Examining the Professional Status of Full-time Sociology Faculty in Community Colleges

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Abstract

In this article, we utilize national survey data to assess the professional status of full-time sociology faculty in community colleges. Traditionally, sociologists have argued that for a particular type of work to be conceptualized as a profession, it must meet certain criteria, such as: esoteric knowledge and skills, high levels of workplace autonomy, considerable authority, and a sense of altruism. More current approaches to professionalization place greater emphasis on how the social structural location and organizational features of a particular group affect their claims to professional status. We apply both the "traits" and "process models" of professions. We argue that in spite of significant structural barriers, community college sociologists do function as a professional group. This has significant implications for faculty, their students, and the discipline of sociology.

Sociologists have paid relatively little attention to the important role community colleges play within higher education in the United States. This is curious given the fact that an estimated 45 percent of all undergraduates are enrolled in one of this country's 1,132 community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges 2014). These dynamic institutions are fertile grounds for examining many of the topics that have long interested sociologists, including social class mobility, the relationship between education and democracy, social justice, and the dynamics of race, class, and gender inequality. An even greater concern is the significance of community colleges to the discipline of sociology. After all, if nearly half of all college students are taking sociology in community college, then the professional sociology community should be quite interested in who exactly it is that is fulfilling the important role of recruiting new students into our discipline (Rowell 2010).

In this article, we utilize data from the Survey of Community College Sociology Faculty[1] to learn more about this group. Specifically, we are concerned with their professional status. Sociologists have traditionally argued that for a type of work to garner professional status, it must meet certain criteria or traits. These criteria relate to the training, qualifications, and motivations of practitioners as well as a sense of autonomy and authority in the workplace. More current approaches to professionalization place greater emphasis on how the social structural location and organizational features of a particular group affect their claims to professional

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status. We utilize both a "traits" and a "process model" of professionalization to explore the work of full-time community college sociology faculty. The primary questions we ask are:

> *Research Question 1:* To what extent does this work meet the criteria (or traits) of a profession?
>
> *Research Question 2:* How do these faculty see themselves?
>
> *Research Question 3:* How are they viewed by others?
>
> *Research Question 4:* How does their structural location affect their ability to operate as professionals?

Our results indicate that this is a highly trained, motivated, altruistic group of professionals. Despite significant structural obstacles, these faculty remain committed to their craft, their discipline, and the social justice mission of community college.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Postsecondary education is characterized by a multiplicity of hierarchies based in part on the type of educational institution (research university, liberal arts college, community college), the degrees held by faculty (PhD, EdD, MA, etc.), the type of work done by faculty (research, teaching, advising), and the type of students served by the institution (graduate, undergraduate, vocational). Community colleges, their faculty, and students are in a precarious position within the myriad postsecondary hierarchies, frequently falling at the bottom of status rankings. The aforementioned hierarchies are claimed to serve as indicators of the professional status of academic workers. For example, it is often argued that university professors, ranking at the top of the academic hierarchies, clearly occupy a professional status whereas faculty laboring in other institutions do not quite travel Clark's (1987) cosmopolitan road to professional status. In exploring the position of sociology faculty who teach full-time at community colleges, we first review the sociological literature on professions and then provide an overview of the research regarding community college faculty as a profession.

Sociological Perspectives on the Professions and Professionalization

Two of the more prominent approaches to studying professions are the trait approach and the process approach. The trait approach analyzes how well an occupational group fits the criteria of a profession (e.g., Goode 1960; Hughes 1965) while the process approach situates an occupational group within the larger socio-historic context, typically chronicling the group's rise to or fall from professional status (e.g., Abbott 1998; Klegon 1978; Larson 1977). Each of these approaches has merit in terms of identifying and understanding professional status. A review of each follows.

Identifying professions: The trait approach. The trait approach to analyzing professions has a long tradition in the United States (Goode 1960; Hughes 1965; Parsons 1939; Scuillo 2005). As stated by Scuillo (2005:915), this perspective, "endeavor[s] to identify *essential qualities* [italics added] of professions and their associations." Using this approach, occupations can be readily assessed as to how neatly or nearly they fit into the characteristics or traits of a profession. While there are a multiplicity of trait models, there are four traits that are common to most models (e.g., Goode 1960; Hall 1979; Hughes 1965; Klegon 1978; Scuillo 2005): (1) esoteric knowledge and/or skills, (2) authority, (3) autonomy, and (4) altruism.

Esoteric knowledge and/or skills refers to the complex and typically highly theoretical component of a professional's knowledge base and skill set. Such esoteric knowledge and skill necessitate prolonged training, which most commonly occurs within professional schools (e.g., academic settings or independent institutes devoted to highly specialized training). In addition, this high-level knowledge is not easily understood by the nonprofessional.

Authority refers first and foremost to authority vis-à-vis patients or clients. The highly specialized purview of a profession, which demands the prolonged training, gives the professional a claim to authority that other occupations do not hold. Entre into a profession gives legitimacy to the power of a professional to dictate what is in the best interest of a patient or client. The authority of the professional also extends to authority over other occupational groups and to power over hiring colleagues and to a certain extent, subordinates.

Autonomy, or self-regulation and self-direction, is argued to be an important trait of professions. Again, the advanced training undertaken by professionals leaves the professionals themselves to be the arbiters of what is "right or wrong" in terms of the work that they do: It is the professional himself or herself who is best able to determine the pace, content, and organization of their work. The structure

of professional work is such that professional associations are integral to defining such things as work content and ethical codes. Autonomy is in part contingent upon peer regulation and scrutiny via professional associations rather than outsiders (e.g., government, clients) regulating the work.

Altruism or a level of selflessness is the final trait of a profession. Professions are thought to be characterized as outward looking in that there is little if any self-interest associated with them. These special occupations are focused on the community good and/or the betterment of the discipline itself (i.e., advancement of knowledge). The work of the professional is then an end in itself rather than a means to some other end. While professionals are often paid at a higher rate than other occupations, it is not the monetary reward that motivates the professional; the reward of contributing to the common good is thought to be paramount.

The process approach to understanding professionalization. The second model used to analyze professions focuses attention on the process by which an occupation is able to attain professional status, and in this way, it takes a dynamic approach to the investigation of professions. Rather than identifying professions using predetermined and static criteria, this perspective argues that socio-historic context and power dynamics come to the fore when considering how an occupation may be situated as a profession (e.g., Abbott 1988; Klegon 1978; Vitullo and Spalter-Roth 2013). A recognition that professions are contingent on what Klegon (1978) refers to as internal and external dynamics is central to this model. Thus, the way in which an occupational group views itself and "constructs" or defines itself has bearing on its potential to attain professional status. In addition, an occupational group vies for professional status in a field that may include other occupational groups who oppose their claims for professional designation. Finally, social forces such as state regulation, larger economic conditions, and public perception come into play when considering shifts in professional status.

In 1978, Klegon introduced a dynamic model for analyzing professionalization by distinguishing between processes both within an occupational group and processes outside of the occupational group's control. The internal dynamic refers to strategies that an occupation uses to protect its esoteric knowledge, such as regulating access to their training programs, making claims regarding the value of the services they provide, the ethical stature of its members, and the importance of their

product or service to the larger society. The external dynamic "involves relating professional organization and control to other institutional forces and arrangements of power" (Klegon 1978:271). When considering the external dynamic, sociologists must place an occupational group in context and understand the social forces that influence its attempts to reach or maintain professional status.

Abbott (1988), in his book *The System of Professions*, makes a similar case for utilizing a process approach to analyzing professions. He argues that occupational fields are often crowded and contentious. To understand why some occupations succeed while other occupations fail to be categorized as professions, Abbott contends that we need to adopt an ecological view of the field of occupations. In the field of occupations, there is constant struggle for niches, status, and power; namely, there is an ongoing struggle among occupational groups to reach professional status, and at times, it is a zero sum game. Abbott identifies three factors necessary to understand professionalization: technology, competition between occupational groups, and social forces.

Vitullo and Spalter-Roth (2013) base their framework on Abbott's model but identify slightly different processes. Like Klegon (1978), they include an internal dynamic: This internal dynamic is captured by considering how a group views itself. In addition to an occupational group's view of who they are, Vitullo and Spalter-Roth include two external dynamics: how others view the group and how social forces influence the group's progression toward professional status. These three questions serve as points of analysis when assessing the professionalization and deprofessionalization of occupations.

The trait model, used to understand the characteristics of professions, and the process approach, used to track how an occupational group becomes a profession, have been applied to many types of work. While each model asks a slightly different question, they both are useful in gauging the circumstances of an occupational group vis-à-vis its work conditions, prestige, and relative power within society. We now turn to how these two perspectives have been used in terms of assessing the status of faculty who teach at community colleges.

The Professional Status of Community College Faculty

The debate regarding whether community college faculty are professionals is not new. Garrison

(1941, 1967) conducted some early research on this question and in 1967 concluded that community college teaching was not a unique profession. McCormick (1982) conducted a nonrandom survey of 100 community college faculty teaching sociology to examine the perceptions of two-year college instructors toward the sociological profession. Although his findings were limited by his sampling technique, he found that 54 percent had degrees in sociology and that 90 percent were participating in professional activities (not necessarily related to the discipline). He also noted 13 percent of those responding felt they were not viewed as professionals by the discipline.

In 2007, the Association for Study of Higher Education published a report titled, "Community College Faculty: Overlooked and Undervalued" (Townsend and Twombly 2007). As part of this report, they include a chapter reviewing the research on this question. In the end, they note that the research findings were mixed. Although many researchers noted that there was a community college professional identity around "instruction," other researchers did not think "instruction" alone could be a qualifying factor for forming a professional identity among higher education faculty. In other words, there was concern that if "instruction only" becomes the factor around which community college faculty form an identity, it would not separate community college teaching from that of high school teaching. Unfortunately, many of the "trait models" applied were based on the standard of the research university as in Burton Clark's (1987) seminal work, *The Academic Life: Small Worlds, Different Words*.

There have been some attempts at a more "process" model of professional identity when exploring community college faculty. In terms of how community college faculty view themselves, research indicates a relatively positive self-assessment. For example, there is a level of agreement that community college faculty share an ideology that recognizes the historic mission of community colleges to serve all students and to be "democracy's college." In her research on the hiring process at community colleges, Twombly (2005:33) recognizes this shared sense of purpose by pointing out that "[t]hey [faculty and administrators] were unanimous in defining characteristics they sought in faculty: an understanding of the community college mission, a concern for student success, and a devotion to teaching." This dovetails with the trait of altruism as articulated by many of the early sociologists who wrote about professions (e.g., Barber 1965; Parsons 1939). Service to students who are marginalized by other colleges and universities is identified as a "calling" by many community college faculty. This shared sense of purpose was identified by multiple sources (e.g., Andelora 2005; Bayer and Braxton 1998; Cohen and Brawer 2008; Rowell 2010; Twombly 2005).

Townsend and LaPaglia (2000) conducted a survey with over 300 community college faculty in Chicago where they examined both how faculty perceived their professional identities as well as how they believed that faculty at four-year colleges and universities perceived community college faculty. They found that the majority of community college faculty in their study agreed that four-year college faculty and university faculty considered themselves to be on the "margins of higher education." They also noted that in spite of this belief, the majority of respondents had not internalized this perception. The authors conclude that prior research bears out the deep commitment of many two-year faculty to their work and the concept of community college.

The question of how community colleges and community college faculty "fit" into a social structural and organizational location has been considered by numerous researchers and commentators (Cohen and Brawer 2008; Levin 2005; Levin, Kater, and Wagoner 2006; Townsend and Twombly 2007). Cohen and Brawer (2008:82) argue that the history that shaped the emergence of community colleges has created ongoing problems for a claim to professional status: "Their work rules and curricula stemmed from state education codes. Mandated on-campus hours for faculty members, assigned teaching schedules, textbooks selected by committees, and obligatory attendance at college events were common." The vestiges of such practices remain with many community colleges, thus posing obstacles to professionalization. Community colleges have institutional practices and external pressures that serve as countervailing forces to the pursuit of professional status.

Levin et al. (2006) contend that social forces have essentially changed the "nature" of labor and laborers at community colleges. Neoliberal policies that favor such things as workforce development over education for citizenship have led to wholesale corporatization of community colleges. These authors point to the need to understand external dynamics that community colleges and their faculty face in order to understand the circumstances of faculty.

Combining the Trait and Process Approach in Understanding the Professional Status of Community College Faculty

While the trait approach remains a useful tool to categorize occupations along a continuum of professionalization, combining it with the variables identified by advocates of a dynamic model of professionalization provides a powerful lens through which to view community college faculty as an occupational group. Using the trait approach, we can ask such questions as: Is an advanced degree a prerequisite to performing the tasks of the occupation? Does the occupational group have authority over clients and/or other workers? Do workers have control over the content of their work? Is altruism foundational to the occupation? Integrating the dynamic model allows us to acknowledge the changing field of occupations and both the internal and external dynamics of professionalization, especially as those dynamics pertain to community college faculty (Vitullo and Spalter-Roth 2013). Answering these types of questions in relation to community college faculty will allow us to better understand their current position within academia and, more importantly, their ability to advocate for the best interest of their students, their colleges, and the larger communities they serve. In reviewing the literature, we argue that in order to understand the professional identity of community college faculty in higher education today, both the static trait and dynamic process models of professional identity are useful.

METHODS

Data used in this article come from a 2014 survey of community college sociology faculty, constructed by the Task Force on Community College Faculty in Sociology of the American Sociological Association (ASA) and administered by ASA's research department. A stratified random sample of community colleges was selected from institutions categorized as "two-year" by the 2010 Carnegie Classification. Institutions were stratified based on their Carnegie size classification (large, midsize, small) and their Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) locale (rural, suburb, town, city) to represent their proportion in the universe of two-year institutions, resulting in 12 strata.[2] Sociology faculty members from these institutions were identified by either directly contacting the department or by searching institutions' websites. Additionally, all ASA members reporting "community college" as their employment sector during the

2014 membership year who were not already included in the sample were added. Including these 170 ASA members, a total of 1,730 faculty members representing 451 institutions were ultimately selected using this sampling frame.

After IRB approval for this study was granted, the survey was produced in Survey Monkey and opened for data collection in April 2014. Faculty members included in the sample were emailed an invitation to participate in the survey, which included a personalized survey link and information about the study. After several follow-up reminders were sent to nonrespondents, the survey closed in June. In total, 712 faculty members from 330 institutions responded to the survey, resulting in a 43 percent response rate. Survey participants were asked both closed- and open-ended questions regarding their employment status, teaching and professional activities, educational background, professional identity, and areas of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with their work. Weights were added to the data to adjust for respondents' representation in the original sample, and the data were analyzed using SPSS. Open-ended responses were coded separately in Excel before being merged back into the master SPSS file for analysis.

The overall study included both full-time and part-time community college faculty; however, this analysis includes only those who reported working full-time, which was just over half (58.3 percent) of the respondents.[3] Among those included in this analysis, the large majority (77.3 percent) self-reported as white, while about 10 percent were underrepresented minority faculty members. About 5 percent selected multiple racial/ethnic categories. Two-thirds of full-time respondents were women, and the mean age was 50 years old. While nearly half of the full-time faculty were tenured with an additional 13 percent on the tenure track, a third reported that tenure was not available at their institution.[4]

In the remainder of the article, we assess the professional status of community college sociology faculty. First, we report on the extent to which faculty meet four main criteria consistent with the trait approach to professionalization. Then we utilize the process approach to consider the unique barriers and possibilities faced by full-time community college faculty.

ASSESSING THE TRAITS

Esoteric Knowledge and Skills

A core aspect of the trait model of professions is the assumption that the work is so specialized that

practitioners are required to possess unique skills and technical, obscure knowledge related to their respective field. In this study, we conceptualize esoteric knowledge and skills as having two components: specialized credentials and professional development.

Credentials. In general, credentials serve as "gate-keeping" or screening devices for the professions. The consuming public is assured that a practitioner in a particular field has an agreed on level of knowledge and skill, and conversely, those lacking that background are barred from entering that profession (Ingersoll and Merrill 2015). In general, the faculty in this study are highly educated. All respondents have had post-baccalaureate training. As shown in Table 1, the majority (approximately 76 percent) have training specifically in sociology. Nearly 40 percent have PhDs in sociology, while another 37 percent have master's degrees. Of those with advanced degrees in other fields, 15 percent have master's, and 9 percent have PhDs. Although about a quarter have degrees outside of the field, the vast majority of respondents (83 percent) agreed that a graduate degree in sociology should be required to teach sociology in community college. It seems that community college sociology faculty support the gate-keeping function of credentials.

Professional development. Most professions require practitioners to engage in ongoing professional development activities throughout their careers. The rationale is that the development of professional level competency is a continuous process and practitioners must update their skills and knowledge to keep pace with new developments in their respective field (Ingersoll and Merrill 2015). This study asked respondents about their professional development activities in four areas: membership in professional organizations, attendance at professional conferences, participation in professional development in their workplace, and publication activities. The results are shown in Table 1.

Community college sociology faculty belong to both regional and national professional associations. About 20 percent[5] belong to the national association for sociologists, the ASA, and 30 percent belong to regional associations (e.g., the Eastern Sociological Society and the Pacific Sociological Association).[6] About 3 percent belong to the Society for the Study of Social Problems, and 4 percent belong to various "state teacher associations." That a greater proportion of faculty belong to regional associations, compared with national ones, is not surprising. As explained elsewhere in this article, community college faculty's membership and participation in the ASA, for example, is hindered by financial concerns.

Faculty are also regular attendees at professional conferences. More than half (56 percent) have attended a professional sociology conference within the past two years, and nearly 30 percent have either presented or presided over a session at a sociology conference. About half (48 percent) have attended a community college–specific conference, and nearly a quarter presented or presided over a session at a community college–specific conference. Also, 53 percent have attended a general teaching-related conference.

The overwhelming majority (90 percent) attended professional development workshops at their own institution, and 56 percent presented and/or led a workshop at their own college. Less than a third (28 percent) have attended a minicourse, webinar, or workshop for sociology educators while 7 percent have conducted a minicourse, webinar, or workshop. The clear pattern for both professional conferences and other relevant professional development workshops is that faculty are more likely to attend such events than to facilitate or present and faculty participation is much greater in activities on their own campuses.

Another dimension of professional development is publication. Only about 10 percent have had a research article published in the past two years, while 18 percent had a non-research article published. This is not a surprising finding since, unlike the evaluation procedures at most baccalaureate and graduate degree granting institutions, community colleges tend not to base faculty evaluation and promotion on publication activities. Faculty in this study were asked which criteria are used to evaluate their performance. The most common response was teaching (98 percent), followed by college service (86 percent) and professional development (79 percent). On the other hand, only 23 percent reported that scholarship is part of their evaluation criteria.

Faculty participation in professional development activities is hindered by a number of factors. When asked to identify the three biggest obstacles to participation, faculty mention time (92 percent), funding (65 percent), and other professional responsibilities (51 percent). This is similar to what McCormick (1982) reports in his study. There is reason to believe participation would be even greater if certain barriers were removed. Asked to imagine if there were no obstacles to participation, 79 percent indicate they would attend a professional conference, 55 percent would attend a mini-conference or webinar, 50 percent would publish a research article,

Table 1. Characteristics of the Trait Approach.

	Weighted Percentage	Unweighted Number of Responses to Item
Esoteric knowledge and skills		
Highest degree earned		
PhD in sociology	39	388
Master's degree in sociology	37	388
PhD in another field	9	388
Master's degree in another field	15	388
Professional memberships[a]		
American Sociological Association	20	297
Regional and other sociological associations	30	146
Society of the Study of Social Problems	3	146
State teacher associations	4	146
Professional engagement		
In the past two years, have you…		
Attended a professional sociology conference	56	379
Presented or presided over a session at a professional sociology conference	29	376
Attended a community college–specific conference	48	380
Presented or presided over a session at a community college–specific conference	22	371
Attended a general teaching-related conference	53	371
Attended a professional development workshop at own institution	90	376
Presented and/or led a professional development workshop at own institution	56	377
Attended a minicourse, webinar, or workshop for sociology educators	28	373
Conducted a minicourse, webinar, or workshop for sociology educators	7	371
Published a research article	10	370
Published a non-research article	18	372
Obstacles to professional engagement		
Time	92	374
Funding	65	374
Other professional responsibilities	51	374
If no obstacles, what would you participate in?		
Attend a professional sociology meeting	79	366
Attend a mini-conference or webinar	55	366
Publish a research article	50	366
Review a journal article	36	366
Authority and autonomy		
Agree somewhat or strongly:		
"I have control over the most important aspects of my job."	85	323
Complete or almost complete autonomy in:		
Deciding how to teach classes	96	400
Developing course syllabi	75	401

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

	Weighted Percentage	Unweighted Number of Responses to Item
Altruism		
Motivation and satisfaction		
Agree somewhat or strongly:		
"I prefer sociology teaching over sociology research."	78	381
"I would rather be teaching at a four-year institution."	21	381
"Given my level of training, education, and experience, I feel underemployed."	27	380
"If I had it to do all over again, I would still teach in community college."	82	380
"Community college sociology faculty are well respected by the academic community."	13	381
Professional identity		
Which best describes your own view of your primary professional identify?		
Community college professor	45	397
College professor	25	397
Sociologist	18	397
Teacher	8	397
Other	4	397

Source: American Sociological Association Survey of Community College Faculty Teaching Sociology, 2014.
[a]Respondents who were added to the sample from the American Sociological Association (ASA) membership database were excluded from this particular tabulation to avoid overrepresenting ASA membership.

and 36 percent say they would review a research article. Each of these figures represents an increase over current levels of participation.

When faculty were asked what one resource would help them participate more in these activities, the most frequent response is time (57 percent). Faculty time is largely devoted to teaching and other professional responsibilities. An assistant professor from a medium sized college in the rural southwest explains, "We have a [five] course load each semester minimum, so time it the true obstacle." Being responsible for so many students each semester leaves faculty with precious little time to devote to activities not required of their job. Another 32 percent of faculty indicate that increased funding would aid their participation. The following quote captures how obstacles related to time and funding are often interrelated. A tenured professor from a large suburban college describes how a lack of institutional support inhibits her ability to engage in scholarly work as a form of professional development:

> There is no institutional support for significant scholarly work of any kind. If administration can't see how it would **directly** benefit the students sitting in your classroom (e.g., you were going to design a

new activity to teach a particular concept), they don't see it as valuable and the institution has no resources to support it.

What these data suggest is that despite some constraints, community college faculty are participating in professional development. Consistent with the trait model of professionalization, they are engaged in an array of activities to keep themselves current in their field and refine their skills.

Authority and Autonomy

Though often treated separately in the literature, we analyze authority and autonomy concurrently. Our rationale is that one (autonomy) necessarily flows from the other (authority). Professionals are considered experts in their particular field and are vested with a great deal of self-governance. As Ingersoll and Merrill (2015) explain, the rationale is that professional authority belongs in the hands of those with the most knowledge and skill regarding their work. Professionals routinely establish curriculum standards for professional training schools, establish ethical standards for practitioners, and exert considerable influence over the process of choosing their colleagues.

In the present study, faculty were asked about the extent to which they enjoy autonomy over their daily work lives. The vast majority, about 85 percent, agreed with the statement "I have control over the most important aspects of my job." More specifically, 77 percent indicated they have complete or almost complete autonomy in developing course syllabi, and approximately 96 percent say they have complete or almost complete autonomy in deciding how to teach daily classes. When asked whether they received support from their institution for curriculum or program development, 46 percent said they had, although only a quarter agreed that the amount of support met their needs. The data (shown in Table 1) seem to suggest that community college sociology faculty enjoy considerable autonomy in the workplace; however, lack of autonomy was also the most coded response to an open-ended survey question that asked about the most dissatisfying aspect of their jobs (20 percent of the 323 responses). This question uncovered different aspects of autonomy than the closed-ended questions in the survey. Many expressed frustration with overbearing administrations and the "corporatization" of education, both of which result in demands over what happens in the classroom. A professor teaching at a non–tenure granting institution expressed his frustration:

> The amount of bureaucracy and the absence of strong faculty control and/or departmental autonomy. As a department we have very little power to shape our work other than through assessment channels. There are many demands on our time from administration over which we exercise little voice and have few opportunities to shape to our disciplinary needs.

Related, but more specifically, many described the increased emphasis on student assessment limiting faculty autonomy in the classroom. A tenured full professor describes one of the most dissatisfying aspects of her job is "[t]he pressure on standardization of curriculum and the over-emphasis on assessment. We continually and constantly meet about assessment and rarely discuss teaching." While a large majority of faculty agreed that they enjoy autonomy, a smaller percentage were dissatisfied with the control that administration and outside forces have over their teaching, a potentially growing trend at institutions around the country.

Altruism

To suggest that the professions involve altruism means that practitioners are engaged in the work primarily to serve the public good rather than their own self-interest. In this study, respondents were asked a number of questions indicative of altruism. These questions were organized around three themes: motivations, level of satisfaction, and professional self-identification. The results are shown in Table 1.

Motivations. The vast majority of faculty in this study, 78 percent, indicate that they prefer teaching over other professional activities. Therefore, it is not surprising that when asked to describe the top three factors that led them to teach in community college, working in an institution that values teaching over research is at the top of the list. Many faulted the "publish or perish" ethos of four-year institutions for creating an atmosphere rife with anxiety, lack of job security, and a disconnection from students. Moreover, faculty discussed not finding the same meaning or value in research as they do in teaching. A tenured professor at a medium suburban college explains, "I believe in the importance of sociology and want to share it with students. I would not want to spend my life focusing on some specific research topic and publishing research results that, realistically, will not have an impact on the world."

The concern for having an impact on the world is common among respondents. That is, faculty talk about being drawn to teach in community college because it has the potential to contribute to the greater good. These reasons take several forms. For example, some speak of being former community college students who want an opportunity to do for others what was once done for them. A tenured professor at a large suburban college commented, "I went to community college and it changed my life and wanted to go back as the best instructor possible and do the same for others." In addition to seeing their work as having the potential to transform individuals, faculty also feel they can affect communities. A tenured full professor at a large urban college links her experience with her commitment to community service, "As a working class woman, first in my family to go to college, I wanted to give back to the community and help other students like myself or who [have] had even fewer advantages."

Faculty also speak about being motivated by their affinity for the community college mission. They talk about appreciating the open access policy of community college as a key factor in self and social change. An instructor at a medium suburban college explains:

> I feel that the community colleges provide an essential role in working towards

economic and social equality in this country, and I wanted to be a part of pushing for change. Community colleges provide an opportunity for nontraditional and low income [students] to further their educational attainment.

For many, it seems that providing opportunities and access to student populations who have traditionally not had access to higher education is what they most value about the community college mission. In fact, when asked to identify those aspects of the job that they find most satisfying, the top three responses related to working with community college students.

Satisfaction. Full-time community college sociology faculty recognize that theirs is a difficult and often disrespected professional position, and yet the overwhelming majority are satisfied with their work. One common perception of community college faculty is that they are disgruntled would-be professors at four-year institutions. However, only about 20 percent of faculty in this study indicated they would rather be working at a four-year institution. Moreover, given their respective level of training, education, and experience, only 27 percent feel underemployed. Put another way, 73 percent feel their employment in community college is commensurate with their professional credentials.

It appears, then, that most full-time faculty are teaching in community college because that is their preference. Furthermore, when asked if they had it to do all over again, would they still teach in community college, 82 percent said they would. This is true in spite of the fact that 87 percent indicate that they do not feel respected by the rest of the academic sociology community. The relatively high level of satisfaction may indicate that the historical mission of community colleges as teaching colleges who serve vulnerable populations intersects with the sense of duty and community service that is a part and parcel of professions.

Professional identity. The commitment of faculty to community college is also evident when they were asked to describe their professional self-identification. The largest proportion (approximately 45 percent) identify primarily as community college professors. The second largest group (25 percent) identify as college professors, while only 18 percent claim sociologist as their professional identity. That community college sociology faculty most identify with their institution as opposed to their academic discipline is not surprising. Other research suggests that faculty feel alienated both by the ASA and their

colleagues at four-year institutions (Rowell 2010; Vitullo and Spalter-Roth 2013).

DISCUSSION

Assessing the Traits

The discussion in the previous section presents a mixed picture of the professional status of community college sociology faculty. That is, faculty do meet some of the criteria of the trait model yet fall short on others. In this section, we discuss the extent to which faculty meet each of the four criteria. Then we utilize the process model to make sense of these results in context. We argue that there are particular structural and organizational barriers affecting the professionalization of community college sociology faculty.

Data regarding esoteric knowledge and skills are mixed. On the one hand, the majority of faculty do possess specialized credentials required of their profession. However, their professional development activities are uneven. The vast majority of faculty participate in professional development activities on their own campuses, but fewer attend regional or national meetings.[7] Few faculty belong to the ASA, but slightly more belong to regional associations. Only a slight minority of faculty are engaged in publication activities.

Regarding authority and autonomy, these faculty appear to be similar to other professionals. The vast majority report having near total control over what they see as the most important aspects of their work (syllabi creation and decisions about how to teach daily classes). However, a small but significant minority indicate their relative autonomy is undercut by a general lack of institutional support.

A sense of altruism is high among these faculty. Inspired by their own experiences as community college students and their commitment to the community college mission, faculty see their work as an opportunity to empower students, create self and social change, and "give back" to their communities. Overwhelmingly, faculty say they work in community colleges because they favor teaching over other professional activities associated with the professoriate. Moreover, faculty report high levels of job satisfaction, and most plan on working in community college until retirement.

Putting the Findings in Context: The Process Model

As mentioned previously in this article, a process model of professionalization is more dynamic than a traits model. Three core questions of a process

models include: (1) How do members of the group see themselves? (2) How are they viewed by others? (3) How do social structural and organizational location affect a group's ability to mobilize and do professional work? The answers to the first two questions are straightforward. First, the vast majority of faculty identify as community college or college professors, whereas a small minority identify primarily as sociologists. Second, when asked how they feel they are viewed by the rest of the academic sociology community, the vast majority say they feel disrespected. Taken together, these results seem to undermine the case for the professionalization of this group of faculty. An examination of the third core questions helps us to put these findings in context.

Data from this survey, as well as other research on the topic, suggest that there are a number of unique structural and organizational features of community college that affect the potential for the professionalization of their faculty (Kapitulik 2013; Rowell 2010; Vitullo and Spalter-Roth 2013). These features relate both to the internal structures of community college as well as external factors that affect the work that goes on in these institutions. In general, there are three aspects of the internal structure to be considered. First is the open admissions policy. In philosophical terms, this means that any person who has the desire to get a college education is welcome (with some minimum qualifications, usually having to do with age and having a high school diploma or a GED). In practical terms, this means that faculty face the challenge of teaching students at oftentimes vastly different levels of ability. Some students are just as prepared and capable as a typical student at a four-year institution. Others, however, have weak academic skills and require significant remediation. The fact that community college faculty work with the latter population is stigmatized by the broader academic community, thus creating a barrier to professionalization. Furthermore, the extra responsibility of working with underprepared students is a persistent and time-consuming challenge that makes it difficult for community college faculty to regularly engage in other profession-enhancing activities.

A second internal factor is the teaching load of community college faculty. Respondents in this survey typically teach five courses or 15 credit hours per semester. This presents challenges on a number of levels. First is the seemingly unending nature of the work involved. As anyone who has taught knows, the work of teaching a course is not limited to 3 contact hours per week per class. Faculty are continuously inundated with student

emails, phone calls, and hallway conversations. There are typically not enough hours in the day to prepare lectures, counsel students, and grade papers for five courses at a time. Assuming an average class size of 25 to 40 students, community college faculty continuously have responsibility for teaching 100 to 200 students per semester, without the benefits of graduate teaching assistants, and they have the added task of addressing the needs of some students who are underprepared for college. The time and energy devoted to teaching creates an opportunity cost insofar as faculty are prevented from participating in other activities to enhance their professional status. As noted elsewhere in this article, faculty in this study prefer teaching over other professional activities, but the point here is that they have limited time to engage in them even if they wish to do so.

Finally, faculty in this study talk about the general lack of administrative support for professional activities. When asked if during the past 12 months if they had received adequate institutional support (funding or release time) to attend professional conferences, only 35 percent answered yes. Likewise, only 43 percent indicated adequate support for conference or workshop presentation. Faculty also speak of a general appreciation for academic professional development in community college. This is partly evident in the aforementioned discussion of inadequate support to engage in these activities, and it is also reinforced by the evaluation structure in most community colleges. In most four-year institutions, scholarship is the most highly emphasized indicator of performance and professional status. As such, scholarly activities are a major component in promotion and evaluation decisions. On the other hand, less than one-quarter of faculty in this study report they are evaluated on their scholarship. The primary criteria for evaluation in community college is teaching performance and college service. So long as scholarship is not a required, supported, or institutionally valued aspect of the role of community college professor, it makes sense that faculty are not heavily involved in scholarship.

There are two main external factors that inevitably affect the internal dynamics. First among these is what Smith Morest (2013) calls the "evolving social roles of community colleges." Since their inception in the early 1900s, community colleges have been tasked with multiple, often contradictory roles (Cohen and Brawer 2008; Dougherty 1994). Debates have raged about whether community colleges should focus primarily on vocational training or on providing a liberal arts foundation for students

transferring to four-year institutions (Hanson 2010). Supporters of the vocational role of community colleges seem to get even more vocal during economically challenging times. In his 2012 State of the Union Address, President Obama argued for the need to place greater emphasis on building community college–local business relationships (Field 2012). As the vocational role is emphasized, there is often decreased support for the liberal arts mission of community college (Kapitulik 2013). In this context, sociology faculty's claim to professional status is undermined by the assumption that their institutions are primarily concerned with teaching basic job skills while deemphasizing the value of a liberal arts education (Hanson 2010).

Second is the ever-increasing push toward the corporatization of higher education (Giroux 2002; Levin et al. 2006). In general, this means that market-based and business principles are being applied to the organization, function, and purpose of higher education. One particularly troubling manifestation of this is the push toward outcomes, accountability, and productivity encapsulated in the contemporary assessment movement (Walvoord 2010). In practical terms, this means colleges, programs, and individual professors are being asked to demonstrate in objective terms that they are producing "results." Faculty in this study, and others, articulate concern over how the push toward quantifying and measuring outcomes may come at the expense of teaching valuable "soft skills" such as critical thinking, media literacy, and personal communication (Kapitulik 2013). Moreover, the emphasis on assessment has resulted in what some characterize as a lack of academic freedom, the routinization of work, and the undermining of professional authority and autonomy.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have utilized two different models to assess the professional status of full-time community college sociology faculty: a trait model and a process approach. Combining these approaches leads us to conclude that in spite of a host of structural barriers, these faculty should be considered a professional group. Their specialized training, high levels of workplace autonomy, altruistic motivations, and ongoing engagement in professional development are all characteristics of work traditionally characterized as professional.

It is noteworthy that community college sociology faculty function as a professional group in spite of significant barriers. Structurally, these faculty

contend with a lack of institutional support for professional activities, including insufficient financial assistance as well as a lack of recognition of the importance of profession enhancing activities such as conducting research and organizing professional meetings. Faculty who do these things typically do so on their own time and on their own dime. We recommend that professional organizations consider creative approaches to membership and conference attendance fees (e.g., a membership tier that permits access to teaching resources, a one-day only reduced conference fee, etc.). We also recommend professional organizations consider opportunities for faculty development by way of webinars that do not require travel to a conference. In addition, outreach to organizations such as the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) with the goal of educating community college administrators as to the benefits of discipline-related professional development may be helpful.

Another barrier is the widespread belief that they are not respected by the broader academic sociology community. This belief has persisted for decades (McCormick 1982). Interestingly, however, researchers have yet to systematically examine this perception. An important area of further study would be to determine what faculty in four-year institutions actually think of their community college peers. In the meantime, this perception of disrespect creates an obstacle to potential professional alliances between these two groups.

Through this analysis, we found a highly skilled and motivated group of professionals who, for the most part, work in community college because they want to. The majority are happy with their choice of career, expressing high levels of satisfaction with their work as well as a commitment to remain in community college until retirement. Further, there is a strong sense of altruism that permeates this group. Similar to other professionals, these faculty view their work as serving the common good and giving back to their communities. Faculty express their affinity for working with underserved student populations and take very seriously their responsibility to teach sociology in an institution whose mission and purpose is to intellectually, personally, and economically uplift individuals who otherwise lack access and opportunities. In short, these faculty are enacting "public sociology" (Burawoy 2005).

In sum, community college sociology faculty constitute a unique professional group that perseveres in the face of significant challenges. We contend that the professional status of this group is equally important to faculty, their students, and the

academic sociology community. As members of a professional group, faculty feel supported, legitimized, and connected to a broader community of like-minded individuals. Students, meanwhile, learn the discipline of sociology from faculty who are highly trained and committed to their craft. As the number of college students who are first introduced to the discipline of sociology in community college increases, it is paramount that faculty continue to grow and develop as professionals.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Reviewers for this article were, in alphabetical order, Elizabeth Cherry, Jessica Crowe, and Anne Eisenberg.

NOTES

1. A research project conducted by the American Sociological Association's Task Force on Community College Faculty.
2. It is important to note that the institutions included in this study constitute a representative sample, whereas the faculty surveyed were not since the universe of community college faculty is not available.
3. The primary purpose for focusing on full-time faculty is based on the professionalization literature, which has historically assumed that professionals work in their fields full-time.
4. An analysis of part-time faculty from this study can be found in the article, "Sociology Faculty Members Employed Part-time in Community Colleges: Structural Disadvantage, Cultural Devaluation, and Faculty-Student Relationships" (Curtis, Mahabir, and Vitullo 2016).
5. Those who were added to the sample from the American Sociological Association (ASA) membership database were excluded from this particular tabulation to avoid overrepresenting ASA membership.
6. At the time of this study, there were 352 ASA members who identified their employment sector as "community college," about 4 percent of the overall membership of the Association.
7. This difference could be explained, in part, if participation in on-campus professional development activities is mandatory for faculty. Unfortunately, our data do not allow us to explore this.

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