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Merit Pay for Productivity: Does It Work?

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study was to determine what impact the 1995-1996 State University System's Teacher Incentive Program (TIP) had on the University of West Florida faculty members' motivation to become more effective and productive teachers. Two separate and distinct instruments were utilized to gather data to address the study's research questions and statistical hypothesis. Results of this study indicate that TIP did not motivate most faculty members to improve the quality of their teaching; TIP selection was based entirely on productivity and not an objective measurement of teaching ability; there was a strong link between productivity and winning the award; TIP motivated faculty members to increase their teaching load in order to be eligible for the award; and TIP has a negative effect on the morale of faculty members.

Since 1993, the State of Florida has been using merit pay as a method of recognizing, promoting, and stimulating high quality and productive teaching through the program known by the acronym TIP (Teacher Incentive Program). The program resulted from the growing concern about undergraduate teaching quality in Florida. In 1995-96, the Florida state legislature provided $5 million to the State University System of Florida for $5,000 base salary increases. Based on this significant increase in base salary, legislators expected that TIP would provide a crucial incentive for faculty members to improve their teaching productivity and quality. Broad eligibility criteria and requirements were established, and each state university was empowered to provide its own process to allocate TIP funds and establish standards to measure teaching productivity (Baker, Tsihrintzis, Munroe, & Ruiz, 1995).

Review of the Literature

Merit or incentive pay is a generic term for any device that adjusts or provides compensation to reward higher levels of performance. It is often used by academic administrators as a managerial tool to improve faculty performance and increase faculty productivity. The simple rationale behind merit pay in higher education is that it will encourage faculty to work harder.

Merit pay is not a new concept in education. It was first used in Newton, Massachusetts in 1908 (Protsik, 1995). During the Reagan administration, a new interest in educational merit pay emerged and continued into the 1990s. Seven out of ten higher education institutions reported giving incentive awards for outstanding teaching during 1993 (El-Khawas, 1993), an increase of nearly 20% since 1987 when only about 50% of the higher education institutions used incentive rewards for outstanding teaching (Menges, 1996).

Merit pay has been used in the corporate world to encourage workers to be more productive. According to Johnson (1984) teacher incentive pay was taken from "a part of the pragmatic, no-nonsense corporate world" (p.176). Companies encourage workers to be more productive by the promise of extrinsic or external rewards in various forms which include increased pay, stock options, time off, discount coupons, bonuses, etc. The assumption is that extrinsic rewards such as merit pay will increase productivity. In theory this appears to be true. Research has shown that monetary rewards do have a significant positive relationship to performance; however, when extrinsic rewards such as teacher incentive programs are used in an educational setting, they are plagued with problems. Johnson (1984) cited as reasons for the problems: 1) objective measures of teaching abilities were lacking; 2) differences in evaluators' standards make merit pay systems potentially subject to patronage and political pull; 3) systematic merit ratings would require extensive administrative training and time; and 4) merit pay would promote competition, not cooperation. Wood and Wood (1988) cited unavoidable inequities within the evaluation system as a major problem to any teaching incentive program and stated that improvement would require greater allocation of administrative and faculty effort and attention.

In reality, research has shown that merit pay has little impact on improving the quality of teaching. In many cases, merit pay does the opposite; instead of motivating faculty members it reduces motivation because it forces faculty members to compete with each other (Farmer, 1993; Jacobsen, 1989; Ogden & Kelly, 1997). Other factors that degrade motivation among faculty members are vagueness of and lack of understanding the merit pay program, distrust of the fairness of the program, and actual regret about receiving the award (Henneman & Young, 1991; McLendon, 1992; Zahorski, 1996). Magnusen (1987) pointed out that "when pay and performance are not clearly linked, faculty skepticism about evaluation processes and rewards seems to be likely" (p. 526). Other researchers have found that faculty members have the following concerns regarding merit pay: 1) both a lack of understanding of the actual criteria used in the decision process and the weights assigned to the criteria; 2) award allocation appeared to be related to factors other than performance; 3) organizational politics played a major role in awarding of merit pay; and 4) merit pay does not motivate faculty members to higher levels of performance (Jenrette & Hays, 1996; Prewitt, Phillips, & Yasin, 1991).

Menges (1996) also suggested a two-dimensional validity test for merit pay programs that must include accuracy and representation. The test will enable a merit pay program to select from all faculty members who are eligible and those who are truly exemplary.

For 1995-96, the University of West Florida was allocated $181,932 for 27 faculty TIP awards. The University of West Florida's TIP guidelines paralleled the State University System of Florida.

These guidelines defined productivity and mandated that individual faculty members must have a record of teaching productivity that exceeded the departmental or college median for the previous three academic years. The following criteria were considered in determining those eligible faculty members: 1) employed in each of the past three consecutive academic years (1992-93, 1993-94, 1994-1995); 2) full-time employee; 3) nine-month or twelve-month appointment; 4) tenured or tenure-earning assistant professor, associate professor, or professor; or instructor; or in a rank which is equivalent to instructor; assistant instructor; or professor; and 5) taught four of the last six semesters during the past three consecutive academic years (summer or overload teaching is excluded).

In addition to the above eligibility criteria, faculty members had to meet criteria which related to *productivity* and *teaching effectiveness and creativity*. A faculty member's teaching productivity had to exceed the departmental or college median over the past three years and included the number of courses taught and the number of student credit hours generated. The faculty member also had to provide evidence of instructional quality in the following eight categories: 1) Teaching Responsibilities, 2) Teaching Philosophy, 3) Course Design/Content/ Methodology, 4) Evidence of Student Learning, 5) Faculty Annual Evaluations, 6) Student Evaluations, 7) Alumni/Peer Evaluations, and 8) Scholarship. Candidates were required to submit a portfolio which identified courses taught during the past three years, plus provide evidence with respect to each of the these eight categories. The faculty member was instructed to restrict the contents of the portfolio to the three academic years 1992-93, 1993-94, and 1994-95. Although the State University System guidelines emphasize productivity, the University of West Florida additionally attempted to focus upon teaching quality by including the eight categories in the TIP portfolio.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was twofold: 1) to determine University of West Florida faculty attitudes toward TIP, and 2) to determine what impact TIP had on faculty motivation to become more effective and productive teachers. The study tested one hypothesis and attempted to answer five research questions. The statistical hypothesis for the study was: There is no significant difference in attitudes between University of West Florida TIP winners and non-winners toward the TIP selection process, as measured by a survey.

The research questions for this study were:

1. What was the attitude of University of West Florida TIP winners toward the TIP selection process as measured by a faculty survey?
2. What was the attitude of University of West Florida TIP non-winners toward the TIP selection process as measured by a faculty survey?
3. What impact did TIP have on University of West Florida faculty motivation to improve teaching quality and effectiveness as measured by a faculty interview?
4. What impact did TIP have on University of West Florida faculty motivation to improve teaching productivity as measured by a faculty interview?

Method

Two separate and distinct instruments were used to gather data to answer these research questions. These instruments were a researcher generated faculty attitude survey and a faculty interview.

Faculty Survey

The purpose of the faculty survey was to measure attitudes as inferred from the responses. The survey used a five-item Likert Scale and consisted of 17 questions. Before the survey was administered, a pilot survey was administered to University of West Florida Educational Leadership graduate students to test its reliability. The Cronbach Alpha internal consistency coefficient on 24 variables and 31 cases was 0.77.

The final survey was administered to 211 University of West Florida faculty members. One hundred and eighteen surveys (56%) were returned. The survey consisted of statements which expressed positive and negative orientations to the issue of TIP. The faculty member was asked to indicate whether he or she agreed or disagreed with each statement by selecting from among response options of: Strongly Agree; Agree; Undecided, Disagree, Strongly Disagree. A "Comments" section was included in the survey. (See Appendix A for an example of the TIP faculty survey.)

To make the statistical analyses more meaningful, some TIP items were divided into two groups based on item content. Group 1 included TIP survey items 1-6, and Group 2 included TIP survey items 7, and 13 -16. The Group 1 content was based on *selection* and *eligibility criteria,* and the Group 2 content was based on *selection process biases.* TIP survey items 8 through 12 were not grouped and were analyzed as individual items identified by a *Q* prefix (e.g., Q8 identifies TIP survey item 8).

Faculty Interviews

The researcher interviewed 20 full-time University of West Florida faculty members to gather information on the impact of faculty member motivation to improve teaching quality, effectiveness, and productivity. The data were collected through face-to-face, open-ended interviews which permitted greater freedom of expression for the respondents, thereby providing a wider range of responses. The following five interview questions were asked in the same order to each respondent:

1. Based upon TIP eligibility criteria, was the process equitable for all faculty? If not, why?
2. Research indicates that merit pay promotes competition rather than cooperation among faculty. Was this the case at UWF? If so, did this have a negative or positive effect upon you?
3. The primary purpose of TIP, as defined in the *Guidelines for Implementing the Teacher Incentive Program 1995-1996*, was to "recognize, promote, and stimulate high quality and productivity in teaching." Therefore, has TIP motivated you to improve your teaching quality and effectiveness and/or to increase your teaching productivity?
4. According to Henneman and Young (1991), merit pay has the potential to motivate faculty to improve teaching quality only if they perceive a strong link between performance and outcome.

In the case of TIP, outcome would be defined as winning the TIP award. Did you perceive that there was a link between your teaching performance and winning the TIP award?

5. If you were in-charge of TIP, how would you run it?

Results

TIP Survey

In order to make the statistical analysis more meaningful, eleven TIP survey items were divided into two groups based on a predetermined question content. Group 1 content was based on selection and eligibility criteria and Group 2 was based on selection biases. Group 1 included survey items 1 through 6 and Group 2 included items 7 and 13 through 16. *t*-tests were selected to be run on both groups to assess a possible relationship between the means of the attitudes of TIP winners and non-winners toward TIP's selection and eligibility criteria and TIP's biases. The .05 level of significance was used for this study. Table 1 presents the Faculty Attitude *t*-test results for Group 1 and Group 2 items. The results of Group 1 (items Q1-Q6) did not indicate any significant difference between TIP winners and non-winners. The results of Group 2 (items Q7, Q13- Q17) did indicate a significant difference between TIP winners and non-winners.

Table 1
Faculty Attitude Survey t-test Results for Group 1 and Group 2 Items

Group	n	Mean	SD	*t*	df	*p*
Group 1 Variables						
TIP	46	15.49	5.07	-1.65	105	.10
Non-TIP	61	16.09	3.85			
Group 2 Variables						
TIP	46	12.35	4.95	-2.36	106	.02
Non-TIP	62	14.13	2.83			

TIP survey items 8-12 and 17 were not grouped and therefore analyzed individually. Because of this, Chi-square tests were run on each item to assess if there was a possible relationship between TIP winners and non-winners. Chi-square tests conducted on items Q9 through Q12 indicated a significant difference between TIP winners and non-winners. Chi-square results of items Q8 and Q17 did not indicate a significant difference between TIP winners and non-winners. Table 2 is a summary of the Chi-square statistical results.

Table 2
Summary of Chi-Square Statistical Results

Items		df	χ^2	p
Q8:	I understand what constitutes good/effective teaching in my department.	4	6.9	.14
Q9:	TIP is an equitable strategy for rewarding exemplary teaching.	4	11.83	.02
Q10:	TIP selection process is weighted toward teaching.			
Q11:	TIP selection process is weighted toward research.	4	11.51	.02
Q12:	TIP selection process is weighted toward service.	4	14.50	.01
Q17:	TIP motivated me to be a more effective teacher.	4	14.50	.01
		4	.95	.92

Faculty members were asked to provide comments on the TIP survey sheet. There were 33 faculty survey comments, 22 were from TIP non-winners, 11 from TIP winners. Table 3 is a sample of these comments:

Table 3
Sample of TIP Faculty Survey Comments

Faculty Survey Comments
TIP Non-winners Comments
"TIP is a good concept. It also makes for good PR with the public who do not understand how it works. It was just poorly implemented."
"I think the program was ill conceived."
"TIP is wrong. It promotes divisive attitudes when feelings are strongest toward apathy. Effect is to discourage anyone who does not simply fit a bureaucrat's formula for excellence, which comes closer to excellence of fit to a spreadsheet than description of an academician."
"The TIP award took money from many and gave it to a few."
"Minorities (race, sex) seem to be favored, particularly if they threaten to sue if they don't receive TIP."
TIP appears to be over driven by FTE generation (productivity) and under driven by teaching quality."
TIP Winners Comments
"Sadly TIP is a very dysfunctional tool; the TIP has greatly damaged morale and caused the system to emphasize the wrong thing."
"TIP is an extremely bad and disruptive program. It never should have occurred."
"TIP unfairly rewards only teachers with high productivity. Excellent and meritorious instructors did not qualify for TIP."
"Heavy weighing to FTE generation is the chief problem in TIP criteria. Otherwise, I believe they are very equitable."
"The package is what sets the reward! How you make the portfolio look is what counts."

Faculty Interviews

Table 4 provides a summary of faculty interview responses by question.

Table 4

Summary of Faculty Interview Responses by Question

Question	Response
1. Based upon TIP eligibility criteria, was it equitable for all faculty? If not, why were the criteria not equitable?	The majority of faculty members, 19 of 20, felt that TIP was not equitable for all faculty members. They felt that TIP was solely based on productivity and discriminated against faculty members who taught small classes, graduate classes, specialty classes, and those who primarily did research. Only two faculty interviewed felt that TIP was equitable. It was equitable only because one department reorganized teaching assignments.
2. Research indicates that merit pay promotes competition rather than cooperation among faculty. Was this the case at UWF? If so, did this have a negative or positive effect upon you?	Eleven (11) faculty members felt that TIP promoted competition which had a negative effect on them. Two (2) faculty members felt that TIP did promote competition, but had a positive effect on them. Five (5) faculty members felt that TIP did not promote competition among faculty members within their department/unit. One (1) faculty member stated that all faculty compete against each other and one (1) faculty member did not know. Three (3) of the five (5) faculty members who felt that TIP did not promote competition among their department stated that they were a close knit group, were friends, and cooperated with each other.
3. The primary purpose of TIP, as defined in the Guidelines for Implementing the Teacher Incentive Program 1995-1996, was to "recognize, promote, and stimulate high quality and productive teaching." Therefore, has TIP motivated you to improve teaching quality and effectiveness and/or increase teaching productivity?	Fourteen (14) faculty members felt that TIP did not motivate them to become better or more productive teachers. Three (3) faculty members felt that TIP motivated them to increase their student numbers in order to meet the eligibility criteria. One (1) faculty member stated, "TIP motivated me to win TIP," and "I did whatever I had to do to win!" Two (2) faculty felt that TIP forced them to "get my house in order" and "redefine my syllabi and forced me to review my outcomes." Three (3) felt that TIP was an extrinsic reward which did not motivate people to perform better.
4. According to Henneman and Young (1991), merit pay has the potential to motivate faculty to improve teaching quality only if they perceive a strong link between performance and outcome. In the case of TIP, outcome would be defined as winning the TIP award. Did you perceive that there was a link between your teaching performance and winning the TIP award?	Seventeen (17) faculty members felt that there was no link between teaching performance and winning the TIP award. Four (4) faculty members felt it was based only on productivity; three (3) faculty members felt it was based on the portfolio submitted; and one (1) faculty member felt it was a political contest. Three (3) faculty members felt that there was a direct link between their teaching performance and winning the TIP award.
5. If you were in-charge of TIP, how would you run it?	Faculty responses fell into four (4) general categories: abolish TIP; base award on teaching performance; redefine/expand eligibility criteria; and reward the department instead of the individual. Five (5) faculty members felt that TIP should be abolished. Nine (9) faculty members felt that TIP should be awarded only for teaching performance. Four (4) faculty members felt that TIP should include more categories (i.e., research, graduate faculty, teacher of small classes.). One (1) faculty member felt that TIP should be awarded to the department instead of individual faculty members.

Statistical Hypothesis:

There is no significant difference in attitudes between University of West Florida TIP winners and non-winners toward the TIP selection process as measured by a survey.

Based on Group 2 *t*-test and Chi-square tests on Items Q9-Q12, this statistical hypothesis was rejected. The findings suggest that the areas in which TIP winners and non-winners differed were: 1) bias, and 2) those areas which were weighted in the selection process (i.e., teaching, research, and service).

Results for Research Questions 1 and 2:

Q1. What was the attitude of University of West Florida TIP winners toward the TIP selection process as measured by a faculty survey?

Q2. What was the attitude of University of West Florida TIP non-winners toward the TIP selection process as measured by a faculty survey?

Based on the findings of the faculty survey *t*-test, Chi-square, and faculty members comments, the answers to research questions 1 and 2 appear to be:

1. TIP non-winners felt that the TIP selection process was more biased than did TIP winners.
2. The TIP selection process was not acceptable to the majority of University of West Florida faculty members surveyed.
3. The University of West Florida faculty members surveyed believe they understand what constitutes good teaching.
4. TIP winners felt that the TIP selection process was weighted toward teaching.
5. TIP non-winners felt the TIP selection process was weighted toward research and service.
6. Among the majority of those surveyed, TIP did not motivate University of West Florida faculty to be more effective teachers.

Faculty Interviews

Twenty faculty members were interviewed in an attempt to answer Research Questions 3 and 4.

Q3. What impact did TIP have on the University of West Florida faculty relative to motivation to improve teaching quality and effectiveness as measured by a faculty interview?

Q4. What impact did TIP have on the University of West Florida faculty relative to motivation to improve teaching productivity as measured by a faculty interview?

The answers to these questions appear to be that TIP did not motivate faculty members to improve the quality of their teaching (18 of 20 faculty members interviewed); however, TIP did

motivate the University of West Florida faculty members to increase their teaching load in order to be eligible for the award. One respondent summed it up with this statement: "TIP motivated me to win TIP."

Conclusions

This study has attempted to measure attitudes of faculty members at the University of West Florida toward TIP. The findings are consistent with the results noted in the literature review. The lack of measures of teaching abilities, political and patronage problems, and the issue of competition rather than interdependence were identified. Eighteen (18) faculty members interviewed believed that the selection process was based entirely on productivity and that it was not an objective measure of teaching abilities. Two (2) faculty members believed that TIP was a political contest. Ten (10) faculty members believed that TIP created competition rather than cooperation at the University. One (1) faculty member stated: "TIP has done more to destroy faculty morale at this university than any other program."

Interview results also supported expectancy and equity theories of motivation. Based on the expectancy theory, faculty members will only be motivated to improve their teaching quality and effectiveness when they perceive a strong link between effort and performance and between performance and outcomes. In the case of TIP, the majority of UWF faculty members interviewed (15 of 20) did not perceive a link between teaching performance and winning the TIP award. The only link the majority of faculty members saw was a link between productivity and winning the award. Faculty members were motivated to increase teaching loads in order to be eligible for the award.

The equity theory is based on comparing one's own performance with the performance of others, and it states that a person is motivated in proportion to how he or she perceives fairness of the award's system. In other words, faculty members compare their efforts and the awards they received to the effort and rewards of other faculty members. In the case of TIP, the majority of faculty members (18 of 20) felt that the eligibility criteria are not equitable, resulting in less qualified teachers winning the award.

In summary, this research has shown that TIP had little impact on improving the quality of teaching at the University of West Florida. In many cases, TIP did the opposite; instead of motivating faculty members, it reduced motivation because it forced faculty members to compete with each other. The following TIP-winning faculty member's statement best sums up the impact of TIP on University of West Florida faculty members interviewed: "TIP did create a competitive atmosphere and did not have any effect on motivation to become a better teacher. TIP was based on a portfolio, not on classroom performance. Overall, it negatively affected the faculty's morale. If there is no objective method of measuring quality teaching, TIP should be abolished!"

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Appendix A

TEACHING INCENTIVE PROGRAM (TIP) Survey

According to the State University System of Florida Guidelines for Implementing the Teaching Incentive Program, 1995-96 of June 30, 1995, the stated purpose of TIP was to "recognize, promote and stimulate high quality and productive teaching" (p. 1). This survey attempts to assess UWF faculty members' attitudes toward TIP. Using a scale of Strongly Agree (**SA**), Agree (**A**), Undecided (**U**), Disagree (**D**), and Strongly Disagree (**SD**), please indicate your degree of agreement or disagreement to the following items:

1. The university's eligibility criteria for TIP is acceptable.	**SA** O	**A** O	**U** O	**D** O	**SD** O
2. The department's eligibility criteria for TIP is acceptable.	**SA** O	**A** O	**U** O	**D** O	**SD** O
3. The university's selection process for TIP is acceptable.	**SA** O	**A** O	**U** O	**D** O	**SD** O
4. The department selection process for TIP is acceptable.	**SA** O	**A** O	**U** O	**D** O	**SD** O
5. The TIP selection process is vague.	**SA** O	**A** O	**U** O	**D** O	**SD** O
6. The TIP selection process is done in secrecy.	**SA** O	**A** O	**U** O	**D** O	**SD** O
7. The eligibility criteria are reflected in the selection of TIP recipients.	**SA** O	**A** O	**U** O	**D** O	**SD** O
8. I understand what constitutes good/effective teaching in my department.	**SA** O	**A** O	**U** O	**D** O	**SD** O
9. TIP is an equitable strategy for rewarding exemplary teaching.	**SA** O	**A** O	**U** O	**D** O	**SD** O
10. TIP selection process is weighted toward teaching.	**SA** O	**A** O	**U** O	**D** O	**SD** O
11. TIP selection process is weighted toward research.	**SA** O	**A** O	**U** O	**D** O	**SD** O
12. TIP selection process is weighted toward service.	**SA** O	**A** O	**U** O	**D** O	**SD** O
13. Politics play a major role in the awarding of TIP.	**SA** O	**A** O	**U** O	**D** O	**SD** O

14. TIP recipients fairly represent all disciplines at the university.	**SA**	**A**	**U**	**D**	**SD**
	○	○	○	○	○
15. TIP is free of gender bias.	**SA**	**A**	**U**	**D**	**SD**
	○	○	○	○	○
16. TIP is free of race bias.	**SA**	**A**	**U**	**D**	**SD**
	○	○	○	○	○
17. TIP motivated me to be a more effective teacher.	**SA**	**A**	**U**	**D**	**SD**
	○	○	○	○	○

18. I received the 1995-96 TIP award. (**NOTE** - This year was the first year SUSSAI data was available).	**Yes**	**No**
	○	○
19. I received a previous TIP award.	**Yes**	**No**
	○	○

COMMENTS: