Satisfaction Guaranteed: Considerations for the Job Search

Karen M. Ondercin
Tracy M. Tyree

As graduate students and student affairs professionals seek employment in the field, they will need to formulate a series of strategies to create a balance between professional expectations and personal needs (Scher & Barr, 1979). Person-environment fit seems vital to job satisfaction. There are certain principles and behaviors within the environment that foster job satisfaction. Some of the issues in the literature relating to satisfaction include opportunities for advancement (Evans, 1988; Hancock, 1988; Holmes, 1982), support from colleagues (Hancock, 1988), role clarification, and professional development (Shaffer, 1972).

In order to examine more closely factors related to satisfaction, the authors went to two midwestern institutions and conducted interviews with eight student affairs professionals. One institution was a small, private liberal arts university of about 4,100 students. The other was a large, Research I, state liberal arts university of about 35,000 students.

The purpose of this article is to present recommendations regarding satisfaction, based on the literature and interviews, for student affairs professionals to consider when investigating new job possibilities. Each person can evaluate the importance of these suggestions in accordance with his or her own individual or institutional needs.

1. Examine opportunities for advancement

Within the student affairs field, career mobility and opportunities for advancement arose as key concerns regarding staff satisfaction (Evans, 1988; Hancock, 1988; Holmes, 1982). If a professional wishes to stay in one location for any length of time, he or she might have to remain in a particular position that no longer provides opportunities for growth because of the lack of more challenging positions available (Holmes, 1982).

During the interviews, the opportunity for advancement was one factor related to their job satisfaction. Because there were more levels in the organizational structure at the larger institution, more opportunities for advancement existed. At the smaller institution, there were fewer positions to which a staff member could aspire. If these professionals were interested in advancement, they would be forced to look to other institutions for promotion, thus decreasing their satisfaction.

In searching for a job, it is unrealistic to expect opportunities for advancement to exist within each institution. Are there opportunities for you to move into a higher position at your present institution?

2. Recognize the need for support

Supervisory support is necessary and important in daily interactions on the job. It is important for supervisors to take an interest in their employees' work. When the supervisory structure is unclear, there can be a breakdown of support, causing negative perceptions of the job as well as personal dissatisfaction. The politics that develop among levels and departments may produce frustrations and/or send confusing messages (Hancock, 1988).

Three of four professionals at each institution felt supported by their supervisor. Staff members at both institutions felt supported by their students and co-workers. However, they indicated an occasional need to educate family and friends about what their job entails.

Potential colleagues may provide insight to the type of support they receive from supervisors, co-workers, and students. How is positive reinforcement and support shown to staff and students?

3. Clarify the job expectations

Role clarification within a department and within the institution also contributes to increased job satisfaction (Shaffer, 1972). By understanding their role and function within the institution, student affairs staff members will feel a greater sense of purpose.

A positive contribution to satisfaction of professionals at both institutions was the fulfillment of job expectations. They entered the field because of their desire to help others and the need to be challenged. They indicated that the opportunity to see students grow was the most beneficial part of their jobs. The rewards from their jobs were consistent with their expectations when entering the field.

It is appropriate to ask the employer to expand on his or her personal expectations of the position holder. How consistent are these expectations with yours? Would rewards from the job be consistent with your reasons for accepting the position?

4. Expect to be a generalist

Another factor related to role clarification is the degree to which a person is a generalist or a specialist. This affects his or her perceptions of opportunities for growth and development. Diversifying responsibilities within the department has been identified as one way to retain student affairs professionals (Burns, 1982; Hancock, 1988).

All eight professionals described themselves as generalists according to their job descriptions. However, the professionals at the larger institution saw themselves as specialists in their daily work.

Although a job description may seem specific, most student affairs professionals find themselves performing a variety of tasks within their area of specialization. What is the range of your responsibilities within the department? Will you have the opportunity to work outside the department?

5. Seek opportunities for professional development

Staff development programs are necessary to ensure professional satisfaction. Developmental activities can increase job satisfaction by encouraging staff members to grow as individuals as well as professionals (Shaffer, 1972). It is important to keep informed about developments relevant to the field. By participating in staff enrichment activities, staff members improve specific professional skills which, in turn, assist them in achieving their personal and professional goals. The perceived possibility of goal attainment may be the most salient predictor of job satisfaction (Roberson, 1990). Results of a study undertaken to examine job satisfaction in student affairs revealed that over half of the respondents indicated that staff development programs were helping them develop as professionals in their field (Bender, 1980). Student affairs staff members cannot help students grow if they, as professionals, have stopped growing (Kuh, 1985; Merkle & Artman, 1983; Shaffer, 1972).

Although professional development is an important factor in staff satisfaction, it is not consistently available. At the smaller institution, more opportunities and financial resources were available to attend conferences, workshops, and activities. Staff development sessions took place at the staff meetings. Staff members at the larger institution felt stifled in their professional development. No mention was made of staff development opportunities on-campus or within the division. While they were encouraged to attend professional development activities, little financial support was available to staff members.

A potential employer can provide information about the institutional commitment to professional development. Potential employees should ask some of the following questions. Is there financial support for you to attend professional conferences? What professional development opportunities are available on campus and within the department? How involved are current staff members in professional development activities?

6. Assess the perceived institutional value placed on student affairs

The value placed on student affairs was another factor contributing to staff satisfaction. Many professionals believe the job they do is important; however, in one study, less than one-half of the staff members surveyed thought that student affairs was considered important on their campus (Bender, 1980; Cox & Ivy, 1984). Generally, the lack of support from the university community resulted in negative attitudes of staff members. A common concern among all staff members was that a crisis must occur for the student affairs division to receive attention. At the larger institution, an awareness of value became apparent when the student affairs budget was the first to be cut.

Often an awareness of value becomes apparent by examining the budget trends within institution. When visiting a campus, ask students and faculty members their impressions of the importance of student affairs offices. Do you perceive that your position will be valued?

7. Investigate the mission of the institution and how well it is reflected within the student affairs division

Another aspect related to staff satisfaction was the awareness of the institutional mission. Staff members at the larger institution assumed their job agreed with the mission, despite the fact that they could not define the mission. At the smaller institution, the response was similar. However, the staff members were generally more aware of what the mission entailed and how their positions specifically fit into the university mission.

It is important during the job interview to determine how the position is congruent with the mission statement. Do you see a relationship between your position and the institutional mission? If not, what is the purpose of the job?

8.Explore available resources

In the student affairs literature, there was little research regarding the physical environment. According to Herzberg's hygiene factors, professionals were dissatisfied if they did not have adequate resources. However, the same research indicated that having these resources did not significantly increase satisfaction (Herzberg, 1966).

According to the interviewees, the physical environment did not significantly impact staff satisfaction. Professionals at both institutions agreed that they had an adequate amount of office space. They were also satisfied with the available resources, such as support staff, supplies, and educational materials. The lack of computers seemed to be the greatest source of dissatisfaction at both institutions. Office size and decor played minor roles in overall satisfaction.

With the advancement of technology, such items as computers and fax machines are becoming a necessity. Be observant during the interview. Would you have sufficient space and resources? If desired resources are not available, consider negotiating before accepting the position.

9. Target ways to avoid burnout

A strong feeling of dissatisfaction was noted in that professionals were unsure of their likelihood of remaining in the field. Staff members at both institutions were contemplating leaving student affairs. They offered various reasons for leaving, including low pay, long hours, and conflicting family needs.

Sometimes taking care of personal needs must be given top priority. Is it possible to pursue outside interests such as hobbies, athletics, alumni groups, and community organizations? These activities may be helpful to maintain a balanced life.

10. Realize that no job is perfect

The attitude with which one approaches a job is significant to his or her level of satisfaction. Expect to make adjustments in a new environment. Be flexible and keep things in perspective. In any job remember that a sense of humor is a valuable resource.

Conclusions

The above-mentioned factors were those most commonly identified in student affairs research. However, this is not an exhaustive list of the effects of the environment on job satisfaction. Other job characteristics of value to student affairs professionals included type of institution (private or public), salary and fringe benefits (Bender, 1980; Rickard, 1982), educational background and previous experience (Grant & Foy, 1972), and number of years worked and number of positions held in the field (Lawing, Moore & Groseth, 1982). While these were mentioned in the literature, little attention had been given to them.

These recommendations are applicable to anyone seeking a job in student affairs. However, all ten recommendations may not be priorities. Each person must decide which factors will enhance his or her own job satisfaction.

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Karen M. Ondercin is a second year master's student in College Student Personnel Administration. She received her B.A. from Iowa State University in Journalism/Public Relations in 1989. Karen worked as a graduate assistant for the Student Alumni Council for two years and will continue her work in student affairs.

Tracy M. Tyree is a second year master's student in College Student Personnel Administration. She received her B.S. from the University of Florida in Business Administration in 1989. Tracy worked as an Assistant Coordinator in Willkie Residence Center for two years and plans to continue her work in student affairs.