Executive Summary

In April, 2008, a survey was conducted to assess the career experiences and satisfaction of the Research Faculty at the University of Michigan. The survey was sponsored by the Office of the Vice President for Research and the Senate Assembly Research Committee and conducted by RLS Associates. It was sent online to all 696 Research Faculty members (i.e., those who had no other faculty appointment) and was completed by 387 of them (a 56% response rate). The results are outlined in this report and summarized below. Five themes were identified as central issues.

1. Terms of Employment: What Was Communicated When Faculty Were Hired?

It is clear that people regularly accept positions as research faculty members without fully understanding the parameters and limitations of that position. This can lead to negative consequences. The discrepancy between what job candidates understood when they accepted the position and the reality of their experiences often becomes a source of dissatisfaction over time.

2. Tenure: When it is Suggested as a Potential Career Option

Many people report that they were not provided clear information concerning the terms of employment when they were hired. With time, this has an increasingly negative impact. In addition, misleading information which is sometimes provided e.g., the ease of transition to regular tenure track faculty positions, is potentially even more hazardous in the long term.

3. Promotions: When Realistic Career Paths are Not Easily Taken

Research Faculty report a great deal of difficulty getting promoted. They feel the criteria are not clear and that prescribed paths for career growth are often unavailable to them. They also report a significant lack of mentoring. All of these lead to a deepening dissatisfaction over time.

4. The Work Environment: Making it More Researcher Friendly

Professional researchers want to be a part of the University's Research Faculty primarily because of the reputation of the University, the characteristics of the particular projects they join, and the opportunity to conduct their own research, publish, etc. With time they generally begin to see the situation as less favorable than they were initially led to believe. While considerable satisfaction was reported on the survey, it clearly wanes over time. Most Research Faculty feel much less supported after two years on the job. In addition, many complain of feeling like "second class citizens" and constrained by a lack of independence in their research endeavors.

5. A Time-in-Rank Limit Policy: Research Faculty Reactions

Two questions produced a strong reaction, suggesting that the imposition of a time-in-rank limit would be very negatively received. The Research Faculty feel that they already experience an environment that makes it difficult to thrive as a researcher at the University. They note that a virtual time-in-rank policy already exists and encourages attrition by those who cannot maintain funding or who become frustrated by the research track appointments and their accompanying limitations. A formal time-in-rank limit under present conditions may be interpreted as adding insult to injury, whereas improvements in support, as recommended below, may better support University research and Research Faculty and also lay the groundwork for time-in-rank limits in the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations offered by RLS Associates covered five themes:

- Make sure that candidates for Research Faculty positions have full information about the terms of employment being offered.
- Motivate high performance by setting clear expectations, providing frequent feedback, and using effective reward and promotion strategies.
- Make the environment more researcher-friendly through mentoring, integration, and support.
- Schedule formal performance reviews that result in action plans to help Research Faculty grow in their positions and allow them to work effectively towards advancement.
- Hold off on imposing time-in-rank limits at least until the other recommendations have been implemented. Survey results show that regular evaluations with clear feedback and mentoring were considered far more motivating than time-in-rank limits and would be far less alienating.