Autonomy and Anonymity: Characteristics of Branch Campus Faculty

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Abstract

Faculty characteristics have major impacts on the teaching and learning environment at branch campuses. A national study of branch campus administrators conducted in 1998-99 highlights issues arising from the disparity in faculty composition associated with the various forms of branch campus organization. The authors describe a faculty environment that is at once anonymous and autonomous in relation to the larger, dominant institution in a multi-campus system.

As the transition from an elite to a mass to a universal system of higher education accelerates, the need for branch campuses is greater than ever. Not only are enrollments growing dramatically in most states, many of today's students do not fit the traditional profile of the 18-25 year-old cohort who attend full-time and live on campus. Today's students seek a quality education at a convenient location, at a convenient time, and at a value price. Extracurricular activities and services are often not the prime attraction for these students.
Branch campuses are often created to serve this non-traditional student niche. And, while they may not always look like a traditional campus, branch campuses are dependent on the most vital resource any institution possesses: the faculty. Branch campuses, however, offer particular challenges for building and maintaining an instructional staff. Faculty roles are not always clearly defined, and additional administrative and support burdens may be imposed on those who perform the bulk of instruction. In this paper we will report on a survey that explored some of these issues and point the way to other fruitful areas of future research as they may pertain to the further evolution of branch campus faculty.

The Study

In 1998 co-author Nickerson conducted a national survey of branch campus administrators. The survey attempted to (1) identify key branch campus characteristics; (2) validate a typology of branch campuses; and (3) ascertain the views of branch administrators on a wide range of subjects involving faculty, students, resources, organization, and institutional relations. Of 1,089 administrators identified and sent surveys, there were 269 valid responses, for a 24.7 percent response rate.

Branch campuses come in as many varieties and forms as do their progenitors; therefore, it was important to establish a list of organizational characteristics that branch campuses share, and that distinguish them from the main campus. These were listed as threshold criteria and included the following:

- one or more levels removed from the institution's governing board
- physically separate from the main campus
- a limited mission vis-à-vis the main campus
- dependence on the main campus for some or all credentialing and/or certification of students
- dependence on the main campus for some or all accreditation
- governance by some combination of main campus values, curriculum and budgetary control, and faculty review/tenure factors

Additionally, respondents were asked to identify whether they shared other, non-essential characteristics including:

- a student headcount of 2,000 or fewer
- CEO's title is other than president or chancellor
- a majority of the curriculum is time-delimited (e.g., only lower or upper division, graduate, etc.)
- curriculum is primarily market-driven
- reliance on the main campus for some or all student support services and extracurricular activities

Although there exists important research on *systems* of higher education, there is little in the literature that addresses branch campuses directly. Thus, a typology of branch campuses was needed for self-identification and consisted of seven variations derived from a review of national directories, accrediting standards, professional organizations, and the researcher's knowledge of branch campuses. The types (and their corresponding sampling percentage) are:

- **Extension Center**: Primarily non-degree programs (3 percent)
- **Regional Campus of a University**: Primarily 2 year college-transferable curriculum (13.8 percent)
- **Comprehensive Two Year Branch of a University**: Transfer and vocational/technical curriculum (7.8 percent)
- **Community College Branch**: Transfer and/or vocational/technical curriculum at off-site location (36.1 percent)
- **Upper Division Branch**: Junior/Senior level curriculum with some graduate and credential programs (14.1 percent)
- **Graduate Center**: Graduate and/or professional programs only (6.7 percent)
- **Distributed University**: No dominant flagship campus; institution's programs are decentralized (3.7 percent)

The remaining respondents (14.9 percent) were unable to identify their institutions within the typology. The most frequent "other" response described a four-year branch of limited size and services.

While the aforementioned study was comprehensive in scope, this article focuses on one aspect of the survey: branch campus faculty characteristics and their implications for the teaching and learning environment of current and future branch campuses. Respondents were asked a series of questions pertaining to the nature of faculty assignments at the branch, including: full-to-part-time faculty ratios, hiring practices, governance, tenure, resources, and faculty attitudes regarding working conditions. Note that while some of the data are

quantitative and verifiable, many of the questions asked respondents for their perceptions—and second-hand at that—concerning faculty attitudes or views.

Who Are Branch Campus Faculty?

An obvious starting point in a discussion of branch campus faculty would be the existence and nature of such a faculty; i.e., do branches have resident faculties and, if so, in what form? Seventy five percent of respondents indicated that they did indeed have at least some resident faculty. The type of branch campus does seem to influence the likelihood of a resident faculty (Table 1). Virtually all comprehensive and regional campuses of universities have resident faculties. These campuses, acting as feeder institutions to the flagship campus, are largely involved in upper-division transfer preparation and ensure quality control for the larger institution. Community colleges and upper-division branches are a bit less likely to have resident faculty. While the reasons for this disparity are not entirely clear, it would appear that geography plays a role. The conventional view of branch campuses is that they serve rural, or at least remote, populations. Increasingly, however, it appears that branch campuses serve a new kind of place-bound learner: the suburban adult. Unable to travel to the main campus because of employment and familial obligations, and congested urban corridors, these learners flock to the new branch campus, often located in the suburbs, a relatively short distance from the main campus. Accordingly, some institutions determine that it is easier and less costly to have faculty commute to these sites, which are often in rented facilities of some kind. Upper-division and community college branches, particularly in the Sunbelt and western states where population and enrollments are growing, often follow this form.

Table 1 Branch Campuses With Resident Faculty

Community College Branch	Compreshesive Branch of University	Regional Campus of Univ.	Upper Division Branch	Graduate Branch	Distributed University Campus	Extension Branch	Other
71%	100%	92%	66%	83%	90%	38%	65%
68 of 96	21 of 21	34 of 37	25 of 38	15 of 18	9 of 10	3 of 8	26 of 40

Although most branch campuses have at least some resident faculty, respondents report that the ratio of part-to-full-time faculty is generally much higher on branches than at the main campus (Table 2 highlights the ratio of part-time faculty teaching at the branch as reported by survey respondents). Indeed, 62 percent of respondents indicated that there is a higher ratio of part-time faculty teaching at the branch, and only 12 percent indicated that that ratio was reversed at the branch. For the most part, this phenomenon appears independent of campus type. Thus, if institutional leaders expect to have comparable educational program quality at the branch, this places a premium on the selection, integration, and evaluation of part-time faculty. Not only must a competent pool of adjuncts be hired, but they also must be trained in the ways of the institution's and the relevant department's curricular goals, because they serve as a critical link between the branch campus student and the institution.

Indeed, for the few resident faculty at most branches, this becomes a significant additional workload.

Table 2
Percentage of Curriculum Taught By Adjuncts/Part-timers

Campus Type	0 - 25% of courses	26 - 50% of courses	51 - 75% of courses	75 - 100% of courses	Total Responses
Comm. College	7	21	39	22	89
Comprehensive	8	3	8	1	20
Regional	7	15	5	8	35
Upper Division	9	11	9	8	37
Graduate	8	2	2	4	16
Distributed	0	4	4	2	10
Extension	1	1	1	4	7
Other	9	8	8	12	37
Total	49	65	76	61	251

The survey also attempted to determine key roles in the recruitment and selection of branch campus faculty, both tenure-track faculty and adjuncts. While there may have been some ambiguity with respect to the meaning of the term "recommends" in the question, "Who recommends the hiring of branch campus faculty?" there are clear patterns which emerge from the data. A more collegial selection process, with significant faculty involvement, tends to occur when the branch CEO's title is Dean. When the branch CEO's title is President, Provost, or Director, the recommending authority is more frequently listed as "the CEO" than is the case where the title is Dean. There may be several reasons for this. The first is that it is far more likely that there is an assigned faculty at a branch campus where the CEO has the title of Dean. A second may have to do with campus type. Community college branches, the predominant model in the study, are more apt to be in close proximity to the main campus and least likely to have a resident faculty. The model at these campuses appears to be more administrative and less collegial as a result.

Also, for these campuses, faculty selection may be more routine because a predictable array of courses is offered each term from the main campus' regular programs. "Recommendation" may mean recommending to departments the particular faculty to be assigned to courses at the branch from within the

departments' current regular faculty or adjunct pools, rather than recommendations of initial hire.

Not surprisingly, faculty selection criteria for branches tend to heavily weigh teaching expertise. Fully 91 percent of branch administrators rated it as the most important factor, and the balance rated it second most important. Another crucial determinant was an applicant's interdisciplinary skills. This, too, was largely independent of campus type although, somewhat understandably, graduate centers did not rate it as highly. Interdisciplinary skills appear important for several reasons (1) often such faculties have not reached a critical mass where traditional disciplinary models can be applied; (2) branch academic programs tend to be market-driven and, of necessity, adaptable; and (3) branch campuses are often viewed as fledgling organizations where experimentation can be encouraged.

Autonomy and Isolation: Two Sides of the Sword

According to respondents, faculty are attracted to the branch by the perceived flexibility and autonomy that comes with working at such a site. Factors that were perceived to attract faculty interest in teaching at the branch campus (rated as very or somewhat important) were: flexibility and autonomy (91 percent), branch campus mission (77 percent), and location (64 percent). Student characteristics and the unavailability of a position at the main campus were both rated as very or somewhat important by 50 percent of respondents. But this perceived autonomy and flexibility appears to have its price. When tenure is institution-wide (the predominant model), and determined largely by main campus colleagues, branch faculty feel vulnerable. Further, while there may be a willingness among senior colleagues to acknowledge the unique factors in branch assignments, there is nonetheless widespread sentiment that teaching is undervalued and research overly so. This is a particular problem for resident branch faculty, given the probable infrequency with which they interact with main campus colleagues, and the often poor access to resources that might be considered ordinary on the main campus.

The composition of branch faculties exacerbates this vulnerability. While 35 percent of respondents claim that their faculty's characteristics are comparable to those of the main campus, 30 percent claim they have a more junior faculty and another 20 percent more women. [This belies the authors' initial hypothesis that branches tend to attract a more senior faculty who are finished with campus politics and major research and rediscovering the joys of teaching.]

The autonomy that the branch faculty hope for does not appear to stem from traditional governance models. While these faculty feel less encumbered by tradition and politics, there are few autonomous branch campus senates, and their representation in main campus bodies appears limited. As with promotion and tenure, local autonomy extends only so far. So, do branch faculty seek to secede from the main campus and form a more perfect union? Interestingly, it would appear not. Keeping in mind that the respondents are CEOs reporting

their perceptions of faculty sentiment, fully two-thirds claim that faculty would prefer to maintain the status quo and only 28 percent want the branch to evolve into an autonomous institution. The remaining 5 percent would choose to transfer to the main campus or rotate between the two. Eighteen percent reported having separate tenure for the branch, and an overlapping 15 percent having an autonomous Senate for the branch. The difference in those two proportions probably reflects a few institutions that have tenure but no senate, just as the 88 percent that do not have separate tenure probably includes institutions at which there is no tenure at the main campus either.

What could explain this seeming contradiction? On the one hand, branch faculty perceive their lives to be in the hands of distant and possibly unsympathetic colleagues on the main campus, and their predicament compounded by poor access to resources. On the other, they appear uninterested in alternative possibilities that represent greater independence. Are there student characteristics or interdisciplinary or entrepreneurial opportunities associated with the branch that adequately compensate for these drawbacks? Or, having chosen this environment, are they confident that they can overcome the barriers? Further research will be required to answer these questions—preferably with branch faculty themselves serving as the subjects. This raises the possibility that there is (or that administrators perceive there is) a branch campus faculty type, for whom the contextual characteristics that define a branch campus are particularly attractive.

Implications for Faculty

As might be expected, there appear to be advantages and disadvantages for faculty assigned to branch campuses. As the administrators in the study noted, branch campus faculty are more likely to be part-time or untenured. Forty-five percent of respondents stated that faculty feel they have limited access to resources. About a third reported that faculty believe their workload differs from those of their peers at the main campus, and that there is less prestige at the branch campus. But, a third reported that faculty find teaching branch campus students more interesting, and almost half stated that faculty feel less encumbered by politics and tradition. There is an interesting and subtle relationship, from a faculty perspective, between autonomy and anonymity. At a university where research visibility is critical, the branch campus may be exile, and anonymity may mean death. But at a typical comprehensive university or community college, the tenure track probationer who cheerfully teaches at the branch campus, and gets excellent student evaluations, is probably a valued colleague. We find ourselves envisioning a department promotion and tenure meeting in which the stodgy old purist, Oscar, grumbles "but he's only got two articles," and the pragmatist responds, "but if HE doesn't teach Beowulf at the Snake River Center every Winter, Oscar, YOU'll have to."

In fact, to the average faculty member, the existence of a variety of models is likely unimportant. S/he is working within one model, and may not even be aware of the others. The typical comparison to be made by a probationary or

tenured faculty member is with the situation of faculty at the home campus. An adjunct may compare their situation with another local institution at which s/he also teaches. In neither case will they necessarily even know of alternative models for branch campus funding, administration, and governance, let alone prefer one to the other. The demographics suggest a faculty that is a powerful potential asset, but relatively un-formed and uninformed. We suspect that in interpreting faculty interests and desires, administrators have somewhat overestimated the sophistication of that faculty.

If we are correct about the relative naïveté of branch campus faculty, at least vis-à-vis the array of alternative models of organization, then the attitudes attributed to faculty might be those of the administrators themselves. In areas where the faculty view has been independently verified, however, administrators seem right on target; their responses reflect the complexity of the isolation-autonomy issues. Branch faculty are likely to be concerned about relative isolation and its effects on their careers. The isolation factor is not simply opportunistic; branch campus faculty may feel they have less access to libraries, specialized labs or computers, and colleagues for joint research. Also, faculty in fields that have a heavy load of service courses, such as history and English, may be isolated from students majoring in the field. Majors may concentrate on the main campus, leaving the branch campus faculty member teaching only introductory courses.

Course loads may be equal in terms of units, but may require more preparation and teaching of a broader range of courses with fewer electives. If faculty also perform student advising, they will have fewer easy advisees, and more students with complicated transcripts and bureaucratic glitches. On the other hand, many branch campuses have assets not available to main campus programs. They may have discretionary funds generated by extension fees or facility rentals. They may also be in newer or more flexible spaces, have room to expand, or have newer equipment, etc.

The profile of branch-campus faculty that begins to emerge is a positive and energetic one. For the roughly two thirds of branch campuses reporting differences in faculty composition when compared to the main campus, the differences lean toward younger, more junior, more female faculty. Many are "Freeway Flyers"; others are traditional faculty whose allegiance has been won by the branch. In sum, it would seem that branch campus faculty, whether tenure-track or lecturer, full time or part time, give their allegiance voluntarily, and are won over by institutions and individual leaders who offer them opportunities and support in achieving their goals.

If the quality of academic programs is largely determined by faculty, branch campuses must recruit and retain good faculty members, support their work, and maintain their morale. For when new faculty come programs will follow, and so will more and better students. Faculty bring quality programs with them, develop new ones, or otherwise strive to maintain or increase enrollments in their programs. Most branch campus administrators we have known are deeply student-centered. They seem to realize that, ironically, their students are often more permanent than their faculty. This creates a powerful opportunity to build a reputation of excellence in both program quality and quality of service.

Historically, branch campuses have most often evolved into stand-alone campuses. Note, though, that with distance learning and online learning, infinite variations are possible. The expectation of eventual autonomy should be balanced against the potential value of other design possibilities:

- demand-driven short range programs which will close down when demand is satisfied
- a counter-trend toward re-centralizing programs
- distance learning may create off-campus centers with NO faculty, just student services
- the clustering of faculties with no real campus (the distributed university model)

These models have important differences for faculty, but there is some doubt whether faculty consider them as possibilities. At our institution, a senior faculty colleague recently proposed a campus model that he described as a decentralized university, which takes its programs to its constituents at the places and times needed. This is the core of the distributed university model. Now may be the time for some reconsideration of the roles of existing branch campuses, and the forms new ones will take. It may also benefit branch campuses to educate current faculty and prospective applicants about their particular characteristics.

Some Further Thoughts

The absence of a coherent body of literature dealing with branch campuses is an inexplicable gap in modern higher education. Whatever the past reasons, this journal marks an attempt to begin to define and understand this increasingly prevalent and vital educational component. The survey on which this article is based, however modest, is an attempt to understand the landscape and the players. Faculty at branch campuses—just as they are at every level of education—are critical to the success of these enterprises. So, what are some of the important things we have learned about branch faculty, as seen through the eyes of campus administrators?

First, while the typology of branch campuses clearly needs fine-tuning, it appears to be a valid organizational taxonomy. There needs to be a way to organize and account for the "other" component, but fully 85 percent of respondents nationally were able to self-identify within the typology, and

similar percentages were derived for the criteria and characteristics developed. This augurs well for a predictive model that will enable future policy makers to make informed decisions about the shape and character of planned campuses based on their intended goals.

Second, it appears that branch administrators play a far more active role in the selection of faculty than presumed. What accounts for this, and is it a positive or negative development? Certainly, there is the possibility that there was a misinterpretation of the question. The hiring process is a protracted, multi-step procedure at most colleges and universities, and rarely does one individual control the entire process. Nevertheless, it is also possible that main campus faculty cede to branch administrators a degree of control they would never dream of on the home campus. This could be related to the branch's low visibility on the institutional radar scope, or the perception that branch campus hires are not as critical and thus unworthy of their time. We find this latter scenario improbable, but have experienced first-hand main campus faculty indifference to our programs on a few occasions. Other factors, such as the high percentage of part-timers, locus of tenure, or the interdisciplinary emphasis may have a compounding influence. And, of course, there is the inescapable fact that this survey was completed by administrators who may have an overly optimistic perspective on their degree of influence. Nevertheless, there is something here that bears further investigation. Too many campuses of different organizational types made these claims for us to ignore their implications.

Third, branch faculties are different in size and composition when compared with those of their parent campuses. Yes, there is a trend nationally—perhaps internationally—for tenure track lines to diminish and the numbers of part-time faculties to grow, but the numbers reported here are worth a second look. Almost 25 percent of branch campuses reported that 75 percent or more of all courses are taught by adjuncts; and 55 percent of all branches reported that 50 percent or more of courses were taught by part-timers. What, then, does this portend for instruction of branch campus students? Consider the campus that is currently too small to have more than a handful of resident faculty. Unless there is a significant and well-planned rotation of faculty from the main campus, local faculty, often junior in status, will have to orchestrate and integrate adjuncts and teach more critical courses than would be advisable to ensure that there is program coherence. On the downside, students may not be exposed to the breadth and diversity of faculty expertise and opinion as are their main campus peers.

Fourth, while we only touched briefly on the subject, it is worth noting that as more instruction moves to the Internet or other forms of distance learning, this distancing may be viewed as less of a problem, or at least not unique to branch campuses. But just as "high tech—high touch" has become an organizational

mantra, there will always remain the need for branch students to have frequent interpersonal connections with real faculty, and the more of them the better. E-mail and chat rooms may enrich and expand our communicative possibilities, but they cannot as yet replace the need for a more personal communication between student and faculty.

Fifth, survey data suggest that there is a strong correlation between branch faculty autonomy and distance from the main campus. This is especially likely for branches established before the advent of teleconferencing and the ubiquitous nature of the Internet. For those campuses where it is too far for main campus faculty to commute, it appears there is a greater likelihood for tenure, governance, and hiring to take place at the branch. Complicating this scenario is the role of the multi-branch institution and the need for "one size fits all." Thus, it is possible that newer or more geographically proximate branches are afforded a different degree of autonomy. This is an issue requiring further development of the data, but it is one that has implications for more than just branch faculty autonomy.

The final issue has to do with access to resources and the expectations placed upon branch faculty. Virtually all administrators in the study agreed that teaching skills were the major hiring and evaluative criterion used for branch faculty. This seems appropriate, given the mission of most branch campuses. There was less agreement, and in many cases frustration, regarding the role of faculty research. Administrators at two-year branches of universities and at upper-division campuses in particular feel that the research expectations placed upon their faculties are unrealistic. They claim there is often little recognition for the special requirements and obligations of branch faculty, including increased teaching loads, program-building, heavy advisement, civic duties, and the jack-of-all-trades nature of the position. Additionally, there is the problem of access to resources and colleagues with whom they might collaborate or who might mentor them. And yet, tenure review and promotion criteria differ little for these faculty members.

Conclusion

Being a branch faculty member must seem at times a little like the life of a monk in a medieval monastery. One has a very important job (transcribing the great books), but works in relative isolation, removed from the great cities and cathedrals, anonymous, but essential to the survival and transmission of knowledge. Lest we carry the analogy too far, suffice it to say that there are challenges and opportunities that make the job a good fit for some and less so for others. What role future branch campuses will take as we move into a new era of distance education precipitated by the Internet and sophisticated audio/video capabilities, only time will tell. But there is no escaping the fact that higher education has committed itself to delivering education to the student rather than the student to education. As more and more students enter the system with this expectation we can only assume that the role of branch campuses will increase in frequency and importance, whatever form they take.

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