

# Tips to Create a Flexible Academic Culture on Campus

Making scholars choose between having a profession and having a life means universities lose. There's nothing inevitable about the high rate of attrition from the leaky pipeline, especially by women. After heavy investment in educating and recruiting the next generation of academics, schools can't afford to drive them away.

At the 2009 College and University Work/Family Association conference in Seattle in June, leaders from Sloan Award schools and the American Council on Education (which administers the awards) shared tips for transforming a campus toward a culture of flexibility. Panelists were:

- **Dr. Jean McLaughlin**, research associate, American Council on Education
- **Dr. Sona Karentz Andrews**, provost and VP for academic affairs, Boise State University ID
- **Dr. Joan Merdinger**, associate VP for faculty affairs, San José State University CA
- **Dr. Amy Strage**, ACE-Sloan faculty-in-residence for faculty career flexibility, San José State University CA
- **Dr. Kate Quinn**, associate project director, American Council on Education, former director of Balance@UW at the University of Washington

Recipients of Sloan Awards for Faculty Career Flexibility are learning what works to make their campuses work/life-friendly (see sidebar). Some have extended initiatives beyond faculty to staff and occasionally students. While those groups' issues vary, a flexible climate can help everyone.

Career flexibility includes options for all different stages of career and family. It benefits new hires as well as those facing retirement. It's for anyone tending an ailing partner or parent, caring for a new family member or recovering from an injury. Examples of flexibility include the ability to move between part-time and full-time work or to leave for a year or two with a way to come back.

## Flexibility now?

Economic troubles trigger a range of human reactions. Some dig in their heels and become less resilient. People with jobs struggle to keep them. Insecurity breeds resistance to experimentation or change. While compassion may extend to those clearly in trouble, inter-group jealousies and rivalries may harden.

Implications on campus can make it hard to change the culture in tough times. Faculty and staff may see their issues as separate or competing. Unions may see change as a threat. It's easier to say *no* than *yes*.

Hiring freezes make it feel less urgent to become an employer of choice. As for retention, why worry about the survivors when people are losing their jobs?

Tough times also bring opportunity. Consider these ideas:

- Ask staff if anyone would like to shift to part-time or take a leave of absence.
- Use collective bargaining to strengthen work/life policies.



Dr. Jean McLaughlin

- Expand options to work off campus to reduce the spread of swine flu.
- Invite work from home as a way to cut utility bills on campus. The University of Michigan posts signs in each building announcing the cost to heat and light it; one building costs \$500,000.

## Getting started

When the president of a university campus has an idea for faculty career flexibility, its evaluation and implementation fall to the provost. Boise State University provost **Dr. Sona Andrews** outlined some of the challenges.

**Know the culture.** Changing the culture requires working *within* the culture so the proposed changes have a chance to take hold. What are the norms on your campus? What's your institutional process for creating change?

**Garner allies.** This is especially important if the initiative is coming from the top. Cultural change needs grassroots support. The University of Baltimore started a series of faculty focus groups. Some were mixed, others grouped by gender or age. Discussing a set of questions generated a level of excitement. Next, they set up committees to formulate suggestions on attrition and retention in early- and mid-career and engaged retirement. The suggestions were brought to the chairs.

It's not always presidents or provosts who start the ball rolling. "Often lots of people are doing things in their corners. Lots of times there's no information linking them," Andrews said. Deans and chairs may act on their own. Top leaders need to put their authority behind the initiatives for credibility and coordination.

**Link resources to initiatives.** "No unfunded mandates," she said. Some universities have central funding for replacements to teach courses, so the departments that approve a leave don't have to spend department funds to pay for it.

**Show the impact and value of change.** Use data to make the case. Link proposed changes to the strategic plan. Proposals need to be part of a vision that's for the good of the school and not just individuals.

## From policy to practice

It's one thing to adopt a policy on paper, but putting it into practice is another. A chair may forget to mention that a pregnant assistant professor will qualify for a pause in her tenure clock. The assistant professor may fear her colleagues will take her less seriously as a mother, so she avoids asking for accommodations that would draw attention to it.

Policies are important. They're authoritative and have staying power, not dependant on a particular dean or chair. They have legs. Practices are informal; they come and go. They depend on individual whim and group norms. Changing the culture involves infusing the community with work/life-friendly norms.

Boise State University publishes its work/life policies not just on the Web site but in printed information sent to



Dr. Sona Andrews

all new faculty and candidates. "If candidates know about the policy before they apply, they don't have to ask. It may make your school a more attractive employer," Andrews said. The same information goes out each year to existing faculty as a reminder.

They train department chairs, especially new ones, and meet with all chairs once a month. They also train faculty on promotion and tenure committees about how to take career options into account.

### Attention to mid-career

San José State University wanted to look at the whole faculty career, not just the early years or retirement. **Dr. Amy Strage** said 52% of faculty are in mid-career, with little or no support. "They need to be inquiring, not stagnant," she said.

San José responded with a post-tenure professional renewal retreat, based in part on Erik Erikson's theory of a conflict in middle adulthood between generativity and stagnation. A generative individual sees herself as productive and guiding the next generation. They also drew on Carol Dweck's idea of fixed and growth mindsets. Someone with a growth mindset would rather learn than look good by doing only the things she thinks she does well.

Satisfaction at mid-career reflects both theories. Happy faculty are tackling new challenges, finding flexibility and balance, enjoying good professional relationships and experimenting with new roles, along with time for reflection. Dissatisfied faculty experience too little time for students or scholarship, have trouble keeping up in their fields and feel disconnected from the campus and its mission.

They planned the retreat for 25 full professors and twice that number applied. Of the 25 attending, 20 were flourishing. Chairs suggested encouraging more who feel stalled or floundering to participate next year.

Here's how it worked this year:

- *Pre-retreat meeting in March.* They explained the program and assigned two books to prime the pump: Dweck's *Mindset* (2006) and Tom Rath's *Strengths Finder* (2007).



Dr. Amy Strage



Dr. Joan Merdinger

### Sloan Foundation Supports Job Flexibility

In 2003 the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, which was already funding a work/life awards program for businesses, invited the American Council on Education to run a similar program for colleges. The Alfred P. Sloan Awards for Faculty Career Flexibility began in 2006, the year after ACE published *An Agenda for Excellence: Promoting Flexibility in Tenure-Track Careers* (2005).

Recipient schools are selected for their progress to date and clear commitment to faculty flexibility. They receive accelerator grants to further their efforts, serving as laboratories to identify best practices. Findings culled from their experience are shared with other universities and colleges.

Winners of the new 2009 Sloan awards are on page 4.

Homework was a written reflection applying the readings to oneself.

- *Retreat in April.* Participants spent the day together in a structured exploration of perseverance, resilience and personal goals. The provost came at the end to debrief.

- *Two personal follow-ups in May and September.* People assess progress toward their stated goals. They identify ways their goals need revision and resources that could help them gain or keep a sense of professional vitality.

### Benchmarking

Old-time shoemakers placed the customer's foot on a bench and traced around it to get the right fit for the shoe. Benchmarking on campus captures the shape of things at one point in time so progress can be measured against it.

**Dr. Kate Quinn** benchmarked work/life data at the University of Washington by gathering data from websites and emailing quests to university representatives. Questions included work/life policy availability, eligibility and use.



Dr. Kate Quinn

Then she promoted a database to track policy use so it can be linked to career outcomes. You need data to show what's working, she said. Track by gender, race/ethnicity, academic field, rank, hire date, policy use and reason, related costs, tenure review date and decision and so forth. Without such data you don't know what's happening; it's all anecdotal.

For example, they'd had a tenure clock extension policy since the 1970s but nobody knew who was using it. Tracking a database of all non-medical faculty hired as assistant professors between 1995 and 2001, she found:

- Nearly one in four had extended the tenure clock at least once.
- Women took more tenure clock extensions than men.
- Women took the extensions for family reasons, while men's reasons were more often professional.
- Tenure clock extensions were used most often in the arts and humanities.

All new parents qualify for a release from teaching classes. Releases went to 18 moms and 16 dads. All felt appreciated and expressed a strong loyalty to the school.

Do you know what's happening on your campus? Do you know if faculty who take advantage of work/life policies are staying and getting tenure as much as those who don't? Set up systems to collect the data and keep it up to date. You may find some surprises.

What may surprise some in Quinn's data was the finding that tenure clock extensions aren't just for new mothers. Men used them as well as women. Reasons were professional as well as personal. Family reasons included spousal care and eldercare as well as childcare.

"Life" in "work/life" is not just about new moms. The more inclusive your policy is, the more effective it will be. The panelists recommended making policies that support women and men at all stages of life and career, whether they're faculty, staff or students. Get buy-in from as much of the campus community as possible. Widespread appreciation and loyalty can help change the campus culture. ■

—SGC

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