

FACULTY RETENTION ON A SHOESTRING:

A Graduate School Research Project 

Executive Summary

The “Faculty Retention on a Shoestring” research project was initiated to identify simple organizational characteristics and environmental considerations that schools could implement to improve their faculty retention at a relatively low cost. This research was not meant to find a “boarding school temperament”—the ideal personality, intelligence, and skill set that flourishes at boarding schools. Rather, it was intended to bring to the surface the “best practices” of schools with optimal retention in order to help schools leverage those things they are already doing well and to suggest areas for possible improvement.

The research consisted of a survey mailed to more than 290 boarding schools. The survey had a very strong 20% response rate. (Normal response rates to mailed surveys are reported to be 1-2%.) Respondents included 59 schools from 22 U.S. states, 2 Canadian provinces, and 1 European country. The survey questions are listed in Appendix 1 and the statistical results in the body of this report. Follow up phone calls and visits were than conducted with some of the respondents.

From the research, it is obvious that retaining faculty is a top priority for schools. Those surveyed were clear that creating the environment for optimal faculty retention is not so much about the faculty as it is concerned with best serving students. Longevity in the faculty adds greater scope and depth to a school’s curriculum and may also enhance alumni fundraising efforts. Moderate attrition can be healthy both in keeping the school community from getting “stale” and in keeping expenses in check. But excessive turnover can be extremely costly on a multitude of levels.

Based on this research, the most common characteristic in schools with optimal retention appears to be a common purpose among the faculty. “Niche,” “fit,” and “common values” were words commonly used by schools with optimal faculty retention. These schools attracted and retained faculty that resonated with the school’s values. This clearness of purpose also seems to help faculty members that do not resonate with these values either seek another school or not seek a position in the first place. The results seem to indicate that schools can increase faculty retention, at times significantly, by clarifying institutional mission and values.

This research also brought out an interesting characteristic common at schools with optimal retention and absent at schools with very low faculty retention. Of the schools that were asked for a more in-depth interview following their initial survey response, all the schools with optimal retention have a published and accessible salary scale; none of the schools with poor retention do. More research needs to be done to determine whether this is a causal characteristic or merely ancillary.

Boarding schools and private education in general are traditions worth supporting and improving. Students deserve the best that we can give them. This research is designed to spur on more research and further the ongoing conversation. While very practical ways to increase faculty retention exist, schools will need the leadership of their boards to implement these changes.

Introduction

This project is birthed out of both my work at a boarding school (The Stony Brook School) and my graduate work in the School of Leadership Studies at Regent University. As I studied organizational theory, I began to wonder about faculty members that left one boarding school for another. What if they arrived at the new school only to find out that it wasn't the first school they didn't like, it was *boarding school* itself. This type of discovery is expensive in time and money for both the schools and the individuals. I began to wonder if there might be: *simple organizational changes and environmental considerations that schools can make to better their faculty retention at a low cost.*

In the fall of 2001, I started talking about this idea with many headmasters, administrators, faculty, and educational consultants. The hypothesis appeared to have merit. Those conversations led to interviews with Pat Bassett at the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) and Steve Rucizka & Aimee Gruber of The Association of Boarding School (TABS). During these I discovered that, not only did the hypothesis have merit, but that there was also a perceived “teacher shortage” for private schools in general. Therefore, faculty retention is an extremely important issue facing all private schools, not just boarding schools, and very little research has been done on it.

These interviews led me to Jim Pugh at the Brooks School and his now two-year study of faculty attrition at independent schools. His research established a benchmark of 10% attrition for independent schools. This spared me the need of establishing such a benchmark. He also graciously gave me permission to adapt his useful framework for questions included in my survey.

This project itself is somewhat a casualty of boarding school life. It was conducted in the midst of my full-time administrative faculty work in the SBS development office. If I were to do it in a perfect world, I'd follow up every one of the initial surveys with a personal call both for the survey and for follow-up interviews.

A word regarding format and length. The headmasters and administrators I interviewed, while being extremely interested in this research, recommended I keep the report short and clear. They ideally would like something they can give to their board chair and say, “This is the research. Here's where we should address our time and effort.” To that end it is intentionally short and devoid footnotes. It is also important to note that this research was never intended to discover, or suggest ways to discover, a “boarding school type”—the ideal personality, intelligence, and skill set that flourishes at boarding schools. Rather, I hope to bring to the surface the “best practices” of schools with optimal retention in order to help them leverage those and to help make recommendations to schools with less than optimal retention.

The Research Method

After the initial interviews referred to above, I mailed a survey to the heads of more than 290 boarding schools. The majority of surveys were mailed to schools in North America. The survey took under five minutes to complete either on the web or in a fax back/mail back paper version. Its purpose was to identify schools with either abnormally high retention or abnormally low retention. It also asked the respondents for their estimation of the causes for faculty to leave. Jim Pugh was kind enough to allow me to use the same categories he had used to provide better

correlation of the studies. (See Appendix 1 for the complete list of survey questions.) The cover letter promised anonymity to respondents and suggested the already busy heads delegate completing the survey to a dean of faculty. The response from the initial mailing was encouraging with most of the surveys being filled out by the heads themselves.

Based on the survey, select schools were chosen for follow-up interviews. This occurred as the results from the survey were coming in. I targeted schools with faculty retention that was either higher than 88% or lower than 64%. These interviews were not scripted but followed a similar structure.

The Statistical Results

The survey had a 20% response rate with 59 schools responding. This response rate is exceptional compared to the 1-2% normal response rates for mailed surveys. These schools represented 22 U.S. states, 2 Canadian provinces, and 1 European country. Slightly more than half (53%) of responses came from schools on the East Coast; less than one-third (31%) came from New England schools. The majority of responses (64%) were boarding schools with day students; 20% were day schools with boarding students; and 12% were strictly boarding schools. Two schools (4%) considered themselves as equally boarding and day.

The types of schools responding were representative of the diversity in boarding schools: religious schools, schools with no religious affiliation, old schools, new schools, schools in urban settings, schools in remote settings. More than half of respondents (52%) were the primary person that makes employment decisions regarding hiring and firing faculty members; another 41% were on a team that makes those decisions and some of those respondents indicated they made the final decision. I believe both the response rate and the diversity of respondents mitigate any response bias and are sufficient for worthwhile analysis of results (Babbie, 2001, pp. 256-7).

All respondents (100%) agreed or strongly agreed that faculty retention is an important issue for their school in the coming years—79% strongly agreed. The average retention of respondents for the 2001-2002 school year was 83%, slightly lower than the five-year average of 85%. Pugh's attrition numbers indicate a similar dip. As one respondent noted, "...The increased demands of a boarding school environment place it at a disadvantage when competing with an independent day school." Many respondents expressed concern about salary and benefit packages, professional development, and finding the best "fit" for their school.

The reasons given for faculty leaving were a bit surprising. Since so many respondents were concerned with faculty salaries, one would expect to see that listed on the top of the "reasons for leaving" list. But only 59% of respondents said "higher salary" was important to very important. "Retirement" scored a 59% as well. The reasons for leaving that were given the most weight were "attend graduate school" (81%) and "personal reasons" (88%).

The Research Results

To a person, the heads of school I spoke with were all quick to point out that faculty attrition was not, in and of itself, a bad thing. When retention is too high, the expense of salaries and benefits can raise at an unhealthy pace for the school. Moreover, no turnover can lead to a "stale" feel at the school. On the other hand, excessive turnover leads to increased costs both in searching for faculty and in training, as well as the toll exacted on the remaining faculty members that have to absorb additional classes and duties. The heads were also clear that the

primary reason for a school to maintain optimal faculty retention is to better serve its students. One survey respondent noted that: “It is extremely difficult to ensure a quality, fully integrated curriculum if there is a significant faculty turnover each year.”

Based on this research, the most common characteristic in schools with optimal retention appears to be a common purpose among the faculty. “Fit,” “niche,” “common values,” “reaching for something higher than ourselves,” and “purpose to our work” were phrases often repeated. This characteristic has a double-edged benefit. Faculty members that resonate with the mission appear to stay longer. And faculty members that do not share those values seem to realize it sooner and leave. This process is further enhanced as new faculty sense the shared purpose more quickly because of the longevity and cohesion they witness in the faculty. Even when a school with optimal retention did not sense their mission was terribly different from other schools, the “common values” were often expressed in the unique way the mission was lived out at that institution. Here are some of the survey responses:

- “As long as we are able to market our niche, I am not all that worried about faculty recruitment and retention. It is the feel of the place, the sense of important work, and the culture of the community that serves as our major recruitment and retention tool.”
- “... ‘Fit’ is so very important as well. Does the teacher’s style and value system match what we are trying to create here?”
- “In the last five or so years, we have reversed a long term history of very high turnover (including frequent mid-year departures). The change has to do with improving the opportunity to teach well and also careful selection of faculty who fit our program. It is not the result of salaries (which remain far below other schools), benefits or perks.”

Interestingly, the leadership style of the head of schools with optimal retention ranged from very hands-on to laissez-faire. Descriptions of three optimal retention schools can be found in Appendix 2.

This is not to say that faculty salaries and benefits are unimportant. My follow-up interviews brought to light an interesting, although quite possibly ancillary, characteristic. Schools with optimal retention all had a published salary scale. This was absent at schools with poor retention. Some optimal retention schools even made it easy to “build salaries” based on adding different duties or earning advanced degrees. One survey respondent’s stated concern was, “Generally, those in their 30’s with small children, a graduate program in the works and plenty to do at [the school]. Getting through this stage and feeling good about being here is the challenge.” To answer that challenge, one school has made it a priority to weight salaries for faculty in the middle of their career. The school sees this age as the “work horses” of a boarding school and has made a conscious effort to keep them.

Faculty salaries weren’t the focus of this project, nor was a faculty salary question included on the survey. It is quite possible that some of the schools with optimal retention that weren’t interviewed more in depth don’t publish a salary scale. This is purely a subjective observation but it seems like it would be a useful exercise for schools to examine their reasons behind publishing or not publishing their salary scales.

What Can Schools Do?

It's easy to see that there is not one all-encompassing answer to solving the needs of faculty and boarding schools. Despite the above comments on salaries, it's important to reiterate that schools with optimal retention used words like "fit" and "niche." A particularly intriguing response quoted above states that one school's impressive increase in faculty retention was "not the result of salaries (which remain far below other schools), benefits or perks." This respondent indicated the increase in retention was the result of an intentional focus on recruiting faculty members that "fit" the school, those that *shared its values*. From the comments above it would be hard to over emphasize the need for a shared vision of what the school can be. When engaged in a purpose bigger than themselves, faculty members appear to more willingly conform to the rigors of boarding school life. A shared institutional vision may also encourage faculty members to clarify their own values, a serendipitous effect that Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner report on in their book The Leadership Challenge (1995):

Somewhat to our surprise, we found that individuals who had a great degree of clarity about the organization's values but little clarity about their own values had no more commitment to the organization than those who had little understanding of their own *and* the organizations values. Even more astounding was the finding that the group with a great degree of clarity about personal values but less clarity about organizational values had almost as much commitment as the group that had high congruence between their own and the organization's values...Having clarity about personal values may thus be more important, in relation to attitudes about work and ethical practices, than being clear about organizational values alone (Kouzes & Posner, 1995, p. 218).

Schools might find some form of values clarification exercise with the faculty to be both fruitful and cost effective. I am certainly not advocating turning a faculty meeting into one large group therapy session! Perhaps a parent or alumnus gifted in the area of leadership development could come in for one faculty meeting. Perhaps this should begin with the school's board.

As seen above, another area schools can immediately address to improve retention appears to be—to no great surprise—that of salaries and benefits. Although higher salary did not top the list of reasons faculty left schools, the survey responses show it is clearly a significant area of concern for heads of school and deans of faculty. One survey respondent noted: "...Because the [faculty] receives a low salary, they tend to adopt an attitude that the school owes them and sometimes they tend to give less than 100%." Fortunately organizations like NAIS are already collecting statistics from independent schools nationwide so finding out where a school fits is fairly easy. Survey respondents were clear that serious work needed to be done at the board level to address these concerns.

Survey respondents also indicated that professional growth and graduate study were important factors in helping schools retain faculty and in enhancing the classroom experience of students. Respondents spoke of this as a key to retaining faculty "in their 30's with a family." The following are some ways schools were trying to help their faculty members in this area. Some schools involved in this project offered compensation or incentive for faculty to earn advanced degrees. Others offered loan packages, outright grants, or slightly reduced teaching loads. Finally, at least one responding school was in the process of offering on-campus daycare. The intent was to have it open for all faculty members at no cost.

More Research Is Needed

Admittedly, this project only begins to scratch the surface. I hope it will spur on more research in this area and in areas such as the applicability of personality tests or screening (such as Myers-Briggs, DISC, or the Highlands Skills Battery Assessment) in helping identify whether a “boarding school type” exists or not. In preparing this report, I found myself wondering if faculty retention might increase as the Millennials (those born after 1980) move into the work force. This age group has been noted for the value it places on friendship, togetherness, community, and pulling together for the common good—all traits that seem well matched with to a boarding school environment (Zemke, Raines, Filipczack, 2000, p 136).

From the results of this limited research project, it is clear that schools can take practical steps in the short term that will have long-term benefits in bringing their schools to a place of optimal faculty retention.

Appendix 1: The Survey Questions

- 1.01 Contact information.
- 1.02 Please choose the most appropriate ending to the following statement: Our school is a: [boarding school, boarding school with day students, day school with boarding students, other]
- 2.01 Are you the primary person that makes employment decisions regarding reappointment and recruitment of faculty members? [Yes, No, I'm one of a team responsible for these decisions, other.]
- 2.02 Please indicate how strongly you agree with the statement: "Faculty retention is an important issue for my school in the coming years." [Scale of 1-5 with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree."]
- 2.03 What was your school's faculty retention rate during the past academic year (2000-2001)? (Please estimate if needed.) [Drop down scale starting at 100% and going do "less than 64%" in 2% increments.]
- 2.04 What was your school's average faculty retention rate during the last FIVE years? (Please estimate if needed.) [Drop down scale starting at 100% and going do "less than 64%" in 2% increments.]
- 2.05 Below are different reasons faculty leave schools. Please indicate the importance of these factors for faculty leaving your school. [Each subsection was answered on a five-point scale from "very important" to "extremely not important."]
- 02.05(a) Different kind of school
 - 02.05(b) Higher Salary
 - 02.05(c) Attend Graduate School
 - 02.05(d) Wanderlust
 - 02.05(e) Retirement
 - 02.05(f) Burn out
 - 02.05(g) Personal Reasons (staying home to raise family, relocating with spouse, moving closer to family, etc.)
- 2.06 In your experience, for faculty member who leave your school to teach at another independent school, do they generally move on to another boarding school? [Yes/Usually, No/Rarely, Unsure, Other]
- 2.07 What are you major concerns regarding faculty recruitment and retention? [Open text box]
- 2.08 Would you like a copy of the results of this survey? (Names of specific schools will not be shown) [Yes, No]

Appendix 2: Three Sample Optimal Retention Schools

School A

Talking with one head of school sounded just like reading John Kotter's (1996) process for initiating change. This individual had made a career of turning under performing schools around by following a ten-step plan that took 5-7 years to complete. The heart of the plan was "really finding out what things the school *should* be about and what it should *not* be about. He led extensive and specific internal and external assessments. His team would then "find the common threads" and articulate them internally, to build support, and externally, to build buy-in. Letting those faculty and students that did not fit find another place to go was as important as attracting and keeping those that did fit. According to this head, faculty retention improves because faculty members are a part of something bigger than themselves that resonates with their own gifts and talents.

School B

The culture of one faith-based school valuing "inclusion and collective truth seeking," sounds very much like the work of the "Rushmorean leaders" described by James O'Toole (1996). This school is just as much "a very busy, overworked, stressed-out place" as any boarding school, but it is saturated with a mission that gives work "a sense of meaning, a sense of purpose" that the interviewee had not experienced at other schools. Except for board-level decisions, all decisions are made by consensus of the faculty. Even board-level decisions happen only after much faculty input. In this school, process is as important as the end result. For example, all faculty meetings are held at night to allow for as many faculty to attend as possible. Inevitably faculty members with dorm responsibilities are left out but meetings are held on different weeknights to try to be as inclusive as possible. Faculty members reportedly feel the school truly "values what the faculty is thinking." As O'Toole states, they are "treated with respect and all are entitled to be treated as ends and not means" (p. 115). One benefit the interviewee saw in this approach is that, although change can be slow, when it occurs everyone is onboard. Since everyone was respected and heard, no one tried to sabotage the resulting decisions.

School C

Another interviewee said that mission didn't bind the faculty together at all. "Basically, all of our schools have a mission to graduate students of character that will be productive citizens that don't take themselves too seriously." This individual stated that the excellent quality of the students was one of the most important factors keeping faculty at this institution. He also said that the school weights the salary scale in favor of faculty members in the middle of their career. Finally, the school was in a position, due to its relatively large size, to be very responsive to keeping faculty members challenged in areas meaningful to them. The school's ability to attract excellent students, its intentional and published salary scale, and the responsiveness to challenging faculty members professionally all indicate unique ways this school lives out its "common" mission.

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