencies, instability and increased training time.

In a detailed analysis of one group of administrators, Sagaria and Johnsrud examined the work histories of 474 student affairs administrators employed in colleges and universities in two cohorts, 1969-1970 and 1979-1980. Of the two administrative cohorts, 27 percent changed positions every two years. Sagaria and Johnsrud (1988) contend that greater understanding of the rate of change, type of change, and relevance of gender may explain the turnover patterns of student affairs administrators between and within institutions. Their findings suggest that further exploration is needed regarding individual and position characteristics as well as organizational structures and processes that may contribute to the mobility of student affairs professionals.

That administrative turnover may be both functional and dysfunctional to an institution is evident. Brittain and Wholey (1990) argue that the disadvantage of turnover is a less attached and knowledgeable labor force and a greater incidence of behavior problems like absenteeism and tardiness. On the other hand, they suggest that the advantage of high turnover is that entry level administrative pay levels are lower and easily replaced, in some cases freeing the institution from some of the expenses associated with promotional paths and benefit and pension plans. There has been a general tendency to view high turnover as an indicator of poor administrative practice. Turnover -- and what explains it -- deserves the attention of those interested in the efficiency and effectiveness of higher education organizations.

The Study of Intent to Leave

Turnover studies differentiate between actual turnover and the intent to leave an organization. Actual turnover is difficult to study because once organizational members have left, they are tough to locate and their response rate is often low. Thus, the study of intent serves as a helpful proxy for actual turnover. Fortunately, predicting the "intent" to stay or leave one's position has been found to be a good indicator of actual turnover (Steers and Mowday, 1971; Lee and Mowday, 1978).

Intention to leave has been shown to be related to those affective responses to work such as satisfaction, involvement, and organizational commitment. For example, a study of those managers holding MBA's in industrial settings has also indicated the power of affective responses to worklife experiences (Rosin and Korabik, 1995). Their findings on worklife experiences indicate that position characteristics, organizational commitment and job satisfaction were important predictors of turnover intentions. Much of the research suggests that individuals' decisions to stay in or leave their position

may be influenced by variables that are attitudinal and perceptual in nature. Despite the importance of turnover among administrative staff in higher education, there is little understanding of how workplace variables affect their intent to stay or leave their current position.

This study extends the conceptual framework posited by Rosin and Korabik (1995) and applies it to academic institutions. Their study explored the differences in managers' worklife experiences and their affective responses that contributed to their propensity to leave organizations. Examining administrators' perceptions of work-related issues is important to the institution if these perceptions motivate individuals to stay or leave. The purpose of this study is to identify what combination of demographic, structural, and perceptual variables best discriminates mid-level administrators who intend to stay from those administrators who intend to leave their current positions in higher education.

Method

Population Studied. The population consisted of all mid-level administrators within a ten-campus university system. This system consists of one research university, two baccalaureate II (liberal arts) colleges, and seven community colleges. Mid-level administrators in this system are those employees classified as administrative, professional and technical staff members, that is, non-academic positions below the Dean's level. Their positions may be differentiated by functional specialization, skills, training, and experience or by the administrative units in which they work. Although these positions may vary by institution, typically Student Services includes admissions, registration, financial aid, counseling, advising, and other student affairs; Academic Support includes computer, media and library services, learning skills center and cooperative education; External

Affairs includes public relations, alumni affairs, communications, and fund raising; Business/ Admin. Services includes fiscal management, accounting and human resources, operations and maintenance, and bookstore (Johnsrud, Sagaria and Heck, 1992; Austin, 1984,1985; Moore, 1983; Moore and Twombly, 1990). Typically, administrative positions are arranged into a hierarchy of levels that are associated with salary categories, status and responsibility (Johnsrud, Sagaria and Heck, 1992).

The data used were from a comprehensive study of administrative worklife that was conducted in the fall of 1994 by surveying the total population of 1,293. There were 901 surveys returned for a response rate of 70%. Analyses were conducted on 869 surveys; the remaining 32 instruments were not useable.

Demographic Data. Of the total respondents, women comprise 50.2 percent of the population and men 47.6 percent. The race/ethnicity reported by respondents indicates that 339 (39.0%) are Japanese, 225 (25.9%) are Caucasian, and 68 (7.8%) are Chinese. The "underrepresented" group includes African Americans, Filipinos, Hawaiians, Hispanics, and Native Americans for a total of 92 (10.6%). The ages are grouped in ranges: ages 22-35 and ages 36-45 are the largest groups with 279 (32.1%) in each range; the third range, 46-55 years, has 189 individuals (21.7%). The majority of the employees (428 or 49.2%) have been employed at the university from 1-5 years. The second largest group, reflective of 6-10 years of service, includes 173 (20.0%) respondents, and the third group, 11-20 years, includes 146 (16.8%).

Instrumentation. The instrument consists of items measuring the demographic, structural, and perceptual variables. Most items about administrative worklife were constructed as five-point Likert scales to indicate the degree of impact of each work-related issue on morale, either negative or positive. Work-related issues were divided into two categories: 1) those institutional issues that

reflect the institution in which one works, and 2) those professional issues related to one's particular professional area or administration in general.

Administrator morale was measured with three sets of questions: the first asked respondents to indicate their level of morale with respect to their experience on campus (response of "1" representing low to "5" high). The second group indicated agreement with a set of statements that deal with the work one does (e.g. variety, common purpose, workplace, freedom, and satisfaction). Similarly, the final group consisted of five statements that pertain to the institution (e.g., loyalty, being valued, caring, and fairness on the job). Responses were scaled "1" representing strongly disagree, and "5" representing strongly agree. A composite morale score was calculated from the responses to the three sets of questions.

Respondents were also asked specifically if they felt stuck in their current position (which was used as a measure of perceived opportunity to advance), if they were a minority by gender or race/ethnicity in their work unit, and whether they intended to leave their current position. The respondents were also asked to report the following demographics: administrative function, position/job title, years worked and type of campus at which they were employed, pay level, race/ethnicity, gender, and age.

Analysis. The two categories of administrative worklife issues (institutional and professional) were factor analyzed to provide more reliable measures of the underlying constructs identified. Both orthogonal and oblique rotations were performed within each dimension to determine best fit. The results of the two rotations were virtually identical; the oblique rotations were retained for analyses. Tables 1 and 2 illustrate how the nine factors were extracted and what issues encompass each factor from the two dimensions (alpha coefficients are included in parentheses). The first dimension,

institutional factors, are those worklife issues that mid-level administrators perceive that are institutional in nature and within the power of the institution to change. The institutional dimension includes the following factors: career support (.85), working conditions (.73), perceptions of discrimination (.79), program review and government /intervention (.71), and issues of diversity (.83). Professional factors, the second dimension, are those issues that reflect the human relationship needs of employees as they function within their professional situation. This dimension includes these factors: recognition for competence (.91), gender and race issues (.89), department relations (.84), and external relationships (.72).

In addition to these nine factors, the additional perceptual variables (level of morale and opportunity to advance), structural variables (institutional type and administrative work unit), and the demographics (gender, ethnicity, minority by gender/race, age, and years employed) were included in the initial model. A discriminant analysis was performed to determine which variables best separate mid-level administrators who intend to stay from those administrators who intend to leave. The purpose of discriminant analysis is to find a linear combination of variables that maximizes the differences between groups. The direct method of discriminant analysis was used and all factors and demographics were entered into the analysis simultaneously. Through preliminary analysis, several nonsignificant predictors were dropped from the study (e.g., gender, ethnicity, and minority by gender/race).

Results

The goal of the discriminant analysis is to find a minimum number of variables needed to predict the intent of mid-level administrators staying or leaving their current positions. As shown in Table 3 means and standard deviations are provided for the two groups of administrators to aid in

understanding the coefficients. Comparing these means suggests variation in the demographic, structural, and worklife issues of administrators intending to stay or leave their position. The first test of the data was the priori classification to examine the underlying structure. One discriminant function was calculated with chi square (8df)=85.97 ($p<.001$). The canonical correlation of .41 indicated the discriminant function provided a moderate (and acceptable) degree of association. The group centroids (means) of -.64 and .31 suggests that the discriminant function separates nicely those individuals who intend to stay from those who intend to leave.

The strength of the standardized coefficients (Table 4) suggests the importance of each predictor in classifying mid-level administrators after controlling for the effects of the other predictors. These coefficients indicate that level of morale (.65), opportunity to advance (.51), and the years employed (.37) contribute most strongly to the classification of group membership.

Moreover, the positive and negative coefficients can be useful in determining how the variables discriminate between the intent to stay or leave. Positive coefficients on the variables indicate that mid-level administrators who intend to leave have lower means than those who intend to stay (see Table 3). For example, administrators who intend to leave have a lower mean on morale ($\bar{x}=8.67$) than those who intend to stay ($\bar{x}=10.00$). People who feel stuck are more likely to intend to leave ($\bar{x}=1.29$) rather than stay ($\bar{x}=1.57$) in the position. Further, negative coefficients suggest that those mid-level administrators who intend to leave are more likely to work in student affairs (-.19) and at a research university (-.19). On the other hand, structure coefficients indicate the correlation between each variable and the discriminant function. Age (.35) and recognition for competence (.35) also contribute moderately to the prediction of who will stay and who will leave (in addition to the aforementioned morale, opportunity to advance, and years employed).

Using the linear discriminant function, group membership may be predicted. The percent correct versus incorrect measures the accuracy of the discriminant function to classify the administrators in two groups (intend to stay and intend to leave). The model correctly classified 75% of the sample (486) of mid-level administrators (against 50% by chance). As Table 5 suggests, the model has better accuracy in predicting who is intending to stay in their position, than who is intending to leave.

Discussion

These results indicate that the combination of demographic, structural, and perceptual variables do well in predicting the intentions of mid-level administrators' to stay or leave their current position. Among the demographic variables however, only age and years of employment discriminate stayers from leavers; that is, the older administrators are, the more likely they are to stay. Similarly, those individuals with more service years and commitment to the organization are less likely to intend to leave their position than those administrators with fewer years of employment. These two variables suggest the obvious: the younger the employee, the fewer service years they have, the more likely they are to intend to leave. The limitation of this data set is that we can not differentiate those who intend to leave their positions from those who intend to leave the organization. The extent to which the institution promotes from within may determine whether they leave not only their position, but also the institution.

Gender, race/ethnicity, and being a minority by gender or race/ethnicity were demographic variables that did not predict intent to stay or leave mid-level administrative positions. Despite recent literature that describes differences by gender in work experiences and outcomes (Sagaria and Johnsrud, 1988; Johnsrud, 1991; Johnsrud and Heck, 1994a; 1994b), this study found gender does

not explain an individual's intention to leave his or her position. These results are consistent with findings reported by Rosin and Korabik (1995) and Smart (1990).

Among faculty, Johnsrud and Heck (1994b) found that ethnic and/or racial minority group members tend to stay. This is not consistent, however, with the findings reported here in that race/ethnicity does not discriminate between stayers and leavers. Although race/ethnicity do not predict in these results, the mobility patterns of minorities--both among faculty and administrative--deserve further attention.

The structural variables (work unit and institutional type) discriminate stayers from the leavers. Those mid-level administrators working in student affairs intend to leave their current positions more often than those in academic, business, and external affairs. The research lends support to Sagaria and Johnsrud's (1988) contention that student affairs is a mobile profession. There is also evidence that there is a slight tendency to hire from the outside in student affairs rather than promote from within (Johnsrud, Sagaria, and Heck, 1992). Turnover decisions among student affairs staff members may reflect this relative lack of opportunity within the institution. More attention is needed to identify those worklife issues that may affect the career patterns of staff within student affairs.

Affiliation with a particular institutional type also relates to intentions to stay or leave. Specifically, working at a research university as opposed to working at a community college and baccalaureate II institution may have an impact on administrators' intentions to leave their current position. The results may be related to size; that is, the smaller the institution, the more positive the work experience, and the more likely the individual to stay in the organization. Prior studies have shown that size of the organization has been an overall predictor of worklife satisfaction (Hall, 1972;

Baldrige, 1973; Wofford, 1971). Moreover, Hall (1996) states that organizational size is a crucial factor that influences much of what goes on in and around the organizational setting. On the other hand, small organizations do not have the opportunity for career advancement within the organization that large organizations do. Further research needs to explore the relationship between actual opportunity to advance and the desire to advance.

This study underscores the power of perception. Perceptions regarding the opportunity for advancement, working conditions, recognition for competence, and morale clearly discriminate those administrators that intend to stay or leave their current position. Morale and opportunity for advancement are dominant variables throughout the analyses. Both are affective responses to organizational worklife issues and structural processes. These data indicate that those individuals who have lower levels of morale and perceive less opportunity for advancement in their position are more likely to intend to leave their positions. The results of this study are consistent with the turnover literature (Manger and Eikeland, 1990; Smart, 1990; McBride, Munday and Tunnell, 1992; Rosin and Korabik, 1995) which indicates that affective responses may account for the intentions of individuals to stay or leave the organization.

The power of perceptions about opportunity for advancement may suggest that promotional ladders or explicit opportunities to acquire new skills and promotional opportunities are not clearly defined or clearly available within these institutions. Often individuals within an institution tend to perceive movement between positions as information about the structure of opportunity for mobility and the potential for their own advancement. If incumbents perceive that most positions are filled by external candidates then they recognize that they must leave not only their position, but also the institution to advance. Future research is needed on the opportunity perceived by administrators who

stay, those who leave their positions, as well as those who leave the institution or their profession.

In addition, perceptions about the lack of recognition (which includes perceptions of trust, guidance, expertise, communication, performance, mentoring, and the authority to make decisions) and working conditions (which include perceptions regarding salary, parking, university reputation, benefits, resources, and environment) contribute negatively to turnover intentions. Clearly, respondents in this study indicate that the degree of support they perceive for their administrative contribution has an impact on their intent to stay or leave the organization. That is, the less recognition they get for their efforts, the more likely they are to leave. Similarly, the more negatively they perceive their working conditions, the more likely they are to leave.

Hall (1996) argues that organizations have the ability to serve the interests of individuals or groups. He contends that these interests should shape the direction of organizational policy and practice, and in turn, such efforts will have an impact on the wider society. In order to identify those group interests, institutions need to know what issues matter to their staff members. Individual perceptions of the institution are important because they ultimately generate responses to work. This study provides support for the notion that perceptions about worklife issues such as recognition and opportunity have an impact on administrators' intent to stay or leave their positions within the institution.

Conclusions

Mid-level administrators are vital to the institution's mission, goals, and services (Johnsrud, 1996); unfortunately, their turnover is high. The findings in this study support previous work on turnover that contends that individuals' intentions to stay or leave their positions are influenced by individual and organizational (both structural and perceptual) variables.

These findings are consistent with research that indicates that perceptions predict actual turnover of faculty (Johnsrud and Heck, 1994b). In fact, the results of the study reported here indicate that perceptions dominate administrators' intent to stay or leave their current position. Although there are demographic and structural factors that play a role in decisions to stay or leave, it is clear that future research needs to probe perceptions in order to adequately identify those factors that make a difference in individuals' decisions to stay or leave.

Turnover is perceived to be a problem when administrators who leave are those the institution would like to stay. Senior administrators can reduce turnover. They may have most success if they attend to those perceptions related to recognition, career opportunities, and morale. They need to formulate and implement institutional policy to address those work related issues that matter most to their employees. This study identifies those worklife issues that predict turnover. Institutions should be concerned with turnover rates so high they affect their ability to operate efficiently and effectively--or so low they suggest stagnation. Institutions need to find the appropriate balance between internal promotions and external hires to provide both opportunities to develop current employees and opportunities to secure new talent. The key to healthy turnover among administrative staff is a balance between retention and recruitment, that is, retention to maintain stability and recruitment to ensure vitality.

TABLE 1

SUMMARY OF FACTOR ANALYSIS ON INSTITUTIONAL ISSUES
(STANDARDIZED REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS)

INSTITUTIONAL ISSUES	FACTOR LOADING				
	1	2	3	4	5
Career Support					
Hiring practices	.79				
Opportunity for career development	.78				
Clear performance criteria	.76				
Opportunity for promotions	.72				
Workload distribution	.69				
Support for professional activities	.68				
Hiring of external candidates	.64				
Working Conditions					
Parking		.78			
Work environment		.69			
University reputation		.63			
Retirement plans/benefits		.57			
Revenue/resources for unit		.53			
Salary		.44			
Discrimination					
Age discrimination			.83		
Sex discrimination			.80		
Ethnic discrimination			.78		
Staff turnover			.61		
Review/Intervention					
Federal government mandates				.78	
State government intervention				.77	
Budget reviews				.53	
Program reviews				.51	
Bureaucratic red tape				.48	
Diversity					
Ethnic diversity					.89
Gender diversity					.88
	1	2	3	4	5
Mean =	3.18	3.26	2.66	2.52	3.49
Alpha =	.85	.73	.79	.71	.83

TABLE 2

SUMMARY OF FACTOR ANALYSIS ON PROFESSIONAL ISSUES
(STANDARDIZED REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS)

PROFESSIONAL ISSUES	FACTOR LOADING			
	1	2	3	4
Recognition for Competence				
Recognition for contribution	.87			
Recognition for expertise	.86			
Degree of trust from supervisor	.86			
Communication from supervisor	.80			
Sufficient guidance	.79			
Feedback on performance	.66			
Pressures to perform	.58			
Authority to make decisions	.55			
Availability of mentoring	.45			
Relationship with sr. administrators	.41			
Leadership of your unit	.40			
Gender/Race Issues				
Racial/Ethnic harassment		.92		
Sex role stereotyping		.92		
Racial/Ethnic stereotyping		.92		
Sexual harassment		.88		
Department politics		.60		
Department Relations				
Within department relations			.88	
Cross-department relations			.78	
Co-workers performance			.73	
Communication between units			.58	
Sense of teamwork			.56	
External Relations				
Relationship with the public				.84
Relationship with students				.81
Relationship with faculty				.66
	1	2	3	4
Mean =	3.48	2.50	3.45	3.90
Alpha =	.91	.89	.84	.72

TABLE 3
MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF VARIABLES

Variables	Group 1 (Leavers) n=158		Group 2 (Stayers) n=328	
	Means	SD	Mean	SD
Age	38.23	9.43	41.25	9.04
Morale (range)	8.67	1.75	10.00	1.91
Opportunity to advance (yes=1, no=2)	1.29	.46	1.57	.49
Recognition for competence (range)	3.29	.92	3.58	.84
Working conditions (range)	3.24	.86	3.33	.77
Years employed	6.94	6.81	8.94	7.59
Work unit (Student Affairs)	.22	.41	.17	.38
Institution (Research University)	.84	.37	.76	.43

TABLE 4
PREDICTORS OF MID-LEVEL ADMINISTRATORS WHO INTEND TO STAY AND LEAVE

Variables	Standardized Canonical Discriminant Function Coefficient	Structure Coefficient
Morale	.65	.76
Opportunity to advance	.51	.63
Years employed	.37	.29
Student Affairs	-.19	-.11
Research University	-.19	-.19
Working conditions	-.16	.12
Age	.14	.35
Recognition for competence	-.01	.35

TABLE 5
**MID-LEVEL ADMINISTRATORS CORRECTLY CLASSIFIED
AS STAYERS OR LEAVERS BY VARIABLES IN THE MODEL**

Actual Group*	Predicted Group Membership n=486	
	Leavers	Stayers
Leavers	73 (46.2%)	85 (53.8%)
Stayers	37 (11.3%)	291 (88.7%)

Correctly classified = 75%

*Evaluation of the homogeneity of the variance-covariance matrices between groups (using Box's M test) indicated no threat to the multivariate analysis.

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