The Salary Structure of Sociology Departments

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Department chairs have recently expressed concerns over the phenomenon of salary compression, or the narrowing of the gap between the salaries of assistant professors and those of senior faculty. Such a compression is thought to lower senior faculty morale. The paper explores salary data organized by academic rank (professors, associate professors, and assistant professors) on a sample of 78 graduate departments drawn from the 1988 ASA Guide to Graduate Departments. Significant differences in the highest, lowest, and average salaries of assistant, associate, and full professors exist between public and private universities and between schools in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. Few differences are found among regions of the country and between terminal M.A. and Ph.D.-granting departments, the latter perhaps due to the shortfall in the supply of new assistant professors. Analysis of salary data reported over a fifty-year period by AAUP suggests that salary compression is not a recent problem in academia. Rather, it has typified academic salary structures for at least a half-century. Salary compression in sociology is somewhat less severe than in other fields, but effects of a lag in supply may eventually be felt in the 1990s.

Recently, academic departments have become concerned with the phenomenon of salary compression, whereby the gap has narrowed between starting salaries and those of most assistant professors and the salaries of senior faculty. Administrators have argued that the perceived compression of salaries is due to the contraction of the job market for sociologists in the late 1970s and early 1980s and the comparative expansion of the market today. The demand for junior faculty, especially from the higher-ranked doctoral programs, is currently outstripping the supply of new Ph.D.s, and thereby creating a seller's market. Recently, Mooney reported in The Chronicle of Higher Education that in little more than a decade colleges and universities will need to recruit 37 percent more new faculty than today to make up for faculty losses due to retirements (July 19, 1989).

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p. 1). In March 1989, ASA Executive Officer William D'Antonio noted that the decline in sociology enrollments and faculty openings found early in the 1980s has abated (1989; see also, D'Antonio 1987; 1988a,b,c). In fact, job openings in sociology are growing, as evidenced by increases in the number of positions advertised in the ASA Employment Bulletin. However, because of a reduction in enrollments in sociology courses, graduate student admissions and faculty recruiting were attenuated during the late 1970s and early 1980s. This should result in faculty shortages in sociology that are more severe than the forecast of The Chronicle of Higher Education. As Hill (1989) observed, however, there is a lagging effect in which declines or increases in the demand for courses and numbers of student majors is gradually followed by a change in faculty recruitment.

The immediate consequence of the cutbacks earlier in the decade is greater competition among departments for new assistant professors, and this, in turn has escalated starting salaries. In fact, within the past three to five years, starting salaries have risen between 30 and 45 percent, with the prospect of a compression of the salary structure of departments. The short-term consequence of a compression of salaries is a lowering of the morale of more senior faculty, some of whom have salaries equivalent to those of beginning assistant professors. Admittedly, some tenured faculty will lag behind in salary because they have also lagged behind in productivity.

Late in the spring of 1989, I undertook a national survey of department chairs of graduate programs. The survey had two goals: to assess the extent to which salary compression was evident across sociology departments and to ascertain departmental salary structures in order to convince my dean of the need to redress lagging salaries of more senior faculty in my department. Using the 1988 edition of the ASA Guide to Graduate Departments, I drew a sample of 104 departments in both private and public institutions. The sample included those departments granting a terminal master's degree and those granting the doctorate.

Chairs were sent a brief, one-page questionnaire and a self-addressed stamped return envelope, and asked to complete information on the salaries at each of three academic ranks (assistant professor, associate professor, and professor). The questionnaire asked for the high, the low, and the average salary at each rank of full-time faculty members, as well as the length of the contract (nine months or twelve months). "High salary" referred to the salary of the highest-paid faculty member at a given rank in the department, while the "low salary" referred to the salary of the lowest-paid faculty member at a given rank in the department. "Average salary" represented the arithmetic mean of the salaries of faculty in the department. In all instances, comparisons of salaries were based upon a common contract length in a department. For all tables presented in this paper, salaries were adjusted to a nine-month contract. Each participating chair was promised in return a copy of the findings. Six department chairs indicated that they were prohibited from releasing any salary data, and two universities returned the completed questionnaires on the condition that they not be identified. The salaries