



# PERCEPTIONS OF STRESS, WORKLOAD, AND JOB SATISFACTION AMONG HSS FACULTY: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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With the support of the KSU Humanities and Social Sciences' (HSS) Administrative Fellowship, Dean Vengroff, Associate Deans Ismaili, Kirby, and Léger, and Dr. Marsil, I developed the present study assessing the stress level, workload, and job satisfaction of HSS faculty. Descriptive and quantitative analyses suggest that faculty stress and workload are high and influenced by work and non-work related factors, including gender, academic rank, and household/childcare responsibilities. Additionally, 29% of the sample reported recently applying for other academic positions, suggesting low job satisfaction among faculty. Possible reasons for the findings and potentially helpful initiatives are offered.

## BACKGROUND

Recent research suggests that faculty members experience high levels of stress and burnout similar to those of other demanding service professions (e.g., medical professionals and K-12 teachers; Watts & Robertson, 2011). This finding is problematic for both faculty and administrators because stress is linked to increased turnover and absenteeism and reduced job satisfaction, productivity, and health (Abouseire, 1996; Olsen, 1993).

Research also indicates that faculty stress is multidimensional and influenced by institutional and faculty characteristics. For example, faculty at comprehensive universities report higher stress levels than those at primarily research or teaching institutions (Perry et al., 1997). Regarding faculty characteristics, female faculty generally report higher stress levels than male faculty (Smith, Anderson, & Lovrich, 1995), which might be due to women's generally greater role in household and childcare tasks (Elliott, 2008); and some studies show higher stress among untenured vs. tenured faculty (see Gmelch, Wilke, & Lovrich, 1986), although new research suggests the

associate rank is more stressful (Inside Higher Ed, June 4, 2012). Low and stagnant salaries and increasing workload are also contributors to faculty stress (Buckholdt & Miller, 2008). Together, these data indicate faculty stress is a complex variable best examined by taking into account work and life contexts.

## CURRENT STUDY

This online study measured recent stress, workload, and job satisfaction among HSS faculty using empirically established measures (i.e., Faculty Stress Index; Gmelch et al., 1986) and researcher-created items. Recent stress was based on responses to 56 items rated on a scale ranging from 1, "Not at All Stressful," to 5, "Very Stressful." Items were aggregated to create several stress constructs, including time constraints (e.g., heavy workload), work-life balance (e.g., managing household), reward recognition (e.g., low salary), and professional identity (i.e., scholarship production). For workload, participants chose an hour range that represented the average hours per week they engaged in a particular activity, such as teaching, research, service, and household/childcare duties. There

were 9 ranges—i.e., "None," "1-4," "5-8," etc. Faculty's recent job satisfaction was measured by two questions: (1) During the past two years have you considered leaving this institution for another (responses range from 1, "Not at All" to 5, "Much of the Time"); and (2) During the past two years have you applied for other academic positions (Yes/No).

## FINDINGS

One hundred and seventy-eight surveys were partially completed; 150 were 80% or more completed. (There are 211 full-time HSS faculty.) The majority of the sample was female (57%), White (83%), and married/life partnered (79%). Sixty-nine percent were parents of children 17 years of age or younger. Almost half of Associates and Assistants reported parenting at least one pre-school aged child compared to 16% of Fulls. Twenty-four percent reported being Full Professors, 34% Associates, 33% Assistants, and 9% Lecturers. Lecturers were not included in reported analyses because of their low number.

The greatest stressors—those with a mean of 3.0 or above—were similar across gender and were related to time constraints, work-life balance difficulties, and

inadequate reward recognition. The level of stress associated with these variables, however, varied significantly by gender with women consistently reporting higher stress than men. Academic rank differences also emerged with Associates reporting significantly higher stress than Fulls on time constraints, work-life balance, reward recognition, and professional identity. Interestingly, Assistants' stress was not significantly higher than Fulls' stress, except on work-life balance and professional identity.

There were also academic rank differences on weekly workload hours, with the starkest differences on household and childcare duties. Forty-seven percent of Associates reported working 17+ hours weekly in the home compared to less than 25% for each of the other ranks. More male faculty reported working 17+ hours in the home than female faculty (48%, 33%).

Regarding scholarship, over 80% of Fulls, Associates, and Assistants reported at least one publication in the last two years. However, scholarship workload differed by academic rank. There was a bimodal distribution for Fulls. Twenty-nine percent reported being heavily engaged in scholarship (17+ hours weekly), and 29% reported being less engaged (1-4 hours weekly). Contrarily, only a small percent of Associates and Assistants reported spending 17+ hours on scholarship, with the majority spending between 1-4 and 5-8 hours.

Teaching time was similarly high for Associates and Assistants. Over two-thirds of each reported spending between 5-8 and 9-12 hours in the classroom weekly. On the other hand, Assistants spend considerably more time prepping

for teaching than Associates. Almost half of Assistants reported spending between 13-16 and 17+ hours prepping compared to less than one-third of Associates. Fulls spend less time in the classroom than the other ranks but have similar prep hours to Associates.

There were little academic rank differences on service-related activities. Most faculty reported spending between 1-4 and 5-8 hours, although the majority of Associates spend 5-8 hours and the majority of Assistants spend 1-4. Most Fulls were almost evenly split between the two ranges.

Overall, tenured/tenure-track faculty reported moderately low job satisfaction. Although not statistically significant, Associates considered leaving KSU more than Fulls and Assistants ( $M = 3.3, 2.8, 2.7$ , respectively). Surprisingly, 29% of the tenured/tenure-track faculty surveyed reported they had applied for other academic positions in the last two years. Consistent with the aforementioned findings, more Associates (37%) reported applying compared to Fulls (23%) and Assistants (24%).

## CONCLUSIONS

Overall, faculty stress levels and workload are high and job satisfaction is moderately low. Women report greater stress than men; Associates report greater stress and lower job satisfaction than Fulls. To a lesser extent than Associates, Assistants report higher stress than Fulls, but do not differ from Fulls on job satisfaction. The data suggest possible contributing factors to these findings, including: low, stagnant salaries; rising cost of benefits; the long hours many Associates spend on household and childcare duties; and the significant time many Associates

and Assistants spend in teaching-related activities. Scholarship productivity is also likely limited by competing non-research demands, which could make meeting rising scholarship expectations for tenure and/or promotion challenging.

Below are several possible ways to address faculty needs while meeting KSU institutional priorities:

- Faculty salary increases and benefit cost decreases
- Reduction in teaching load
- Affordable campus childcare
- Aligning KSU Spring and Winter Breaks with Cobb County School System
- Paid semester leave for new parents
- Policy on stopping tenure clock for caregiving-related demands (e.g., after birth/adoption of child, when caring for chronically ill spouse, child, or parent)
- Decreasing financial barriers to summer scholarship production (e.g., 12 month faculty salary option, increased availability of current HSS summer research grants)
- Pre-tenure and post-promotion research sabbaticals
- Automatic course releases and reduced service for new tenure-track faculty and Associates seeking promotion to Full
- More opportunities for all faculty to reassign time from teaching and service to research
- Assessment of stress, workload, and job satisfaction across university faculty
- Creation of university-wide faculty development center for scholarship production, education, and collaboration