



Spring 2010 STEM Women Associate Professor Focus Group: Summary Results

Purpose

The general purpose of the March 11, 2010 focus group was to gather information from STEM women associate professors regarding their opinions on pursuing leadership positions within the University and determining their needs to attain such positions in the future. Additionally, the group discussed two specific ADVANCE initiatives: (1) the Administrator Shadowing Program, and (2) the Leadership Support Fund. ADVANCE at Brown has received no applications for either program since the release of the call for proposals in fall 2008.

Method

ADVANCE at Brown invited all STEM women associate professors (n=11) to participate in a “needs assessment” focus group. Internal evaluator, Dr. Carrie Spearin of the Sociology Department, led a group of six (55%) faculty in a discussion on leadership opportunities. Participants were informed at the start of the focus group that their input was entirely voluntary and their comments would remain strictly confidential. No identifying information would be contained in the report of findings. The guided discussion lasted one hour.

Discussion Questions

- Is there interest in administrative leadership among STEM women associate professors?
- What type of leader do you want to become? What type of leadership roles do you want?
- What resources do you need to become this type of leader? What do you need to achieve that success? What types of barriers exist?
- Currently, the Administrator Shadowing Program has received little interest from tenured STEM women faculty. What would make such a program more appealing?
- What types of interactions with senior administrators would be helpful in achieving your overall career goals?

Interest in ADVANCE Leadership Programs

Overall, faculty expressed interest in holding leadership positions within the University and in the ADVANCE leadership programs. Participants reported reading the requests for proposals (RFP) with interest and felt that the programs would be beneficial to their careers. However, several barriers hindered them from taking advantage of these initiatives. For example, one faculty member recounted how her department chair discouraged her interest in one of the leadership programs. In this case, her

department chair did not fully understand the program and its process. The chair stated that he could not afford to let her take advantage of teaching relief because the needs of the department depended upon her teaching her courses. Because of this initial resistance, the faculty member decided this was not a “battle” she wanted to pursue. Another faculty member affirmed that she was very interested in the programs but believed that her department chair and peers would view her participation negatively. She believed that the general feeling within the department was that participation would be a “waste of time” and incur a “black mark,” and grant proposal writing and publishing were better uses of her time.

Another faculty member suggested that the programs listed under the Leadership Support Fund were not truly applicable. Many of the faculty members would welcome opportunities to be leaders, but they believe participation in these leadership-training programs would actually take them away from the path to leadership. Group consensus is that the only path to a leadership position is through excellence in research and within scholarly disciplines. However, one faculty participant noted that there was no real need for a formal leadership program like those offered through the Administrator Shadowing Program because if she wanted a leadership position, she could just ask for one. Overall, it appears at this stage in their careers, participation in these programs would limit their productivity and STEM women associate professors primarily focus on working towards promotion to full professor. Participation in administrative leadership programs would take them “out of the research arena” and further drain their time.

Work-Life Balance and Research Excellence

The faculty members agreed that the major impediment to excelling at their research, which they believe is the pathway to leadership positions, is lack of time. Many of the women faculty present pointed to outside draws (childcare, housework, etc.) as limiting the level of productivity needed for promotion to full professor, taking on a leadership position, or participating in a leadership program.

One professor stated it would be “easy and fun to be a leader in my field or the University if I had back the 19 hours a week I put towards household labor.” This average of “19 hours per week” comes from an AAUP article, [*Housework is an Academic Issue*](#). This article and its concrete suggestions were referenced several times during the guided discussion. (See Current Needs of STEM Women Associate Professors.) Faculty participants also believe that other universities do “a better job” of helping their faculty balance the work-life strain. For example, one participant noted that other institutions offer financial supplements to their faculty for domestic help and childcare. Another participant stated that the programs currently offered by the Office of the Dean of the Faculty and Human Resources are not tailored to the needs of faculty and simply “do not work.” Each time she tried to use the “Emergency Back-up Care” service, it failed.

Current Needs of STEM Women Associate Professors

The focus group participants were unanimous in their feelings towards the peer-mentoring groups established by ADVANCE at Brown. One faculty member believed that the peer-mentoring groups were “excellent” and that they would last well beyond the life of the grant. However, many of the faculty women present believe ADVANCE at Brown is “out of tune” with the challenges of mid-career STEM women. This is why they believe the administrative leadership programs were unpopular, as they are inappropriate for mid-career STEM women.

Participants stated their need for ADVANCE at Brown to work with administrators to confront barriers to faculty success. They also offered several suggestions that would meet their needs as researchers, which would in turn put them on an academic leadership trajectory or pathway. These suggestions or “needs” are as follows:

- **ADVANCE as a Facilitator.** One faculty member stated the need for ADVANCE to act as a facilitator with department chairs for the Leadership Programs. While the financial award and teaching relief is beneficial, most would like someone to work directly with the chairs to explain the program and act as a liaison with the department in order to take advantage of the programs. One stated she would like a scenario such as, “you’ve won the award and we [meaning ADVANCE] will take care of getting everything in order or you.”
- **Continued Department Chair Training.** They would like the department chair training to continue focusing on improving the understanding of issues specifically related to mid-career STEM women. They believe that some department chairs underestimate the importance of the training and suggest mandatory attendance for future sessions.
- **Meeting with ADVANCE PIs.** Faculty participants would like have more “face time” with the ADVANCE at Brown PI and co-PIs. One specific suggestion was to meet with the PI and co-PIs to develop a list of priorities of mid-career women, possibly a “top five barriers” list, and then to meet once a semester to discuss these issues and any progress. Additionally, they suggested that each co-PI take up one issue, such as childcare. They would like that person to research what is being done elsewhere (in universities and in industry) and advocate for Brown University policy and/or procedure changes. For example, participants would like to see the implementation of a policy requiring that departmental colloquia and faculty meetings be scheduled to ensure their conclusion at or before 5:00 p.m. (when most childcare services end). They believe these changes have to begin at the senior level.
- **Short-term, On-Campus Leadership Programs.** A few faculty stated they would participate in a leadership workshop series or short-term on-campus program. They explained that at this point in their careers, their commitment to leadership is limited. They would like something that they could participate in that does not infringe on the demands of their job and things that the University values (i.e. research and productivity). They suggested something high quality and

tailored to STEM women. As one faculty member explained, the programs listed in the Leadership Support Fund RFP would not be instructive for mid-career STEM women faculty.

- **Time Management Programs.** Faculty stated they would most value programs that would help them excel at their research. One suggestion would be workshops geared at time management and people management. How to train lab personal, how to manage lab workers, managing budgets and money, general management of research programs/projects, and managing work-life balance are some examples of possible useful workshops. As one faculty member stated, “there has to be a better way to do this than the way I do it.” Many feel because they have never had any training on management, they are “re-inventing the wheel,” which limits their productivity. They would like to have a series of workshops that focus on these time management issues similar to ones offered to women doctors in the Medical School. They would like a parallel program tailored specifically to STEM women faculty.
- **Advancing Research Careers.** Faculty participants agreed that the road to leadership and advancing their careers was through enhancing their research productivity. They suggested seed funds for new, innovative, and collaborative research would be helpful. While others stated that the Career Development Awards covered this type of research (and were pleased with the funds they had received), others had misread or misunderstood the RFP. Some clarification on the flexibility of Career Development Awards would be helpful. They also suggested research grants similar to the OVPR-sponsored Salomon Awards, specifically for lab equipment and supplies rather than for mentors or other lab help.
- **Family-Work Benefits.** As an offshoot of the discussion on time-management, a few faculty mentioned that a way to ease the family-work strain would be for Brown to offer faculty a “real childcare benefit,” or more specifically, a financial benefit for support and services that would help ease these “outside drains.” They cited the AAUP article for specific suggestions and benefits. They would like a Brown-administered service that would link prescreened childcare and household service providers to faculty. As one faculty participant mentioned, she spends a portion of the time she would otherwise spend in her lab screening potential household help.
- **General Atmosphere.** Finally, there were a few comments on the general atmosphere within departments. Participants felt that “no value” was placed on leadership within their departments. Additionally, they would like institutional recognition for their leadership in mentoring fellow faculty and students. Many find this a rewarding yet time-consuming part of their job and they feel the University does not fully recognize its importance.