Please cite the source as:

Galaz, F. (1999). University Experience and the academic profession. *Revista Electrónica de Investigación Educativa*, *1* (1). Retrieved month day, year from: http://redie.uabc.mx /vol1no1/contents-galaz.html

ISSN: 1607-4041

Revista Electrónica de Investigación Educativa

Vol. 1, No. 1, 1999

University Experience and the Academic Profession

La experiencia universitaria y la profesión académica

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(Recibido: 21 de junio de 1999; aceptado para su publicación: 12 de agosto de 1999)

Resumen

La identificación, reclutamiento y fomento al desarrollo de futuros académicos es de vital importancia para la renovación de la profesión académica. Este trabajo discute la influencia de la experiencia universitaria en la decisión de los estudiantes de perseguir una carrera académica. Considerando la naturaleza del trabajo académico, se describen algunas de las características personales más apropiadas para dicho trabajo; así como la manera en como la experiencia universitaria tiene un impacto sobre ellas. Luego de concebir la decisión de convertirse en académico como una elección vocacional, el trabajo concluye con la recomendación de algunas políticas que pudieran ser útiles para las instituciones interesadas en identificar y apoyar a aquellos estudiantes con el potencial de incorporarse exitosamente a la profesión académica.

Palabras clave: Académicos, educación superior, decisiones vocacionales, desarrollo estudiantes, experiencia universitaria, profesión académica.

Abstract

The identification, recruitment and nurturing of future scholars is of vital importance for the renewal of the academic profession. This paper discusses the influence of the college experience on students' decisions to pursue an academic career. Taking into consideration the nature of academic work, it describes the personal qualities most suitable for such a work, as well as the impact the university experience has on them. After discussion the decision of becoming an academic as a vocational choice, the paper ends with some policy recommendations for institutions interested in identifying and supporting students with the potential for going successfully into the academic profession.

Key words: Faculty, academic profession, vocational choice, student development, college experience.

Introduction

Given that the academic profession can be considered as the "key profession" because its members educate and select the rest of the professions (Perkin, 1987), it is very important that academics be among the best qualified and committed persons. Moreover, a successful contemporary society cannot be thought of without a high quality higher education system, and this is unthinkable without a talented, energetic and socially responsible faculty (Bowen & Schuster, 1986). So, the recruitment of new members for the academic profession is of the utmost relevance, as future faculty will bear the responsibility for going beyond the accomplishments of today's senior faculty.

This paper aims to clarify the way in which college and university experience influence students regarding their decision to go into the academic profession and, secondly, at making some policy recommendations to better identify, recruit and promote future academics. To this purpose, the paper is divided into five sections. First, we describe the nature of academic work within the institutional and disciplinary contexts that influence the balance between the different tasks of the professoriate. Second, based upon the previous section, and considering that academic work takes place in a context of academic freedom, collegiality and scholarship, we enlist major characteristics that faculty present, as well as some that they *should* have. Third, we briefly describe the impact of university experience, including both the undergraduate and graduate levels, on the faculty characteristics mentioned earlier. Fourth, to illuminate the developmental process by which students come to elect the academic profession we discuss vocational choice behavior. Finally, we present some policy recommendations for institutions interested in identifying and supporting students with the potential for going into the academic profession in a successful way.

The academic work

In general and ideally, faculty work can be organized around four task categories: instruction or teaching, research and creative activities, public service, and institutional citizenship, governance and operation (Bowen & Schuster, 1986; Braskamp & Ory, 1994). Some of these activities are performed by other professionals, but two aspects separate academics from them, even though they might be from the same field and hold the same educational degree. In the first place, although not always attained, the ideal for a faculty member is to participate in activities from all of the task categories. Secondly, all four academic functions are unified by a *learning approach* attitude (Bowen & Schuster, 1986) or *scholarship* (Boyer, 1990). Such scholarship, for example, differentiates the teaching of a higher education professor and that of a high school teacher, as well as the services provided by a non-faculty professional and the consultation done by an academic in the process of applying state-of-the-art knowledge to help solve problems of the general public.

Although the ideal image of an academic asks of him(her) to perform all of the functions already mentioned, the *balance* achieved among these activities, as well as the *way* this balance is attained, depends heavily upon the sector and mission of the higher education institution in which the faculty member works (Ruscio, 1987), and on the discipline the particular academic cultivates (Becher, 1989). So, for example, within the California Higher Education System, community colleges are primarily oriented towards vocational training, the California State universities impart liberal and professional education and provide a significant amount of public service, and lastly, the University of California campuses emphasize high quality research. On the other hand, academic work in the natural sciences is closely related to basic research, while in education the professional service dimension is highly emphasized.

The ideal faculty profile, then, has to be qualified by the nature of each particular institution and each particular discipline, which together provide an ever-present context for academic activities and for the professional identity of academics (Clark, 1987). An excellent academic from a research university will not necessarily attain the same status at the community college level and, in the same vein, a highly regarded historian could not expect his(her) activity profile to be generalizable to an economist. We recognize this situation, but in this paper we will nevertheless talk about the generic academic or faculty member and, consequently, we will think of his(her) work in terms of teaching, research, public service and institutional governance.

Some key faculty characteristics

The characteristics necessary to become a specific professional can be defined in two ways. One can look at successful practitioners and extract from them an idiosyncratic profile and, on the other hand, one can analyze the tasks that such practitioners usually perform and, on this basis, come up with a profile to be

considered by aspirants to it. As we are interested not only in the identification of future faculty, but also in the promotion of the academic career, we will not pay attention to those characteristics that cannot be modified in any significant way, as for example initial socioeconomic status, family religion, birth order, etc. (e.g. Bowen & Schuster, 1986; Finkelstein, 1984). This information, however, can be very helpful regarding equity and diversity issues.

In the tradition of the first approach, Finkelstein (1984), after reviewing the pertinent literature, characterizes academics as follows: they come from families that emphasized intellectual endeavors and school achievement, they have a preference for solitary and autonomous activity, they show high achievement and autonomy needs, they present a preference for intellectual modes of satisfaction and for mastering experience and, lastly, they are highly intelligent (p. 44).

According to the second approach, we need to make a task analysis of the four academic activities, which are always performed under the context of academic freedom, collegiality and scholarship. To function effectively in such a context, the academic must develop characteristics consistent with such elements of the academic atmosphere.

Academic freedom refers to the fact that academics, to the better of their knowledge and skills, can pursue whatever topic of research and teach openly about it as well (Flood & Moll, 1990). So, a proper use of academic freedom demands honesty, respect for the perspective of others and social responsibility, as freedom to do research and teach without these characteristics could very easily be abused.

Collegiality refers to the social nature of intellectual work. The solitary work of the scientist is a very popular image, but when it actually happens it is usually only part of the story. Academics perform a very significant portion of their four tasks imbedded within groups, where participants need to communicate effectively, specially because at times it is necessary to discuss contrasting positions. In general, collegiality allows academics to develop significantly in all of their roles (Flood & Moll, 1990). So, academics need to be able to work in groups, which in particular implies having good oral communication skills, as well as acceptable analytic and synthetic intellectual skills. Once again, group work demands all the persons involved to respect each other.

The scholarship term has been used lately by Boyer (1990) to embrace all of the activities that an academic does, but here we will equate its use with that of the learning approach concept used by Bowen and Schuster (1986). So, for the academic, scholarship implies an attitude of always wanting to know more about his(her) field, of knowing what lies beneath the surface, of knowing its antecedents, of appreciating its relevance and connections to other fields of study. In short, scholarship entails a life-long learning attitude and it is expected to permeate not only research, but also teaching, public service and institutional citizenship. Abstract, analytical and synthetic intellectual skills are important for such an

attitude to be productive in academic terms.

Let us now analyze the characteristics demanded for an adequate performance of the four academic tasks. In relation to teaching, there is a great deal of material regarding desirable characteristics on the part of the academic. Wisniewski (1989), speaking of education faculty, maintains that their most salient characteristic should be their commitment to scholarship, which entails "all forms of creative and intellectual productivity" (p. 137), as well as a life-long learning attitude. In teaching, scholarship implies being committed to one's field, always being up-to-date in what is being thought, and looking for effective teaching techniques to foster student learning. Communication skills and enthusiasm about the contents and procedures used in teaching are also essential. Being a professor also entails having positive expectations regarding students' academic performance, as well as having respect and understanding for them. Whatever the age of the students, it is important for faculty to interact with them in a significant way, both in and outside the official learning setting (usually the classroom). Having academics so many activities to be concerned with, faculty-student interaction also reflects generosity on the part of the faculty. In short, faculty need to be concerned about learning and development of their students and be enthusiastic about them, recognizing always that whether one likes it or not, the professor is always a role model for his or her students.

In doing research or performing any other creative activity, the term scholarship probably attains its more traditional meaning (Pelikan, 1983). The faculty in their research functions are automatically committed to scholarship, as they are permanent students of whatever field of study they work in. In the intellectual aspect, academics have to analyze and synthesize information, make questions, solve problems and, very specially, be able to communicate in writing. He(she) needs to be able to work alone and in groups and, as today's research agendas many times cannot be followed without financial support, researchers also need administrative skills to organize their research endeavors.

Public service refers to the activities that faculty perform in applying their expertise to the solution of problems that the general public faces. The range of activities under this category is wide, covering from consultation and the provision of professional services, to the realization of big socially oriented programs or research oriented towards the solution of a problem. All the characteristics mentioned in relation to the research function are also relevant here, but we can also find other ones. In particular, in this professional role it is imperative that the academic be socially responsible, be interested in the public's, clients' and users' point of view, be respectful of the larger community, and that he or she acts always with the highest professional standards.

Institutional citizenship refers to faculty participation in the governance and operation of their higher education institution. Being colleges and universities organizations where professional expertise is a major authority legitimizer, they have evolved, from their very beginnings, ways by which faculty can significantly

participate in decision making. The scenarios and levels at which faculty take part are varied, but in all of them it is necessary, once again, to have communication skills, a commitment to the institution and discipline, and the capacity to work in groups in a collaborative manner. In particular, it is important to be able to accept criticism in a positive way, as well as to be able to discuss intensively without assuming aggressive postures that influence in a negative way the atmosphere of the institution. Stress can be present particularly in this role, and so faculty must be able to deal with it.

Bowen and Schuster (1986), also on the basis of their description of the academic work, present a list of faculty qualifications (pp. 25-26). According to them, faculty have a superior general intelligence, are able to communicate effectively both in speaking and writing, are intellectually curious within and beyond their specialty area, are open-minded, tolerant and have a contemplative disposition. Faculty also work very hard to develop a mastery of their special fields, they are willing to keep up-to-date, and have appropriate communication skills, particularly as they relate to publication; they also have the necessary skills to be successful practitioners in their special field. In the motivational area, faculty possess a teaching vocation, and are able to work with little direct supervision. In particular, faculty have a good rapport with students (patience, group leadership, etc.).

As can be seen, Bowen and Schuster's (1986), Finkelstein's (1984) and our own analysis overlap to a considerable degree regarding personal characteristics that faculty *should* possess given an ideal perspective.

University experience and faculty characteristics

Of the faculty characteristics enlisted previously, many of them have been shown to improve during college attendance. Such is the case, in the cognitive area, with critical thinking, capacity to address ill-structured problems, conceptual complexity and both oral and written communication skills. In the attitude and value area students increased their interest and valuing in the arts, culture and intellectual life. It is also the case that there is a trend towards liberalization, including openness and tolerance for diversity. Finally, in the psychosocial area there are improvements in autonomy, independence and internal locus of control. Although not as clear as the freshman-to-senior changes described, the net effect of colleges in relation to such outcomes is also positive (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Of the faculty characteristics considered as ideal, the majority of them cannot really be said to be idiosyncratic of the academic profession. After all, not everyone that finishes college or graduate school goes on to become a faculty member in some higher education institution. Beyond being able to successfully complete college and graduate education, what appears to be central for becoming an academic is the vocational choice of the persons involved, as well as a socialization process that builds a highly positive disposition towards the different academic disciplines,

and, in a lesser way, to the teaching role.

One very influential position regarding vocational choice is that of John L. Holland. According to him, vocational interests are an expression of the personality of individuals, which can be classified in one of six basic types: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising and conventional. In a parallel way, environments can also be classified according to the same six types, depending upon the type of personality of the people that are involved in those environments. Finally, Holland maintains that behavior is a product of the fit between personality and environment, and people will particularly look after environments, and, for that matter, careers that will allow their personality type to manifest itself in the best possible way (Winrach & Srebalus, 1990). So, "*investigative* people tend to be analytical, curious, methodological, and precise. Investigative individuals often lack leadership skills. A typical investigative occupation is that of biologist" (p. 42). As can be seen, investigative people are inclined to become academics.

Although independently constructed, Astin's (1993) typology of college students is closely related to Holland's scheme. According to Astin, students can be thought of as pertaining to one of seven types: the scholar, the social activist, the artist, the hedonist, the leader, the status striver and the uncommitted. In particular, the scholar type is "characterized by a high degree of academic and intellectual self-esteem, high expectations for academic success in college, and aspirations for high-level academic degrees" (p. 38), while the status striver is interested in "obtaining recognition from colleagues for contributions in her special field, and becoming an authority in her field" (p. 40). Astin also presents career and major field choices as a function of different student types and, like Holland, contends that such choices are closely related to his typology (p. 41). Becoming a college teacher or a scientific researcher is, as could be expected, highly associated with the scholar type.

Although going into the academic profession could be highly associated with personality or student type, it is important to see career behavior as a developmental process where at least five stages can be identified. According to Herr, Rayman and Garis (1993), such stages are self-awareness, exploration, decision making, preparation and commitment. If one looks at vocational choice in this way, then it is only natural to view the role of the university experience in determining an academic career path for a particular person as the *provision of a context* where the activities and decisions imbedded in this vocational identification process take place. This position agrees with our knowledge that for a substantial number of students "initial career choice at the beginning of college tends to be the single best predictor of career choice at the end of college and the career or occupation actually entered" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 424). Given this, a factor that becomes crucial for students to actually implement their vocational decisions is, in the first place, to finish their college education and, in the case of the academic career, to go on to graduate school.

Finishing college has been studied under the term of educational attainment and,

due to their influence or close relationship with this construct, educational aspirations, persistence and attendance to graduate or professional school are treated as components of the educational attainment construct (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). In general, the academic and social integration of the student to his(her) college environment appears to be of the utmost importance for the completion of the undergraduate degree (Tinto, 1993), and whatever can be done to enhance such integration is viable to increase the future educational attainment of students. In particular, participating in undergraduate academic programs as research activities (e.g., Astin, 1969; Hoyte & Collett, 1993), honors programs (e.g., Pflaum, Pascarella & Duby, 1985) and in general entering yearly programs stressing academic abilities (e.g., Hetherington & Davis, 1984), appears to favor academic success, increased retention and, in the case of participating in research activities, positively influences the decision to go into graduate school. Without denying the importance of student integration to the college environment, Brower (1992) has recently stressed the complementary view that students play an active role in such "integration," and that student persistence is also the result of students being able to accommodate their college demands and expectations to their life-tasks. This perspective seems particularly relevant in helping to understand graduate persistence.

On the other hand, social integration has also been found to be a very important factor influencing educational attainment, specially for minority groups. In general, the fit between values, models and the opportunity for meaningful interactions are all important in maintaining students in their colleges. More than the presence of isolated programs oriented at particular student populations like Blacks or Hispanics, what has now been signaled is that the entire educational atmosphere or organizational culture of the institution has to be oriented towards fostering achievement from all of its students. So, actions have to be taken not only in the student affairs area, but also in the rest of the institution, most particularly in the area of academic affairs (Richardson & Skinner, 1990; Townsend, 1994). Regarding meaningful social interactions, it has been systematically reported that contact with both peers and faculty enhances educational attainment by way of impacting factors like intellectual and interpersonal self-concept (e.g., Pascarella, 1985). Interaction with faculty has also been found to affect the orientation towards scientific and scholarly careers (e.g., Phelan, 1979) and, at the graduate level, the development of identity in relation to the department in question (Kirk & Todd-Mancillas, 1991). Socialization forces in graduate school, however, can also be negative, as in the case of the way teaching is assigned a secondary rank in relation to research (Katz, 1976). In particular, socialization patterns regarding minority students can be highly disruptive for their educational and personal development. So, for example, minority students have reported a state of isolation from both peers and faculty, as well as a general discriminatory treatment. They are also bypassed for financial aid, making persistence in the program still more difficult to maintain (Duncan, 1976).

Besides the student being able to adequately respond to the academic and social demands of the higher education institution, it has also been found that economic

health is vital for educational attainment. Without it Hispanics might leave college not because of their academic performance, but rather because of financial reasons (Nora, 1990). The way in which financial aid is provided is also important, as it has been shown that study-work programs are more effective in promoting persistence than scholarships or loans (Herndon, 1984).

In short, it is possible to see both academic and social integration as a function of student involvement (Astin, 1984), and when speaking of academic careers, such involvement would relate to the academic skills and perspectives, as well as to the attitudes and socialization related to a particular discipline. Going into academe, then, would be a function of the student involvement in the relevant areas that compose the future roles of faculty. This "anticipatory socialization," however, usually takes place in the disciplinary-research area while students are at the college level, as at that time students would normally not be involved in the teaching, public service or governance tasks that they could be confronted with in the future as academics. The evidence reported in the sense that among the reasons people give for going into graduate studies, two of the most frequent were the attraction of the subject matter and the possibility of doing research in relation to such subject matter, testifies to the strength of this early socialization process. Other important reasons given are the expectation of enhancing a professional career, a state of inertia and indecision, and a special liking for university life (Rudd, 1985). Baird (1976) has also found that an interest in their field of study was the most frequent reason given by students for going into graduate school. The second reason reported was that students saw that their vocational area required an advanced degree. However, Baird also found that faculty and family encouragement were also very important.

So, it appears that students first develop a certain career personality, then go into college and, depending upon their academic and social integration, then finish the undergraduate program. During such academic and social integration, students, with their personal background always as a context (e.g., family encouragement of educational values), will be further socialized into the area of their preference gaining, by means of graduate studies usually done around a discipline, membership into an "academic tribe" (Becher, 1989). At this point a new academic has been formally born.

Faculty recruitment

What can be said on the basis of the material presented above in relation to faculty recruitment? Are there ways in which the identification, selection and support of potential academics can be enhanced? We will present some general recommendations that, we hope, answer in the affirmative sense the previous questions.

First, the academic profession should be made financially attractive relative to other professional alternatives. This implies the creation of stimulus to go into

graduate school and improving the working conditions to be found when getting incorporated into a higher education institution (Bowen & Schuster, 1986).

Second, an extraordinary effort could be made to promote the academic profession among students at the undergraduate level and even at the high school level. This promotion, however, would take the form of a relationship similar to the one found within collegiate sports and in the "farm system" of professional baseball, where "scouts" search, stimulate and attract promising prospects (Bowen & Schuster, 1986). Paying more attention to high school students is also justifiable because there is evidence that shows that intentions and academic performance at that early stage could be related to the pursuit of scientific careers in the case of women (Farmer, Wardrop, Anderson & Risinger, 1995).

Third, if student involvement determines student developmental outcomes, including the dedication and commitment to a major and career (Astin, 1984), then it would be convenient to look for ways in which students, both undergraduate and graduate, could have the opportunity to participate, in an academic and socially meaningful way, in the activities that characterize the academic profession. The available literature reports that involvement in the academic, disciplinary and research tasks has been fomented in a diversity of ways, and that the impact of such efforts have usually been positive in relation to promoting the academic career. However, involvement in the other academic functions (teaching, public service and, specially, institutional governance) has not been given as much attention. So, the initial socialization of academics, even at the graduate level, is biased in favor of subject matter expertise and research oriented. Beyond the reward structures of higher education institutions, this could very well be a reason why, for example, young academics are so reluctant to spend less time and effort in research and give equal importance to other academic tasks. In relation to institutional governance, for example, a concrete way of facilitating student involvement would be to have him (her) know, witness and participate in certain curricular dynamics of the college, as well as in other areas where his (her) participation could be possible given the rules and norms governing such processes.

Fourth, graduate education should not only devote itself to the cultivation of the scholarship dimension of future academics, as this orientation will most surely maintain the current situation of students perceiving that the only important reason to pursue graduate studies should be the mastery and research of a particular, and usually very specific, topic area (Rudd, 1985; Ruscio, 1987). There is currently a wide-range acceptance that teaching should be given special attention, but we maintain that formal activities should also be planned for the future public service and institutional governance roles of academics. Regarding institutional governance, for example, it is not very difficult to envision the offering of a seminar on higher education institutions in general or about specific topics dealing with campus governance. In relation to public service, workshops to analyze case studies of programs and activities having to do with such topics could be very helpful. Regarding this recommendation, some academics will say that such

events are already taking place informally in the interactions between graduate students and their supervisors. Indeed, such is the case in many instances. However, that is not always the case, and by expliciting these activities, the proximal environment (usually the department's culture) would acknowledge, embrace and promote such perspective. Values would be more evident in this way and people could more easily organize activities to enhance such values.

Fifth, it is commonly recognized that student vocational decisions will be better as more relevant information is available for them to explore (Herr, Rayman & Garis, 1993). Unfortunately, the academic profession is sometimes seen as a "non-profession", to the extent that some of the characteristics of a profession are not very well specified. So, for example, no license is required to be able to teach at the college level, and even the tasks that academics perform can vary to a great extent. As members and future members of this profession, we need to present it to the general public and to students (future colleagues) in particular, as a unitary generic activity, as a profession. This aspect requires us to work closely with academic and vocational counselors.

Finally, evidence shows that persistence both in undergraduate and graduate programs requires something more than performing an adequate quantity and quality of work. Beyond such a point, social forces affecting the graduate student attain a central role in influencing educational attainment, specially in the case of minority students (Hoyte & Collett, 1993). If we want to encourage promising young scholars to go into academe, we need to care for the existence of conditions conducive to students' development. Katz (1976) has enlisted among the main ones attention and recognition from faculty, regular exchange of ideas, opportunities for group work and financial support. Hoyte and Collete (1993) mention confidence building and role modeling as particularly critical for minority students. By following this direction we think we will be better able to cultivate effectively and without traumatic experiences, the students' integration to one of the many academic tribes that populate the vast and diverse territories of colleges and universities territories.

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Direcciones electrónicas donde se puede obtener información relacionada con la temática del artículo:

www.nea.org/he/tanda.html. Página de la *National Education Association*. En ella se encuentran los últimos números de su revista en educación superior "Thought & Action." Esto números están en línea, en formato PDF.

http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~hpfa/ The Project on Faculty Appointments at Harvard University.

http://www.nea.org/he/heupdate/index.html HEA Higher Education Research Center Update.

http://www.aaup.org/ American Association of University Professors.