



## Why Is Research the Rule? The Impact of Incentive Systems on Faculty Behavior

**L**ike no other aspect of higher education, tenure has become a lightning rod for criticism about how the academy functions. It is a rallying cry for those who want to restructure colleges and universities—in particular, those who seek to change the incentives they believe lead faculty to prefer research over teaching. Detractors complain that tenure is little more than a guarantee of lifetime employment, one that weakens, rather than strengthens, quality by permitting faculty to determine the amount of time they devote to the various activities that make up their jobs. This freedom, critics argue, leads to the primacy of research in faculty activity and a concomitant lack of attention to teaching and service.

While opinions abound regarding the impact of incentives and rewards on faculty behavior, few facts are in evidence. Is it simply the freedom bestowed by tenure that causes faculty to shift ever-increasing shares of time and effort toward research and away from teaching, advising, and other service activities? Or, are faculty merely responding to the signals their institutions send—that professional success is based largely on success in research? Has the push for all colleges and universities to transform themselves into research institutions influenced this shift?

In this issue, *The Landscape* provides some of that critical, once-missing evidence, using data from a new study of faculty. In answering questions about what incentives and rewards systems they believe are important—as well as what consequences those incentives have on their professional lives—these faculty members provide one of the first empirical glimpses into the motivations and environments that influence their behavior.

### Going Straight to the Source

To examine the role that incentive and reward systems play in influencing faculty thought and behavior, National Center for Postsecondary Improvement researchers William Massy and Andrea Wilger of Stanford University conducted interviews with faculty members about the multiple, fluid, and



sometimes contradictory realities of their work lives. Their study was based on a qualitative, open-ended set of one-hour conversations with faculty members around work issues—their feelings, values, and beliefs regarding incentives and the resulting professional climate these rewards occasion. By interpreting the subjective narratives of interviewed faculty, Massy and Wilger were able to uncover a great deal about the trade-offs they make between teaching and research.

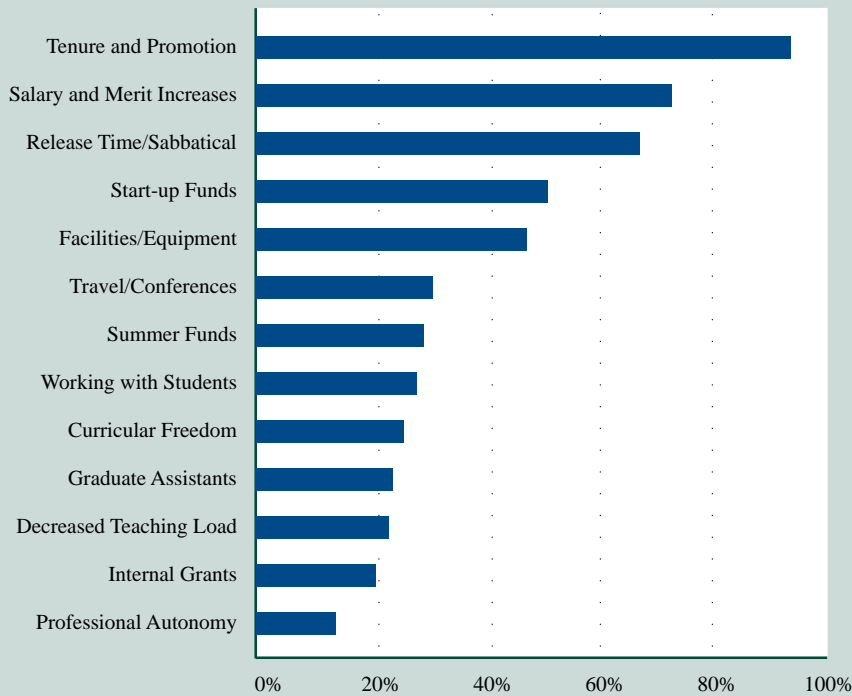
The interviewed faculty members were drawn from a sample of 19 colleges and universities across all four-year Carnegie classifications. The sample included faculty from a subset of institutions for which the researchers had significant amounts of curriculum data, as well as comprehensive and doctoral-granting institutions randomly selected from the 1998 Higher Education Directory. The resulting database contained 378 interviews with faculty at eight research universities, three doctoral-granting universities, four comprehensive universities, and four liberal arts colleges.

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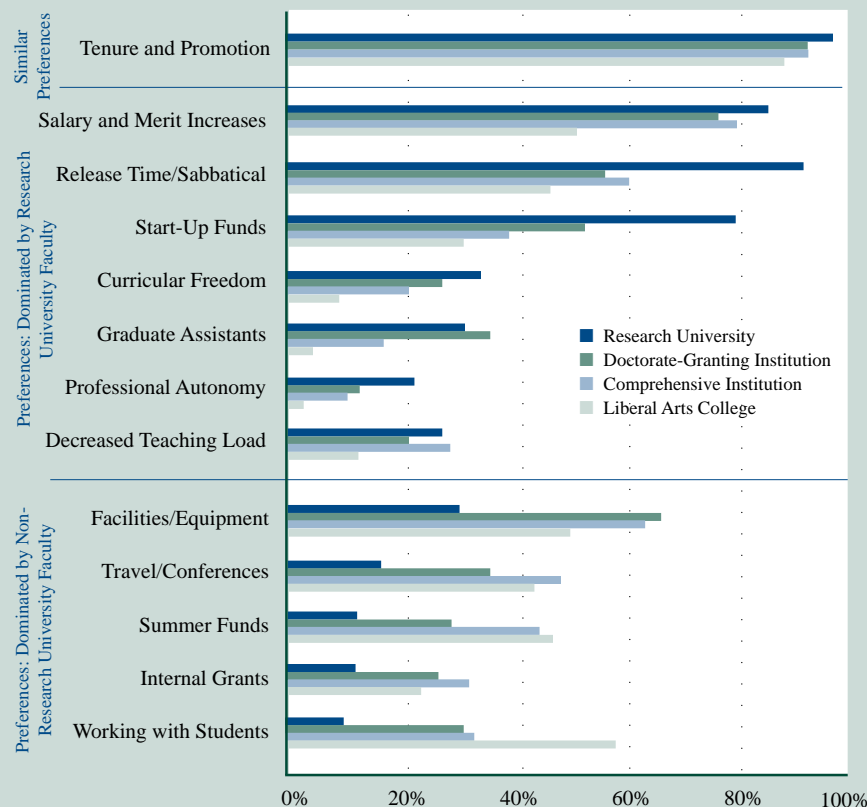
**Chart 1**

Percentage of Faculty Reporting a Reward or Incentive as Important



**Chart 2**

Percentage of Faculty Reporting a Reward or Incentive as Important, by Institutional Type



**The Carrot**

What incentives and rewards do faculty consider to be important? Chart 1 depicts the answers from faculty across all institutions. Not surprisingly, tenure dominates the list. Nearly every faculty member interviewed (94 percent) finds tenure and promotion to be an important goal. Almost three-quarters of faculty are also motivated by salary and merit increases. This finding is consistent, considering that the same evaluation criteria used for tenure are also used to determine pay increases, particularly the benchmarking of faculty research activities.

Other rewards that a majority or near-majority of faculty designated as important relate to research: sabbatical and release time, start-up funds for research, and facilities and equipment. Overall, the importance of research-based activities overshadows factors related to teaching, such as working with students, curricular freedom, a decreased teaching load, and professional autonomy.

A more nuanced—and telling—picture emerges when these responses are parsed according to the type of institution in which faculty members are appointed: at research universities, doctorate-granting institutions, comprehensive institutions, or liberal arts colleges. To help distinguish the importance that different faculty members place on these incentives, Chart 2 roughly groups responses according to three categories: preferences for incentives that are similar across institutional type; those for which faculty at research institutions demonstrate greater interest, particularly compared to faculty at liberal arts colleges; and those for which non-research faculty indicate greater importance, relative to research faculty.

Tenure and promotion continue to rank as the most commonly cited incentives for faculty, regardless of institutional type. In particular, their importance was almost universally expressed by research faculty, 99 percent of whom mentioned this goal.

While 75 to over 80 percent of faculty members at research, doctoral, and comprehensive institutions listed salary and merit increases as important, a relatively smaller percentage—but still a majority—of liberal arts faculty did so.

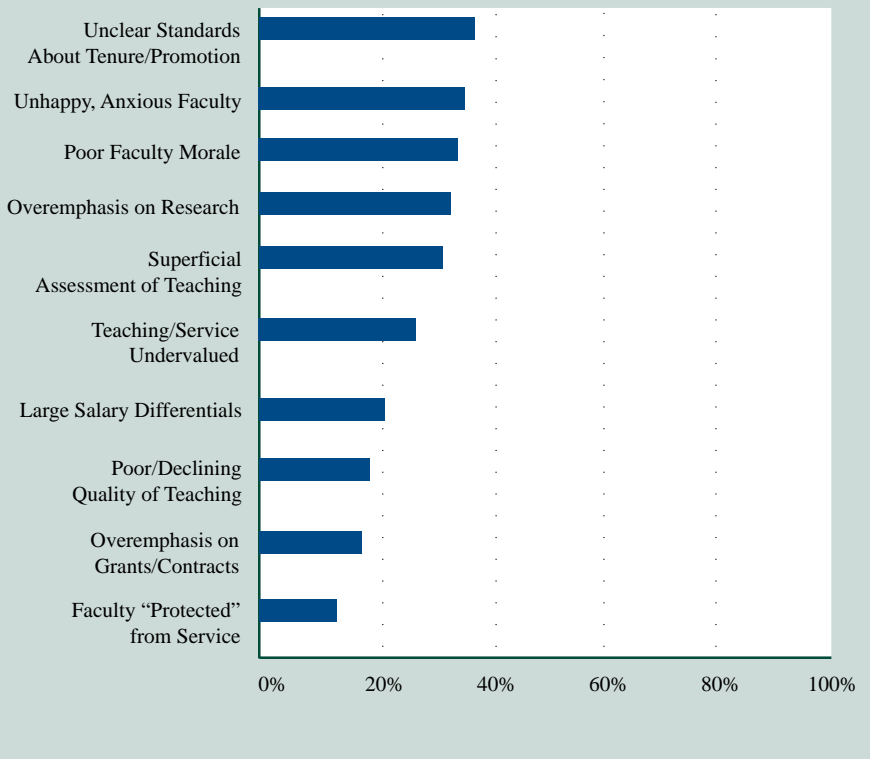
When compared to the responses of their peers at liberal arts institutions, responses from faculty at research institutions dominate in the expected places: release time/sabbaticals, start-up funds, curricular freedom, and professional autonomy. These categories all represent key aspects of research-related incentives and rewards, including the freedom to “teach your research” in more narrowly focused and specialized undergraduate courses. Interestingly, with respect to access to graduate students and decreased teaching loads, the responses of faculty at doctoral and comprehensive institutions clustered with those of their peers at research universities—perhaps indicating the increasing thrust at these institutions toward research and away from teaching.

Other research-related rewards—such as access to facilities and equipment, travel and conference stipends, summer funds, and internal grants—are skewed in the opposite direction. For faculty at liberal arts, comprehensive, and doctorate-granting institutions, these internally based resources are far more important than they are for faculty at research universities, whose activities are more likely to be supported by funds from external grants and contracts.

Clearly, rewards and incentives in pursuit of research are becoming increasingly important for faculty at all institutions. The research university model, whether the support of scholarly inquiry is internally or externally based, is becoming the dominant model. However, a problem may be emerging for liberal arts faculty, who continue to value working with students and do not—or cannot—pursue decreased teaching loads. Pulled in two directions, they are not only chasing after tenure and valuing rewards linked to research, but also maintaining an emphasis on teaching.

**Chart 3**

Percentage of Faculty Reporting Various Consequences of the Incentive Environment



**The Stick**

What are the professional consequences of emphasizing tenure, research, and related incentives? Faculty answers, it turns out, are slightly schizophrenic. Chart 3 depicts the responses from faculty at all institutions to this question. Although tenure is almost universally prized as a reward, 37 percent of the faculty interviewed believe that standards for tenure and promotion within their department or institution are unclear. Slightly fewer believe the rewards system has generated unhappy, anxious faculty (35 percent) and poor faculty morale (34 percent), as well as an overemphasis on research (33 percent) and the superficial assessment of teaching (31 percent).

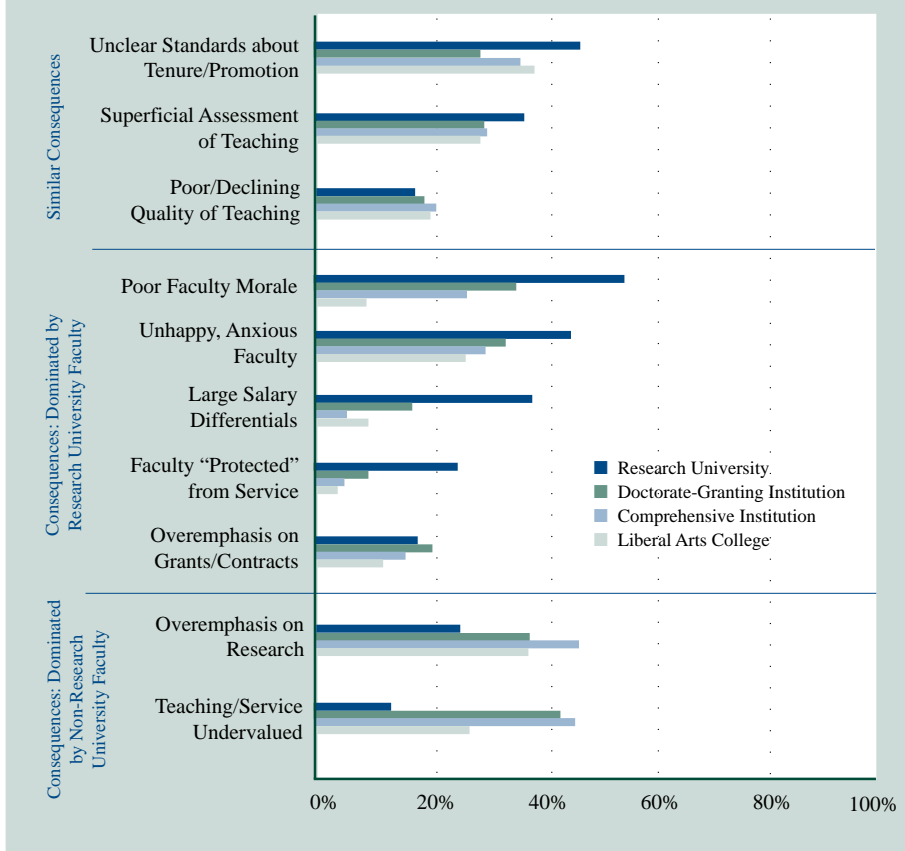
Even faculty members who were not unhappy themselves or did not express anxiety over continually shifting standards for tenure characterized the climates of their work-

places in this manner, prompted by the perception that other faculty members in their departments held these beliefs. “In the interviews,” says researcher Andrea Wilger, “there was a very strong sense that faculty weren’t exactly sure what it takes to get tenure—even among senior faculty who had already achieved it. They or their colleagues did not know if their work was sufficient, as standards were continually being ratcheted up.” Is the conclusion that faculty are becoming more conflicted as the research model either creeps into their institutions or becomes even more demanding of faculty time?

Looking at responses according to institutional type places the picture in sharper focus. In the same way that Chart 3 clustered responses, Chart 4 makes a distinction among those that are similar across institutions, those that were dominated by research university faculty, and those dominated by faculty at non-research institutions.

**Chart 4**

Percentage of Faculty Reporting Various Consequences of the Incentive Environment, by Institutional Type



Overall, roughly similar percentages of faculty across institutional type tend to be unclear about standards, to believe that teaching is superficially assessed, and to be concerned about the poor or declining quality of teaching.

However, by far, more research university faculty suffer from poor morale, are unhappy or anxious, complain about large salary differentials, and believe they are protected from service activities by their reward structures. In the case of salary differentials, research university faculty responses are noticeably more dominant, perhaps reflecting the tendency of many research universities to pay their stars significantly more than their rank-and-file professors, as a by-product of competitive and research-based merit and salary reward structures.

While liberal arts faculty do not seem to be suffering from widespread

poor morale, they are concerned about something. A fair proportion reported working in unhappy, anxious professional settings, perhaps a result of their attempts to focus on both research and teaching in the face of unclear standards about tenure and what they perceive as the superficial assessment of teaching. In keeping with the struggles to balance their teaching and research roles, faculty at liberal arts, comprehensive, and doctoral-granting institutions believe—far more than research university faculty—that there is an overemphasis on research in their rewards systems. In comprehensive and doctorate-granting institutions in particular, that overemphasis corresponds to an under-valuing of teaching and service as well.

### Perspective

It is striking how these data show

some, but very little, differentiation among faculty at different institutions in what incentives they think are important and what the consequences of those preferences are—further proof that the research model has come to pervade all types of institutions of higher education. But does the ubiquitous sense of stress represent proof positive that institutions' reward systems alone are what is pressuring faculty to perform more research in order to win a grab at the brass ring of tenure?

An interesting irony was revealed when faculty answered the question, "Absent your department's requirements, if you had more discretionary time, what would you do with it?" Eighty-three percent of all respondents said the found hours would go to research—even a fair share of faculty at liberal arts colleges. An emphasis on tenure and research within the department may be producing some undesirable effects, but it may be that faculty themselves *want* to do the research. Although they are employed at a diverse set of institutions, they are for the most part cut from the same cloth—products of graduate programs at research, doctorate-granting, and to a lesser extent comprehensive institutions.

Why has the research model come to pervade higher education's reward and incentive systems? It may be a confluence of issues—both top-down pressure from institutions who want external grants and contracts to help fill budgetary gaps and bottom-up pressure from faculty members who, in a tight higher education labor market, bring the model of the top-ten research institutions to their faculty posts at comprehensive universities and liberal arts colleges. To move on to bigger, better, and tenure-track positions, these faculty members must truly publish or perish. On the other hand, staffed with faculty capable of attracting grant dollars and becoming competitive in a national market, wouldn't it make sense for their institutions to facilitate that talent? □