

# **Retiring from the Professoriate: Some Insights into the Problem Recognition Phase of the Decision Process**

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## ***EXTENDED ABSTRACT***

Faculty, who have been teaching for several years, may begin to think about retiring from the professoriate and doing something else – and/or possibly travelling and enjoying leisure activities in their later years. Regardless, at some point, most of us will think about retiring. As faculty, we are in a rather enviable position. Due to changing laws and the presence of tenure in many institutions of higher education, there is no mandatory retirement age. This means that for most faculty, it is an individual decision as to when one retires. The profession of a faculty member is not particularly physical demanding and if one is in good health, it is possible to remain an active professional well in to one's later years.

The Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1986 was designed to generally eliminate mandatory retirements for most job classifications. However, universities and colleges who wanted to hire younger faculty members and promote the hiring of under-represented groups (women and minorities) asked for an exemption from the Act. This exemption was granted with an expiration date of January 1, 1994. The exemption allowed Universities to force faculty members to retire at age 70. When Congress allowed the expiration of the exemption, tenured faculty members had, in essence, lifetime employment security. Today, we accept that a faculty member's the decision to retire is an individual decision based on a variety of factors.

The overall goal of the study is to better understand the decision process of faculty members who decide to retire from the professoriate. As the goal was to understand a decision-making process, the five stage consumer decision-making model provided a conceptual framework for beginning to look at the process. The first stage of the consumer decision model is problem recognition. This begins the process and triggers some further action on the part of the individual. Problem recognition is activated according to consumer behavior literature, when the discrepancy between the desired state and actual state reaches a critical level. Using this conceptual model, exploring when a faculty member recognized a "problem" is a focus of the research. To explore this area, the decision was made to use qualitative research. The Phenomenological approach, which "describes the meaning of the lived experience for several individuals about a concept or phenomenon," in this case, the decision to retire, appeared to be best choice.

This phase of the study specifically examines the factors that were salient in influencing faculty members to begin seriously considering leaving the professoriate. The question that was asked related to *Problem Recognition* is as follows: "From the literature on retirement, we have identified some variables that might have factored into your decision to retire. How, if at all, did the following variables act as "push" and/or "pull" factors in your decision-making:

- \*Professional variables (e.g. academic pursuits, professional identity, Research, teaching, discipline-related issues)
- \*Institutional variables (e.g. university policies and politics, leadership, Departmental situation, governance)
- \*Financial variables (e.g. retirement income and benefits, other employment)
- \*Familial variables (e.g. spouse/partner life situations, caring for and/or Spending time with other family members, family history with Retirement)
- \*Personal variables (e.g., free time, travel, other interests, health)"

The decision was made to select the sample from a population that consisted of retirees from one university. This decision was based on the desire to hold retirement benefits constant and for the convenience of conducting personal interviews. There are no rules for sample size in purposeful sampling, so the researchers decided that there should be at least 20 in the sample. This number seemed sufficiently large to cover a variety of experiences, but sufficiently small to be able to conduct in-depth interviews in a reasonable time-frame. The final sample consisted of fourteen females and six males. The respondents came from a variety of disciplines across campus. All faculty members had retired within the past 10 years. Most of the respondents (seventeen) opted to participate in a Faculty Early Retirement Program, which is a phased retirement that allows a retired faculty member to teach one term per year for a maximum of five years. Not all respondents who entered the Early Retirement remained in the program for the full five years.

Each retired faculty member contacted received a letter of invitation to participate in the study. If the retiree agreed, a mutually convenient time and location were established for the interview to take place. The interviews were recorded and the recordings were transcribed. The transcriptions of the interviews were sent to each respondent for corrections or concerns. Once the respondent read and consented to the information in the transcript, the interview raw data (transcripts) were uploaded into a Box file. The researchers read through each interview transcript and highlighted the key phrases and statements that pertained to either the actual or desired state of affairs that led to problem recognition. Each key phrase or statement was then interpreted based on the entire interview transcript, where respondents revealed a bit more about the subject. The individuals who conducted the interviews were also able to add a bit of the nonverbal cues that could help reveal the meanings of the statements.

It was apparent that most of the external influences on the desired state were related to personal desires and family, while external influences on the actual state were related to the job, the institution or financial. Internal stimuli on both the desired and actual states were related to personal or financial. It appears that when the push and pull of the desired and the actual situations tend to reach a threshold level of discrepancy, individual faculty members have recognized a problem that can possibly be solved by leaving the professoriate. At this point most faculty will begin researching (seeking information) regarding various aspects and issues related to retiring.

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# Background



- Early Years
  - Universities could have mandatory ages for retirement of faculty
  - 1905 William Osler (Johns Hopkins)
    - *'Faculty over 40 are unproductive and those over 60 are a nuisance.'*
- Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1986
  - Universities exemption allowed mandatory retirement at age 70
  - Exemption expired in 1994.
- Currently
  - Tenured professors have lifetime employment security

# Related Literature

- Most previous research has focused on health and wealth aspects of retirement.
- Lincoln Financial Group – *Business Wire* and TIAA publications
- Limited work on behavioral and psychological influences.
- Several in *Social Security Bulletins* (Vol. 57 #1, Vol. 70 #4, Vol. 71 #4)
- Durbin et. “The Decision to Leave Work” *Research on Aging* (Vol. 6 #4)
  - “Presumably a conscious decision. . .occurs when there is some pause in ongoing affairs in which individuals become aware that some choice exists.”
  - “For those who had some dissatisfaction, . . .the option of leaving was made viable, it was necessary to pause, to consider the offer.”

# Research Question

- What influences a faculty member to begin seriously considering retiring?



# Conceptual Framework

- Problem Recognition Phase of Consumer Decision Process Model
- Noticeable discrepancy between the actual and desired states.



# External Stimuli

- Desired State



- Actual State



# Internal Stimuli

- Desired State



- Actual State



# The Study

- Qualitative Research
- Phenomenological Approach
  - Requires a lived experience – retiring
  - Several individuals
- In-depth interviews with respondents
- Sample
  - Retired within past 10 years from one university
  - This allowed retirement benefits and conditions to be constant
  - 14 Female, 6 Male for a total sample size of 20.

# Question Prompt

- How, if at all did the following variables act as “push” and/or “pull” factors in your decision-making?
  - Professional variables
  - Institutional variables
  - Financial variables
  - Familial variables
  - Personal variables



# Key Phrases

- External Stimuli on Desired State
  - Mostly related to family and/or personal variables
    - *I love to travel – Most of my travel buddies are somewhat older than I am and are already retired and they have more free time.*
    - *All three of our kids are now in the area and six grandkids within 10 minutes. So when it was a great day to paraglide with my kids, I couldn't because of class.*
- External Stimuli on Actual State
  - Mostly negative statements related to professional situation and institution
    - *It was the pressure of the job*
    - *I had two people I just couldn't get along with – so it was time.*

# Key Phrases

- Internal Stimuli on the Desired State
  - Most common statements related to Personal and Family
    - *I didn't want to lose the academic connection.*
    - *I wanted to benefit from my retirement money*
- Internal Stimuli on Actual State
  - Most related to Personal and Financial
    - *My eyesight was of concern*
    - *I said I was too old for this stuff*
    - *Waiting 3 or 4 years because the income would go up significantly in those years was never a consideration or attraction.*

# Summary

- Both external and internal factors were salient for the respondents
  - Desired state was influenced by personal and family variables, which pulled the individual toward retirement
  - Actual state was negatively influenced by job/profession factors (push factors) and positively influenced by financial factors (pull factors).
- When push factors and pull factors reach critical levels, the faculty member begins researching (seeking information) regarding various aspects and issues related to retiring.