

**University Faculty Productivity:
Issues, Choices, and Policy Recommendations
July 10, 2002
Tom Auxter
President, United Faculty of Florida**

Last year the Legislature requested a study of university faculty productivity with an eye toward policy recommendations that might result in an increase in productivity. The report, which was written by MGT of America, points out that productivity must be considered in relation to the essential functions of the university: teaching, research, and service. It is important to keep this larger context in mind. However, since the evaluation of research and service productivity is a very complicated process, requiring knowledge of each specialization, in the past the Legislature has focused on productivity in teaching when making legislative policy – with an emphasis on production increases in the quantity of student credit hours. The analysis and policy recommendations that follow will also have a focus on productivity in relation to teaching but will have an emphasis on issues affecting quality.

What is the goal of productivity? Is it merely improvement in the quantity of student credit hours produced? The study provided by MGT shows that on average each university faculty member produces 375 student credit hours per year. Since this is already an extraordinarily high level of productivity of student credit hours for professors, it is unclear what further cost-effective measures the Legislature might take, in relation to the existing faculty at the current level of compensation, that might cause the faculty to be more productive in generating student credit hours -- without a reduction in the quality of what is offered to university students.

If the goal of productivity is simply to increase the number of student credit hours per faculty member, that is, maximizing student credit hours, then it would seem that we are already close to the goal. Indeed, we may already be at the point of diminishing returns in how much of a pay-off there will be for re-doubling efforts to increase this kind of productivity.

But there are other ways to think about faculty productivity. It is essential to recognize that issues of quality are as important as issues of quantity. Even the crudest quantitative conceptions of productivity have built into them some notion of quality control: the goal is greater quantities of the same -- not greater quantities of a product that is less than the same. If we build quality into our definition of the goal of productivity in teaching, then the goal becomes an increase in the quality of the educational experience of the student, maximizing access to this experience to whatever extent possible. If we are talking about the goal of research or service in the university, we need the same kind of focus on quality.

It is impossible to talk about the quality of faculty productivity without talking about the quality of the faculty. This means we also need to examine factors in the Florida context that have had a bearing on the recruitment and retention of faculty. We need to look at what has happened to faculty in Florida over the past two decades in order to gain perspective on the critical issues affecting faculty productivity in the future and the significance of policy recommendations that will meaningfully increase productivity.

In 1980, the Legislature responded to arguments that Florida will not be able to compete with other states in hiring and retaining faculty unless there is a serious adjustment in the level of compensation. In that year the Legislature voted for a 17% increase in faculty salaries across all ranks. This made us competitive with other universities that are our counterparts and set in motion a decade of very successful hiring. At the same time we were able to retain the highly qualified professors we had successfully hired as junior faculty in the seventies because there was no longer an economic incentive to move their families elsewhere. By the late eighties Florida had moved to somewhere in the middle of the pack in state funding for faculty salaries. Historical factors were on the side of Florida; hiring was extremely successful; the faculty was highly qualified; and the quality of faculty productivity was exceptional.

But for the past decade, the factors that have a bearing on the hiring and retention of faculty have been unfavorable, to say the least. This has occurred at the same time that there has been a high rate of productivity in student credit hours -- giving the appearance that the universities have been very productive and successful. (In fact the MGT study points out that the already high rate of productivity has even increased in the past decade.) Nevertheless, because hiring and retention are now issues, the quality of a university education itself is in question, even as we celebrate how well we are doing in producing units of student credit hours.

What has happened? In the past decade most faculty have experienced a virtual salary freeze. Faculty were state employees and were given by the Legislature the same average salary increases provided to other state employees -- usually a two-and-a-half to three percent increase. But, unlike other categories of state employees that actually receive the full amount of that raise, faculty usually see less than half of that raise. A half percent is subtracted off the top to fund faculty promotions. (This is something that does not happen to any other category of state employees. Others get promoted to a new job. Faculty promotions are promotions -- usually only twice in an entire career -- to do the same job with greater recognition.) Another half percent or so is subtracted for equity adjustments. This leaves only two percent or less -- to be divided between cost-of-living and merit increases. Since faculty are highly productive, it is always difficult to determine which one or two faculty members of many highly productive faculty members in a department deserve the little money available for merit increases. High visibility achievements

(e.g. the Nobel prize or a book published that year) come first and receive small rewards. There is no money left for the achievements of others. As a consequence, there is a huge pool of unrewarded meritorious faculty in every department every year, and they do not even receive the three percent cost-of-living adjustment given to all other state employees. They receive something like one percent as a cost-of-living adjustment and nothing else.

All of this has resulted in a phenomenon called “salary compression.” The longer faculty stay in Florida, the more they are behind their counterparts elsewhere. This means that as soon as faculty are able to find a job elsewhere, they have the financial incentive to move. In 1980 the Legislature was able to overcome the salary compression problem by providing a special salary supplement of 17%. We saw tremendous success in hiring and retention during the decade that followed. Since that time, the only special salary supplements appropriated by the Legislature have gone to Florida’s criminal justice state employees – in order to keep them from moving to other states. Without a salary supplement for faculty in two decades, and with a continuation of structural inequities in the salaries, there is an extremely serious problem of salary compression. Now assistant professors are \$5000 behind their counterparts, and full professors are \$15,000-\$20,000 behind counterparts. A good beginning to overcoming this problem would be to build into the budget (for the new Boards of Trustees to administer) a salary supplement of 17% -- raising the salaries of all professors affected by this phenomenon. Then we can see what further measures need to be taken on salaries when we compare how close we have come to our counterparts. In the meantime we will have sent a message to faculty that we intend to fix the problem.

Another problem resulting from distortions in state policy is that most departments are functioning with half to two thirds the faculty that are found in counterpart departments in comparable universities. This means that students are cheated out of the full complement of faculty to teach all of the courses in the major because there simply are not the specialists in the department to teach all essential courses. Either courses are not offered or faculty who are not in that specialization are forced to teach them. This is bad for students in either case. Nevertheless, we are considered very productive because we teach more students with fewer faculty members. At the same time, students face another problem: classes are filled to capacity. While this makes it seem as if faculty are very productive, with no unfilled seats in the classroom, it means that students who are a few classes into a semester and discover a course is wrong for them cannot transfer to a course that would be better for them because there are no empty seats elsewhere, and they would have to slow down their progress toward graduation if they dropped the course.

Both of these problems students face are related to funding patterns in the Legislature. After a decade of underfunding, Florida is now (in fiscal year 2001-02) last in the nation in per capita funding for higher education. (Simply divide the number of citizens into the number of dollars provided by the Legislature.) While there are some qualifications that can be made to make this look better (e.g., citing the number of senior citizens who are not seeking access to higher education), it is still a dismal picture.

Florida's last place finish in higher education funding makes it difficult to fix the problem with faculty salary compression. It also makes it impossible to fix the problems students face with departments that are smaller than they should be and classes that are larger than they should be. The financial pressures are so extreme that on every campus administrators find themselves appointing task forces to make recommendations about how to start dismantling part of the curriculum in order to protect the quality of the rest.

A modest beginning for the Legislature would be to make a commitment to leave the bottom ten states in funding for higher education – perhaps making a short-term commitment to move the state (within five years) from the bottom to the mid-thirties range. Then we can at least see how much improvement in the situation there has been and what still needs to be done to get the results we are looking for.

Recommendations:

1. Make a short-term commitment to leave the bottom ten states in funding for higher education and move to a position that will at least place Florida in the middle of the range of the next ten states in funding. Make sure that the increase is budgeted for community colleges as well so that quality control is mandated for all the higher education constituencies that feed directly into the universities and affect the quality of a university education.
2. Take an initial step toward fixing the problem of faculty salary compression by building into next year's budget a special salary supplement of 17%.
3. Expand the size of the faculty and the size of departments so that students have access to the full range of specializations within their areas of study and have a sufficient number of classes they need available to them at all levels.
4. Immediately address the needs of graduate assistants regarding both stipends and health insurance so that they are not motivated to move elsewhere during this period (when it appears to them that the curriculum they expected to have available for their courses of study is in serious jeopardy).