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Work Satisfaction: Also an Issue in Higher Education

Cynthia E. Mader

One of the best experiences I've had at Grand Valley was the Academic Leadership Roundtable. The sixteen participants met Thursday evenings during the 1996 winter semester—a semester with, it seemed, a record number of Thursday night blizzard warnings.

As snows and winds swirled outside Padnos Hall, the participants inside were presented with case studies, statistics, institutional data and personal perspectives by nearly twenty speakers, almost all of whom were Grand Valley faculty members and administrators. Topics ran the gamut of issues facing colleges and universities today: state funding, student retention, technology, continuing education, library resources, legal issues, campus climate, instruction, governance, affirmative action, and so on. Certainly any doubts participants might have had that challenges are facing higher education in general and Grand Valley in particular were gone long before the spring thaw. Mine were gone before the steaming soup of that first blustery night's dinner break.

What strikes me most, as I recall all the valuable information passed on to us, are the speakers' personal observations. The opening speakers offered their favorite maxims about being a successful administrator. President Tinsley said, "Friendliness helps, especially if it is genuine, but competence is a prerequisite"; "You are there to serve, not to get the credit"; and "Honesty is the best policy, because, if you are honest, you won't have to keep track of what you said to whom." President Lubbers advised, "Have a clear vision of the university's mission and clientele"; "Don't be autocratic, but have the courage to make lonely decisions"; and "Never run a deficit." And Provost Niemeyer added, "Accept the fact that you are an administrator and act like one"; "Gain the confidence and trust of others"; "Develop the ability to inspire," and (unexpectedly) "Have some fun."

I didn't anticipate the last maxim, but it captures my own most lasting impression of the Roundtable—namely, the satisfaction our speakers seemed to derive from their work and the enthusiasm they showed for it: Library Director Lee Lebbin's excitement about automated conveyor systems; Dean Mary Seeger's convictions about classroom instruction; Professor Don Williams' reflections on the lack of campus community and how things could change with something as simple as a twenty-four hour Denny's near campus; Vice-Provost Bob Fletcher's mile-a-minute barrage of enrollment statistics, overheads, and jibes. Clearly, these speakers were as competent and dedicated as one would expect of experts in their fields, but they seemed to enjoy and even have fun with their work.

In the months following the Roundtable, I've sought to engage a few faculty and staff members individually in discussions about their work and personal enjoyment of it. Following are some of the observations I've gleaned:

- 1. Dedication isn't enough.** Helping others and doing good often appear on lists enumerating the satisfactions of being an educator. However, most of the people I talked to didn't even mention them. Doing good for others was often a built-in component of their work, but it didn't seem central to their work enjoyment. In fact, one faculty member told of becoming deeply depressed after agreeing to take on an administrative position, because, although he believed that it would be for the good of the unit, it would also mean leaving classroom teaching, which he dearly loved.
- 2. Autonomy is a luxury.** The freedom to arrange and conduct one's work mostly as one sees fit is a bonus gratefully acknowledged by those who have it—namely faculty members—and most said that it was the best aspect of their work lives, because it made their lives easier and more civilized than those of friends outside higher education. One candidly admitted that it was not the work that was cherished, but the freedom it allowed to pursue other activities that were enjoyable. However, few administrators or professional staff members referred to its presence in their work lives, and not one clerical/office staff even mentioned it.
- 3. Support helps.** On the one hand, we hold fond notions about mavericks and loners. On the other hand, almost everyone I spoke with attested to the importance of support from others. One faculty member told how disheartening it has been to be well-recognized and respected by the larger research community but rarely acknowledged by unit and campus colleagues. A member of the professional staff can remember being thanked only once over the last several years—despite excellent work, long hours, and good relations with colleagues. The depression experienced by the faculty member newly appointed an administrator began to lift as wholehearted support emerged from his unit members.
- 4. Personal style matters.** Satisfaction is sometimes derived not from the work itself, but from associated activities which allow personal styles to flourish. Said one instructor, "I'm okay but not great, in the classroom; What I get a kick out of, though, is the planning process. I like organizing my courses, then tinkering with them and making them better next time." Another faculty member is enjoying a new role coordinating an academic program: "I don't like administration, but I like wandering around and getting people to talk to each other. I'm good at that, and that's what this program needs."
- 5. Some have more fun than others.** Not surprisingly, work satisfaction is often related to employment status. Tenured faculty report greater enjoyment than tenure-track faculty, who in turn report more satisfaction than non-tenure-track faculty. Among professional staff members, anxiety

is a recurring theme: “Nobody ever seems satisfied. I worry a lot about complaints. I try to be responsive and do a good job, but I don’t get much backing.” Clerical and office staff identified interactions with students and staff as the best part of their jobs. However, some wondered how much their work is valued. Said one, “Everyone’s friendly and nice, but sometimes they act as if I can just keep churning out work like some piece of technology.”

Certainly, work enjoyment doesn’t equal party hats and noisemakers. Someone pointed out that that’s why we call our work a job instead of summer camp. Nonetheless, it is apparent to me from these conversations that work is an endlessly fascinating topic to most of us, often a source of much personal satisfaction, and an endeavor most people wish to do well.

Because of the Roundtable experience, it is clear to me that great care has been taken through the years to ensure Grand Valley’s growth and success. Much of the credit for this success goes to those who met with us and shared their expertise and enthusiasm, but faculty and other staff members have also influenced and contributed to the vitality of Grand Valley. I can’t help reflecting how basic and simple our work-related wishes often are, how inexpensive to implement when compared to the daunting challenges listed earlier, and how relatively easy they are to satisfy—at both an institutional and interpersonal level.