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Teaching, research, and faculty salary inequality in American public university systems: An exploratory analysis

M. Garrett Roth
Gannon University

William P McAndrew
Gannon University

Abstract

This article explores the relationship between university faculty human capital types and levels and their related salary inequality across five university systems in the United States. More specifically, a better university ranking in The Wall Street Journal or Forbes leads to a higher GINI coefficient. This finding is also true for research and development spending. We further show evidence that universities value human capital more or less equally dependent upon the concentration of human capital types. Faculty teaching is valued more equally and research less equally. Further analysis focusing on the assistant professor subgroup, as a larger and more active share of the academic job market, amplifies our results.

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Contact: M. Garrett Roth - roth026@gannon.edu, William P McAndrew - mcandrew002@gannon.edu.
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1. Introduction

Since the publication of Becker's *The Economics of Discrimination* (1957), the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, many scholars in economics, sociology, and psychology have attempted to better understand inequality and discrimination in the marketplace. Whether salary differences depend on individual levels of human capital and marginal productivity or personal prejudice remains a predominant question of interest in academic literature. Considerable research on salary inequality has focused on university professors and found some evidence of disparate treatment based on gender and to a lesser extent race (Gordon, Morton, and Braden 1974; Becker 1964, Ch. 2; Bellas 1997; Hirsch, Schank, and Schnabel 2010; Fernandez and Campero 2016; Dilmaghani and Hu 2023). However, the motivation of previous research is overwhelmingly sociological and stresses the customary demographic distinctions of the broader discrimination literature.

This study, in contrast, considers the source(s) of salary inequality across faculty within a particular university, with an emphasis on the type and level of work faculty provide. More specifically, we ask whether an increased emphasis on research output produces a more or less egalitarian pay structure. To measure inequality, we construct GINI coefficients from salary data for five public university systems and compare them against two measures of university ranking as well as levels of research and development (R&D) expenditure. We find that more prestigious universities have higher levels of inequality, also shown in Roth and McAndrew (2018). Whereas Roth and McAndrew (2018) utilized data only from New York and North Carolina, the current paper includes Florida, Wisconsin, and Texas as well. We also include variables not previously employed, namely, *The Wall Street Journal* university rankings and levels of R&D spending, the latter of which is tabulated both at the institutional and faculty level. The addition of these new variables markedly improves the predictability of salary inequality. Finally, an important distinction between discipline-specific professional schools and traditional four-year universities is made. Collectively, these several expansions on Roth and McAndrew (2018) provide a more detailed explanation for university salary inequality.

As a more direct measure of faculty human capital and employers' market preference for higher marginal productivity, we find a significant correlation between higher levels of R&D spending and salary inequality. These findings demonstrate that salary distributions differ based on employer and market characteristics not necessarily directly related to taste-based discrimination. In other words, the level and type of human capital observed within a faculty body can impact salary distributions unrelated to demographics.

Studies of inequality and discrimination continue to prove challenging. As Howell et. al. (1994) explains, survey data is unlikely to accurately measure racial preferences due to the modern social stigma of publicly revealing one's prejudice, leading to an underreporting of demographic preferences. This is true whether discrimination is motivated by "taste-based" personal bias (Becker 1957, Shi et al. 2017) or "statistics-based" group differences and risk aversion (Phelps

1972, and Arrow 1972). Strategies have been developed to overcome this measurement problem. One strategy is an experimental audit study, where pairs of individuals with different characteristics are matched, and measurements of their treatment are compared (Nguyen 2022, Doleac and Stein 2013, Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004). A second strategy looks at comparisons of marginal productivity and salary, where any difference in pay not attributed to marginal productivity is ascribed to discrimination (Baert et al. 2017, Kahn 1991). Both strategies have flaws due to the absence of observed repeated interactions that could help determine whether discrimination is taste-based or statistics-based (Levitt 2004; McAndrew and Roth, 2021).

This study does not focus on discrimination or inequality in the pejorative sense but captures part of the market preferences of universities for specific types of academic human capital and their related outputs. In brief, we find universities compensate teaching more equally across professors and disciplines compared to research output. While faculty at a more prestigious school (where research output and grants are emphasized) are likely to have higher salaries in general, the differences between salaries across faculty are likely to be larger as well compared to a lower ranked (and likely more teaching intensive) schools. It may be the case that if teaching is a more general skill (especially at the undergraduate level) and research a more specific skill, then Becker (1964) would predict university teachers receive a lower and more homogenous salary whereas researchers a higher and more heterogenous salary, which the findings in this study support. Although outside the scope of this paper, if a particular demographic group tends to work at research-intensive schools or in disciplines valued more or less by universities, salary differences across demographics could be partially explained by a faculty self-selection process.

2. Methodology and Data

As a representative sample of faculty earnings across the United States, we obtained data on public college and university salaries in Florida, New York, North Carolina, Texas, and Wisconsin. These states are both geographically and structurally diverse, ranging from a highly decentralized system such as Texas to a much more consolidated system such as Wisconsin. Private college and university salaries are not public information, and we suspect that any results applicable to public institutions and faculty salaries will also hold for private institutions due to their overlap in the academic labor market. Few academic job candidates would, for example, focus more heavily on public institutions than private in their job search. Data from other states, most notably those on the Pacific coast, were unusable as they either (i) provided names and salaries, but not associated positions or (ii) made no distinction between flagship (research-oriented) and branch campus (teaching-oriented) faculty.

Due to both the inherent time delays involved in data collection caused by many phone calls, emails, or even FOIA requests, and the bevy of sources employed, our data “center around” the 2015-2016 academic year. When more readily available, data from a previous or subsequent year is used. Because the whole of faculty salaries at any given institution changes at a glacial pace, minor time inconsistencies do not compromise the validity of our results. Details on the sources of salary data are provided in an appendix.

To the best of our ability, salary data is restricted to tenured and tenure-track faculty. Accordingly, teaching professors, research professors, instructors, visiting professors, professors of the practice, adjunct faculty, etc. are omitted from the analysis; faculty whose primary responsibility was administrative (e.g. deans or associate deans) are also omitted. When available, faculty with "full time equivalency" less than 0.66 as well as those paid less than $35,000 were omitted; such "judgment calls" were necessary due to the incompleteness of the data.

Independent variables to be individually considered include (i) academic ratings for 2016 by *Forbes* magazine and (separately) *The Wall Street Journal* (hereafter, *WSJ*) and (ii) an average of research and development expenditures by institution as compiled by the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (NCSES). The former serve as alternative measures of institutional quality; the latter are a proxy for total *external* grants obtained by faculty at each institution. To better reflect long-run levels of external funding, the NCSES data is a decade-long average of expenditures from 2010-2020 rather than a "snapshot" of expenditures for the 2015-16 academic year. Though highly popular, *U.S. News and World Reports* academic ratings are unsuitable for empirical analysis due to the division of rankings into categories such as "National Universities" and "Liberal Arts Colleges".

Though (unsurprisingly) highly correlated, we hypothesize that university ratings and R&D spending will both increase salary inequality. Where more corporate (non-academic) alternatives exist for research output (engineering, hard sciences, business, and medicine) academic salaries will reflect such career alternatives for faculty. Thus, well-ranked, research-oriented universities will demonstrate more unequal salaries than lesser-ranked, teaching-oriented colleges. Unfortunately, most highly ranked teaching-oriented liberal arts colleges (e.g. Amherst College) are private and, therefore, necessarily outside the purview of our analysis.

Grant expenditures more directly reflect the marketability of faculty research. While we expect that the prevalence of "in-demand" research will selectively raise the salaries of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) faculty, the opposite may be true; faculty in typically grant-dependent disciplines may be funding their salaries as well as their research from external sources.

Before reporting empirical results, we first summarize the data by state, as shown in Table 1a, and by category in Table 1b.

Table 1a – Summary of Faculty Salary Data by State

State	FL	NY	NC	TX	WI
Schools	12	29	16	47	14
Faculty	11,446	7,890	9,380	22,475	5,887
Median salary	$106,080	$83,511	$83,594	$104,135	$83,546
Avg. GINI coefficient	0.216	0.137	0.173	0.291	0.156
Avg. R&D exp. per faculty	$121,211	$346,466	$70,891	$130,064	$73,731
Median Forbes ranking	455	347	492	574	435
Avg. WSJ rating	45.46	44.43	45.04	39.79	36.38

Table 1b – Summary of Faculty Salary Data by Category

	All	Professional schools	Non-prof. schools	Asst. profs. (all)	Asst. profs. (non-prof. schools)
Schools	118	22	96	118	96
Faculty	57,078	8,476	48,602	18,396	17,045
Median salary	$95,073	$126,123	$91,316	$79,179	$78,730
Avg. GINI coefficient	0.213	0.222	0.211	0.195	0.190
Minimum	0.080	0.080	0.093	0.031	0.035
Maximum	0.370	0.337	0.370	0.401	0.342
Avg. R&D exp. per faculty (thousands)	$147.77	$421.62	$90.72	----	----
Minimum	$3.46	$19.70	$3.46	----	----
Maximum	$3,252.62	$3,252.62	$566.78	----	----
Median Forbes ranking	474	347	478	----	----
Avg. WSJ rating	42.00	43.28	41.97	----	----

From the raw salary data, GINI coefficients were calculated by school across all faculty and separately by rank (assistant, associate, and full professors) using the GINIDESC STATA module (Aliaga and Montoya, 1999). As an exploratory analysis of cross-sectional data, we default to ordinary least squares as the most straightforward econometric approach. As shown in Table 1a, marked discrepancies in state-wide median salaries warrant the inclusion of a state-specific dummy variable. Consequently, the regression specification shown in equation (1) is

$$GINI_i = B_0 + B_1 * RANK_i + \vec{B} * STATE_i + e_i \qquad (1)$$

where *i* is a university, GINI is the customary 0 – 1 measurement of pure inequality, RANK is *either* a standardized school ranking *or* R&D expenditure, and STATE is a vector of state-level dummy variables. For the sake of consistency, we reverse the sign of the standardized *Forbes* ranking such that a higher value implies greater academic prestige. The correlation between

R&D expenditure and ranking metrics is 0.77 for *Forbes* and 0.86 for *WSJ*. Consequently, including both a ranking and R&D variable in a single regression specification would create unacceptably high levels of collinearity. Table 2 shows the results of the previously discussed specifications as applied to GINI coefficients for the entire pool of faculty. The number of observations vary based upon university ranking and R&D data availability.

Table 2 – Determinants of Salary Inequality (Full Sample)

VARIABLES	(1) Forbes	(2) WSJ	(3) RD	(4) RD per faculty
Forbes	0.0148* (0.00743)	-----	-----	-----
WI (dummy)	0.0300 (0.0291)	0.0350*** (0.0125)	-0.00620 (0.0196)	0.000583 (0.0214)
NC (dummy)	0.0522** (0.0230)	0.0448*** (0.0117)	0.0195 (0.0179)	0.0259 (0.0196)
FL (dummy)	0.0768*** (0.0220)	0.0941*** (0.0129)	0.0555*** (0.0192)	0.0659*** (0.0207)
TX (dummy)	0.153*** (0.0214)	0.180*** (0.0103)	0.129*** (0.0148)	0.135*** (0.0162)
WSJ	-----	0.0202*** (0.00389)	-----	-----
Avg. R&D (millions)	-----	-----	0.0771*** (0.0213)	-----
Avg. R&D per faculty	-----	-----	-----	15.44 (15.58)
Constant	0.146*** (0.0166)	0.133*** (0.00778)	0.154*** (0.0128)	0.156*** (0.0146)
Observations	49	78	87	87
R-squared	0.587	0.840	0.644	0.591

Standard errors in parentheses; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

3. Empirical Results

The results are largely consistent. Greater ranking prestige or greater R&D levels lead to a more unequal salary distribution. Two additional results are noteworthy. First, for the broadest sample of schools, R&D levels seem to matter at the institutional level; the per faculty R&D variable is positive (more inequality) but not statistically significant. Given the radically different means of average R&D expenditure per faculty member shown in Table 1b, the inclusion of discipline-specific professional schools, such as SUNY Polytechnic Institute, is likely creating excessive noise in the dataset. This issue will be addressed via sample restriction later in this section. Second, *WSJ* rankings fit GINI coefficients far better than those of *Forbes*. Differences in ranking criteria are likely driving this result and will also be discussed at the end of this section. Though omitted for the sake of brevity, a regression formulation using Carnegie classifications as an independent variable produced comparable and highly significant results ($p < 0.01$), with R1 institutions having the most *unequal* salary distribution.

As one of two robustness checks, we repeat the previous analysis for the subset of assistant professors. Because this least senior and partly untenured group is more likely to be fresh from, on, or contemplating the academic job market, they are most likely to be paid in accordance with the salary dictates of that market than their entrenched and more senior colleagues. The results provided in Table 3 comport with those of faculty as a whole, including the superiority of *WSJ* rankings over *Forbes* as a predictor of salary inequality.

As a second robustness check, we eliminated the aforementioned "professional" schools focused on a narrow range of disciplines from the sample. Schools such as New York's Maritime College and the Texas A&M Health Science Center are sufficiently singular in breadth of academic focus that faculty homogeneity may affect salary inequality. As shown in Table 1b, R&D expenditure per faculty member is drastically higher at such institutions as well. Moreover, four of the five highest R&D expenditure per faculty values were among such vocationally focused schools. Casual observation also suggests that such "professional" schools were outliers at *both* ends of the GINI coefficient distribution; the North Carolina School for the Arts was the most equal school in the sample while University of Texas Health Science Centers (at Tyler and San Antonio) were among the most unequal. No significant difference exists, however, between the *average* GINI coefficient for "professional" schools (0.222) and their more generalized counterparts (0.211). Results of the same regression formulations as Table 2 (with all faculty ranks considered) are reported in Table 4 with such professional schools omitted from the analysis. As expected, R&D expenditure per faculty member is now a significant determinant of salary inequality in the restricted sample. Though omitted for the sake of brevity, a regression of assistant professor GINI coefficients at multidisciplinary institutions comports with the results in columns 3 and 4 of table 4.

The abiding difference between the explanatory power of *Forbes* and *WSJ* rankings warrants additional exposition per their methodological differences. The components of each metric are summarized in Table 5. Despite a general congruence, *Forbes* rankings place greater emphasis on student debt (7% of WSJ metric) and student satisfaction / recommendations (6% of WSJ metric). Though neither formula appears to especially emphasize research output and external grants, the WSJ correlates more highly with both R&D levels and salary inequality.

In summary, our empirical analysis has established that institutions with more prestige and more R&D expenditure also show greater inequality across faculty salaries. In addition, the ranking metric of *WSJ* is more predictive of salary inequality than that of *Forbes Magazine*. Lastly, R&D levels per faculty member become significant when R&D intensive professional schools (such as health science centers) are eliminated from the sample.

Table 3 – Assistant Professor Determinants of Salary Inequality

VARIABLES	(1) Forbes	(2) WSJ	(3) RD	(4) RD per faculty
Forbes	0.0222** (0.00963)			
WI (dummy)	0.0734* (0.0377)	0.0766*** (0.0181)	0.0266 (0.0265)	0.0354 (0.0290)
NC (dummy)	0.0878*** (0.0299)	0.0660*** (0.0169)	0.0353 (0.0243)	0.0436 (0.0266)
FL (dummy)	0.0925*** (0.0286)	0.0987*** (0.0187)	0.0505* (0.0259)	0.0639** (0.0280)
TX (dummy)	0.228*** (0.0277)	0.242*** (0.0150)	0.182*** (0.0203)	0.189*** (0.0222)
WSJ		0.0250*** (0.00563)		
Avg. R&D (millions)			0.100*** (0.0284)	
Avg. R&D per faculty				21.38 (20.73)
Constant	0.0833*** (0.0215)	0.0798*** (0.0112)	0.107*** (0.0177)	0.109*** (0.0201)
Observations	49	78	85	85
R-squared	0.645	0.806	0.643	0.592

Standard errors in parentheses; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 4 – Determinants of Salary Inequality at Multidisciplinary Institutions

VARIABLES	(1) Forbes	(2) WSJ	(3) RD	(4) RD per faculty
Forbes ranking	0.0149* (0.00758)			
WI (dummy)	0.0287 (0.0300)	0.0353*** (0.0130)	0.00285 (0.0210)	0.0113 (0.0210)
NC (dummy)	0.0509** (0.0240)	0.0451*** (0.0122)	0.0286 (0.0195)	0.0370* (0.0195)
FL (dummy)	0.0755*** (0.0230)	0.0944*** (0.0134)	0.0715*** (0.0211)	0.0766*** (0.0210)
TX (dummy)	0.152*** (0.0224)	0.180*** (0.0109)	0.141*** (0.0172)	0.141*** (0.0172)
WSJ ranking		0.00169*** (0.000331)		
R&D total			0.0847*** (0.0224)	
R&D per faculty				168.8***

				(44.21)
Constant	0.147***	0.0615***	0.144***	0.134***
	(0.0178)	(0.0169)	(0.0154)	(0.0159)
Observations	48	76	75	75
R-squared	0.575	0.836	0.671	0.672

Standard errors in parentheses; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 5 – Summary of Weightings in College and University Rankings

Forbes Methodology	Wall Street Journal Methodology
Student satisfaction – 27.5% - Student evaluations – 22.5% - Frosh-to-soph retention 5%	**Resources – 30%** - Finance per student – 11% - Faculty per student – 11% - Research papers per faculty – 8%
Postgraduate success – 30% - Alumni salary – 15% - Who's who listings of alumni – 10% - Alumni in corp. officers list – 5%	**Engagement – 20%** - Student engagement – 7% - Student recommendations – 6% - Interaction w. teachers & students – 4% - Number of accredited programs – 3%
Student debt – 17.5% - Typical four-year debt load – 12.5% - Student loan default rates – 5%	**Outcomes – 40%** - Graduation rate – 11% - Value added to graduate salary – 12% - Debt after graduation – 7% - Academic reputation – 10%
Four-year graduation rate – 17.5% - Actual rate – 8.75% - Predicted vs. actual rate – 8.75% **Competitive awards – 7.5%**	**Environment – 10%** - Proportion of intl. students – 2% - Student diversity – 3% - Student inclusion – 2% - Staff diversity – 3%

4. Concluding Remarks

Understanding salary differences across universities, disciplines, and demographics is important not only for social understanding, but to ensure that universities are following federal law. This paper expands previous research by including additional data and variables, and finds significant differences in salary equality across universities and university systems as measured by GINI coefficients, and that schools of greater prestige have higher levels of inequality which are larger for the assistant professor rank compared to professors of all ranks, agreeing with Roth and McAndrew (2018). The current paper also finds a positive relationship between R&D spending and salary inequality at the institutional level, and when professional schools are excluded at the average faculty level as well. R&D spending is highly correlated with external ranking, more so for *WSJ* compared to *Forbes* rankings. The relationship between R&D spending and salary inequality indicates that university salary differences are based, at least in part, on marginal productivity differences among faculty and market preferences for research in specific disciplines. This finding is in line with the predictions of Becker (1964) in that more general skills (teaching) are compensated less and more homogeneously than more specific skills (research) which are compensated at a higher level and more heterogeneously, likely due to the different marginal productivity, turnover, and search costs imposed by replacing employees with general versus specific skills. Although not directly looked at in this study, future research can investigate the impact university salary inequality has had on faculty employment decisions related to teaching or research, similar to major choice among students (Wiswall and Zafar (2015)).

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6. Appendix - Notes on Sources of Salary Data

Florida data were obtained via the "Florida has a Right to Know" website and were current data as of February 2016. The search tool for contemporary data is available at https://prod.flbog.net:4445/pls/apex/f?p=140:1 Historical data are not available.

New York data were obtained via public records request from the state comptroller's office and were current as of August 27th, 2015.

North Carolina data were obtained from the *Raleigh News and Observer* website and were the most recent data available on February 27th, 2016. As with Florida, contemporary but not historical data are available at https://www.newsobserver.com/news/databases/public-salaries/

Texas data were primarily collected via the *Texas Tribute* website and were the most current data as of October 2017. As of May 2020, the *Texas Tribune* no longer makes university faculty salaries available via their "government salaries explorer" (i.e. no applicable website link is available). As necessary, additional data were obtained via direct request to school administrators.

Wisconsin data were collected from the Baraboo News Republic website in October 2017 and were for fiscal year 2016. The relevant webpage, (https://www.wiscnews.com/baraboonewsrepublic/news/state-and-regional/database-university-of-wisconsin-employee-salaries/article_1d2815f5-3ac0-5614-8196-89b3de700370.html) though available, now requires a subscription.