Developing and Implementing Effective Campus Worklife Policies: The Story of one NSF ADVANCE Project

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Six years ago, Louisiana Tech University’s NSF ADVANCE grant began with three goals: building a more supportive climate, enhancing promotion and leadership, and increasing retention of women faculty in STEM. One of the programs created to help achieve these goals has focused on developing and implementing effective worklife policies for the campus, to both build a more supportive climate and increase retention of women faculty. The campus does not have formal worklife policies beyond those that are federally mandated (such as the Family and Medical Leave Act). The worklife policies effort for this project, unlike most of the other eight programs, has required input, buy-in and approval from not only groups and administrators across campus, but also from top administrators for the university and personnel at the state system level. A number of strategies have been used in laying the groundwork, with varying levels of success as well as multiple starts and stops. Actual changes in worklife policies have yet to be realized, but there is hope that at least some of the proposed policies will be approved by the conclusion of this last no-cost extension year. Assessment suggests that a significant portion of faculty (both male and female) do not feel that the campus currently has an adequate number of worklife policies, with less (15%) female faculty versus male (54%) faculty agreeing that existing policies are sufficient. Similar percentages (15% for female faculty and 46% for male faculty) felt that faculty in their department are well-informed about campus worklife policies. Interviews suggest that some campus administrators are concerned that the lack of worklife policies may impede their ability to attract and retain new faculty, especially female faculty. This paper looks at the process of laying the groundwork for such policy change, including efforts to engage and solicit both input and buy-in from a variety of campus groups, as well as efforts at the state level to implement worklife policy changes.

Background

Louisiana Tech University is a medium-sized state university with an increased emphasis on high-quality interdisciplinary research in key focal areas over the last 20 years. The College of Engineering and Science emphasizes and utilizes an interdisciplinary, team-based model in all aspects of administration, education, and research. The college incorporates engineering, engineering technology, computer science, math, chemistry, and physics in a single administrative structure, which emphasizes collaboration and removes many traditional systematic hurdles. The practical structure of the college demonstrates a more collaborative, versus competitive, work environment than most institutions. The college leadership was reasonably familiar with gender issues as they relate to undergraduate education, faculty retention and success prior to ADVANCE. The college has been successful in securing federal funding for and implementing a number of relevant programs, employing for approximately a dozen years an integrated model for the first two years of undergraduate engineering education. This has reaped significant rewards in student success, retention, and satisfaction.
Faculty expectations in the college for teaching, research, and service vary from department to department. Tenure-track/tenured faculty typically teach three to six courses per year and are generally expected to contribute to two to four proposals per year (at least some of which can be as a co-PI). One to two publications are expected per year, in general, as well as reasonable production of PhD and master’s students. Teaching and research are both considered important, given the focus on personal interaction, innovation in curricula, and hands-on learning. In fact, for most faculty, at least some of their proposals and publications can be education-focused.

Specific Barriers to Women’s Advancement at Louisiana Tech University

An analysis of data from the years 2000-2008 suggested several barriers to the advancement of women faculty in STEM in the college. Discrepancies in terms of salary, resources, and other measures of compensation did not appear to be issues at the University. Salary data at the assistant professor level was identical for men and women in both engineering and science; at the associate and full professor level, salary data in the sciences was statistically similar. An analysis of start-up packages showed women received larger packages (in terms of dollar value) than their male counterparts. While there has been and continues to be a negative disparity in the total number of women in STEM fields in the college, the college leadership has exerted concerted effort over this time period to address this problem. These have increased both the total number of tenure track women faculty and the number of disciplines that have at least one tenure track female faculty member. Two women held formal leadership roles in the college during this time period. For reference, the college averaged around 70 tenure-track/tenured faculty and 10 women tenure-track/tenured faculty during this time period. The total number of leadership positions in the college during this time frame averaged around 25.

A faculty survey adapted from similar ADVANCE surveys at University of Wisconsin-Madison and University of Rhode Island identified several areas for potential improvement, including overall job satisfaction related to working climate, retention, and promotion/leadership. Most positive climate characteristics rated lower for women and negative climate dimensions rated significantly higher for women. Thus, women experience a less welcoming and more demanding work environment. This situation is of particular concern as research shows these issues have the greatest apparent impact on women, who often under-represent or altogether deny experiences of discrimination.

With funding from the NSF ADVANCE Program (Award #0930232), the college has implemented a concerted systematic approach to address the issues of climate, retention/promotion and professional development, with the overall goal of implementing programs which will increase employee satisfaction of both sexes and enhance retention rates, with a focus on performance and sustainability.

Theoretical Framework
Social Cognitive Theory\textsuperscript{10} and the extension of this theory to career development\textsuperscript{11} and work satisfaction\textsuperscript{12,13} provide the underlying theory that informs the project. At the foundation of this theoretical framework is the belief that a person is both an interpreter of contextually-bound experiences and agent in changing those experiences. As such, one’s context or environment plays a central role in moderating one’s career choices and goals, and ultimately, work satisfaction. Bakken, et. al.;\textsuperscript{14} proposed that research career development in the medical field be studied from a social cognitive perspective\textsuperscript{10,11} that considers the multiple environments central to one’s life and work. Relevant to this project, the authors advocated that attention be given to the multiple environments of research, academia and home/family life that create numerous and often competing expectations and demands on one’s work life. These multiple environments interact with personal characteristics (e.g. gender, race) to influence career behaviors, confidence in one’s ability to do research (research self-efficacy), and the outcomes one expects from a research career (career self-efficacy). These factors, in turn, predict one’s initial or sustained interest in a research career pathway. This theoretical framework is important because it recognizes the role of personal agency and personal characteristics in the career development process. The authors suggested that interventions to increase the number and effectiveness of researchers in an academic environment be focused on 1) reducing role conflicts imposed by multiple environments, 2) providing continuity of training efforts, 3) creating a positive and rewarding mentoring culture, 4) and incorporating and evaluating efforts to increase one’s research self-efficacy beliefs.

Not only must one be interested in a career pathway and provided with the optimal conditions to pursue a career pathway, they must be supported in their work environments to achieve and maintain a satisfying work life. Lent and Brown\textsuperscript{13} initially proposed a model for work satisfaction that extends their scholarship on Social Cognitive Career Theory\textsuperscript{11}. In this process model, the authors posit that work satisfaction is influenced by 1) one’s affective traits, 2) participation in goal-directed activities, 3) environmental supports and resources, 4) work self-efficacy and 5) both expected and received works conditions and outcomes. The relationship between environmental supports and resources and work satisfaction is both direct and indirect. Indirect factors include one’s participation in and progress toward goal-directed activities as mediated by work self-efficacy and work conditions and outcomes. The advantage of this work satisfaction model is that it acknowledges both subjective and psychological forms of well-being along with social and cognitive factors that influence work satisfaction. In other words, it acknowledges one’s satisfaction toward life and negative or positive feelings in concert with one’s desire for self-actualization, meaning and purpose in life within the context of the work environment. These forms of well-being are necessary for creating salience between one’s personal goals and identities and her roles within the work environment. Goal-relevant supports and resources within the work environment, therefore, are important for promoting work-life balance and job satisfaction\textsuperscript{13,14}. Lent and Brown\textsuperscript{13} proposed that interventions be targeted to those that are likely to impact work satisfaction, such as helping an employee overcome perceived obstacles to and make progress toward achieving her goals, implementing strategies to foster self-efficacy beliefs, creating salience between work roles and work
goals, and enhancing the meaning-making potential of one’s work.

Considering these various influences on work satisfaction and the intervening areas suggested by Bakken, et al.\textsuperscript{14} and Lent and Brown\textsuperscript{15} our project is focusing on interventions that will most likely result in work satisfaction and ultimately influence the retention of women faculty in STEM fields. More specifically, our ADVANCE initiatives target mentoring, and other related programs such as the faculty lunches and career development workshops, as means of providing environmental supports and resources to promote work satisfaction and retention of women and men in the college. A concerted development of formal mentoring programs, professional and leadership development programs and institutional policies for life transitions should yield gains in women’s satisfaction and therefore, retention and promotion.

**Program Overview**

As suggested by the initial faculty survey, the project has worked to adapt and implement best practices from NSF ADVANCE Programs designed to build a more supportive climate for women faculty in STEM departments, provide training on professional development and leadership, and work to increase retention of women faculty. Specific programs developed for each of these focus areas. The worklife policy effort is one of four programs aimed at impacting the climate for women faculty (see Table 1). All programs were offered to faculty in STEM departments, with the exception of the worklife policy efforts, which have been extended to the entire campus. There is some overlap between the initiatives and goals. For example, worklife policies should contribute to retention of women faculty, in addition to helping create a more supportive climate.

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Table 1 – ADVANCE Programs
The ADVANCE Program leadership laid the groundwork for developing one or more new Worklife Policies for the campus during years one and two, in partnerships with other colleges on the university campus. A campus-wide survey of faculty suggested significant interest in expanding the services of the nationally accredited early childhood education center on campus. The center began offering their program for three- and four-year olds with a modified full-day option (children may attend both the morning and afternoon sessions but must be picked up for lunch) for the first time in year four of the project. Project personnel worked with the center director and university administrators to find more space on campus as well as other sources of funding which would allow both the number of children served to grow and allow the center to offer care for children birth through pre-kindergarten. While there appeared to be viable options for both space and funding, we have not been able to make additional progress on these fronts.

Project personnel were next asked to serve on the Faculty and Staff Senate Benefits Committee during year three of the project to draft a resolution recommending that the university adopt worklife policies (modified duties, tenure clock stoppage and transitional support) that peer institutions have adopted. The resolution was passed by both the Benefits Committee and the full Faculty and Staff Senate in spring of 2012. In January of 2013, the Faculty and Staff Senate recommended that a campus worklife policies committee be created to study these policies. The university Administration and Planning Council (which includes the president, vice presidents and dean) proposed that the president form a committee to consider possible policies and recommend which policies should be implemented. The president concurred and also appointed a governance committee (including deans and vice presidents) to make sure that policies were compliant with existing policies from the state management board. The university president retired before this committee was able to be formed and meet. There were a number of other simultaneous leadership changes at the university, included vice president for academic affairs (similar to a provost position), dean of the graduate school, vice president for research (who was previously the college dean), and the college dean (formerly an associate dean in the college).

Under the new president, the campus-wide committee was formed, led by the project co-PI with representatives from each of the colleges. They worked to draft policies in four areas: modified duties policy for faculty dealing with life transitions, tenure-clock extension policy for faculty who have/adopt children, a tuition exchange program, and a common policy on tenure and promotion. The tuition exchange program has since been implemented. The committee considered having the university submit the remaining new policies to the University of Louisiana System for approval (which would extend these policies to most of the universities in the state). However, the university administration decided that it would be best to create campus policies with the understanding that the other universities in the state would be likely to adopt the policies once they were official on our campus. The committee is currently hoping to develop acceptable language that would make the remaining policies opt-out policies (where it is assumed that qualified faculty will use the policy unless they make a specific request to forego it) versus opt-in policies (which require that faculty make a special request to use a particular policy).
Current thinking is that if faculty have to request the assistance provided by the policies that they may be less likely to take advantage of these policies and that doing so may be viewed as a weakness on their part by their peers and administrators. Opt-out policies, however, suggest that the university expects everyone to take advantage of these policies and that doing so is not unusual. Hence faculty are more likely to use the policies when they need them.

Assessment Summary

A mixture of quantitative and qualitative measures was used to collect baseline data during the first year. They focused on evaluation planning efforts during the first year of the grant; findings from a survey and interviews administered to college faculty and administrators; and institutional data related to the goals of the project. During years two through five, a follow-up survey was administered to all college faculty (completion rates for female faculty have been around 80% each year; completion rates for male faculty have been around 50% each year), in addition to faculty interviews (completion rates for female faculty and administrators have been around 90%, completion rates for mentors of female faculty have varied from 50% - 100%) and collection of institutional data (faculty gender composition by rank, promotion, attrition, time in rank, grant applications and awards, publications, leadership positions, recruitment, awards and worklife policies over time) related to the goals of the program. Note that project personnel who are faculty, administrators and/or mentors do not participate in the interviews.

It should be noted that the college has under 100 faculty members, approximately 70 of whom are tenure-track/tenured faculty. Over the time span of this project, the number of women faculty has ranged from 15 – 17, with 5 – 7 non-tenure-track, 2 – 4 at the assistant professor level, and 4 - 6 at the associate professor level, and 1 – 2 at the full professor level. The size of the college and small number of female faculty members (approximately 10 tenure-track/tenured) imposes several restrictions on data collection and reporting. First, identifiable information (aside from gender) is not included so as to protect the identity of the faculty member. Secondly, surveys are administered anonymously, so it is not possible to compare individual respondent’s responses over time. Lastly, similarities or differences in survey results across different years must be interpreted carefully because the set of respondents may not be exactly the same from year to year. It should also be noted that the percentage of male faculty responding to the annual faculty survey is somewhat lower than the percentage of female respondents, which may affect the validity of the responses. The fact that the project is focused on improving the success of women faculty may be a contributing factor to the lower response rate from male faculty. For a survey is administered via email, however, the response rate for male faculty is considered good.

Here, we summarize data from years one through five relative to worklife policies efforts. Additional data, not reported here, examines a number of other issues.

In 2014, women faculty remained less likely than their male colleagues to agree that the campus has an adequate number of worklife policies (Chart 1) or that the faculty in their program are well-informed about the existing policies (Chart 2). Note that while the
difference between male and female responses to these two questions were statistically different in 2011 (both questions at the p< 0.5 level), 2012 (only the question about existing policies, at the p< 0.5 level) and 2014 (both questions at the p< 0.5 level), it was not true in 2013. One possible reason may be that men and women views’ on this topic became more similar over the lifetime of the project, with the sudden gap in both questions in the last year (2014) related to the ending of the project. It could be that female faculty were frustrated that more progress was not realized on these two issues while male faculty felt encouraged by the promise of additional progress and also more satisfied with the progress to date than their female counterparts. The lack of formal, written worklife policies was noted on the surveys as a concern by many female and male faculty members. Not all faculty members may be aware that they can informally request accommodations when needed, and women in particular were reported to be less likely to ask for such informal assistance, which may also have contributed to the difference in responses to the questions on Charts 1 and 2. Most interviewed faculty members and administrators supported instituting one or more worklife policies, particularly a policy outlining conditions under which the tenure clock could be extended. Some administrators in the college are concerned that the lack of worklife policies may impede their ability to attract and retain new faculty, especially women.

(Not asked in Year 1)

Chart 1 – Percentage of Faculty who Strongly or Somewhat Agreed: This campus has an adequate number of worklife policies
Chart 2 – Percentage of Faculty who Strongly or Somewhat Agreed: Faculty in my program (department) are well-informed about the campus’ worklife policies.

One female faculty member noted: “That’s a big order, when you start trying to change a university. They say it’s like trying to change a battleship with your hands or running in molasses. But a lot of that is because universities are old, venerated institutions. They’ve been around since medieval times...They are steeped in tradition and ways of doing things. It’s hard to change them. It really is. It takes a concerted effort on those that want to make the change to do it...That I have learned from being a [faculty member] at a university. It’s hard. But it is rewarding if you can. I feel like the ADVANCE Program has some real marked improvement for the women at Louisiana Tech University. I know it has.”

Another faculty member wrote on the annual survey: “I believe the maternity policy at Louisiana Tech University is poor or lacking...It concerns me that no proper maternity policy is in place to protect women’s careers when they need some time to take care of their very important baby.”

One administrator in the college explained: “The president approved that committee and, in addition, appointed a governance committee consisting of a couple of deans and a couple of vice presidents to work with the university senate committee to make sure that whatever policy is produced is compliant with existing policies that are imposed on us by our management board...That was pushed forward...as an outcome of the ADVANCEing grant, especially based on some of the early survey results from the first couple of years of that being an important issue. It’s marching through the process that it takes, especially to establish a significant change in the policies, like this could be.”

Other college administrators were hopeful that the recent changes in university administration will increase the likelihood that worklife policies will be implemented in the next couple of years: “My understanding is that those [proposals to develop worklife
policies] were presented to the president under previous administration. There wasn’t much willingness to pursue that. I suspect that that’s going to get revisited under the current administration. At this time, there’s a tremendous amount of things that are being revisited. It’s a matter of when to time the reengagement process. I suspect [the new president of Louisiana Tech University] is willing to look into that especially since there are sister institutions in our state that have policies.”

Another college administrator observed: “Within the college, we have agreed that as soon as the provost’s office gives permission, we will modify our tenure and promotion policies to include things like a tenure clock extension and accommodation for not only women, but also men who have unexpected events in their lives, like death of a family member or extended illnesses of a spouse or close relative. So we have discussed that we would like to include those statements in our tenure and promotion policy, but we cannot do that until the university adopts some official position on this... Given the budget constraints and other factors that we are going through, I think the new president and the current administration is more interested in finding ways to retain faculty than has been in the past. At least, that’s my sense.”

Relative to the project’s efforts to expand the availability of campus child care, an administrator noted: “We need to learn from organizations like Google and Microsoft [that provide onsite daycare]. Even though they are extremely demanding work environments, I think they are much more successful in recruiting and retaining outstanding women.”

Lessons Learned

Because this ADVANCE project was an adaptation and implementation grant, project personnel were required to find programs developed by other ADVANCE projects and modify those for our institution, goals and audience. Some of these programs were well-documented and easy to adapt. Others were not. In addition, some of the programs worked well from the start. Others required revision, tweaking, and adjustment over time. Nevertheless, Worklife Policy efforts have been the most challenging of the nine ADVANCE project initiatives to move forward. This is likely due in part to the fact that these require changes in university-wide policies, versus local department or college practices, and that this necessarily requires much broader education and consensus-building to achieve. The effort was also slowed by a number of changes in the college and upper administration. Efforts by other peer institutions and support from the Faculty and Staff Senate have helped advance these efforts and project personnel remain hopeful that these efforts will result in new policies. Indeed, enlisting the support of and partnering with groups outside of the College have been key to advancing these efforts.

Conclusion

Louisiana Tech University established a program six years ago, with funding from the NSF ADVANCE Program, aimed at building a more supportive climate for women faculty, increasing retention of women faculty, and providing training for professional
development and leadership. The program has utilized a multi-pronged approach and adapted best practices from NSF ADVANCE projects to implement several initiatives, including a worklife policies effort. While most changes in worklife policies have yet to be realized, there is hope that these policies may be adopted before the end of the project. Assessment suggests that a significant portion of faculty (both male and female) do not feel that the campus currently has an adequate number of worklife policies. Similar percentages feel that faculty in their department are well-informed about campus worklife policies. Interviews suggest that some campus administrators are concerned that the lack of worklife policies may impede their ability to attract and retain new faculty, especially female faculty. Project personnel remain hopeful that at least some of the proposed policies will be implemented in the next couple of years. If such policies are realized, they could serve as models for other institutions in the state.

References


