

CREATING A POSITIVE DEPARTMENTAL CLIMATE: PRINCIPLES FOR BEST PRACTICES

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Well-conceived policies and procedures help create a supportive climate for faculty. Over the past few years—primarily through interviews, focus groups, and direct e-mail requests—we have been asking women and men faculty members to describe specific programs or general behaviors that contribute to a climate that supports their academic career success and satisfaction. The following summary describes (often using their own words) what the faculty members have told us. The examples represent three important general principles of effective leadership:

Transparency: Making all kinds of information available and easy to find

Uniformity: Leveling the field and dealing equitably with all faculty

Assistance: Attending to the needs of faculty; offering mentoring and other types of help

The overall message is a strong one: While no single practice like those described in this report is likely to change the atmosphere in a department or unit, administrators who apply the touchstones of *transparency*, *uniformity* and *assistance* when developing or reviewing policies and procedures can create environments within which all faculty members flourish. Of course, because each academic unit is unique, administrators may either find that some of the following practices are not appropriate or decide that they need to tailor the practices to their particular situations.

We have organized this report according to the problems women faculty in particular most often speak about, but these are issues that arise for many faculty, regardless of gender or other characteristics: (1) unsatisfactory hiring and initial negotiating experiences, (2) inadequate explanation of and access to relevant university and department information, (3) a lack of mentoring and other forms of support, (4) unclear or poorly managed review and tenure processes, (5) feelings of isolation and lack of collegiality, and (6) an unwillingness to accommodate whole-life needs, especially family and childcare responsibilities.

We have further identified each practice according to how many of the three themes of transparency, uniformity, and assistance it specifically addresses. For the most part, the faculty members are describing practices they have experienced here at the University of Michigan, although a few of the practices are ones that current or former UM faculty members have encountered at other research universities.

I. **Issues related to Hiring and Negotiation.** Departmental administrators and hiring committees often report that, despite attempts to recruit and hire women and minority faculty, they fail because no viable candidates fit the specific criteria for an advertised position.

- Chairs and hiring committees in several UM departments have learned to avoid this dilemma by keeping the job specifications general instead of trying to fill a narrow niche. As one chair explained, “If you want to catch [a certain kind of] fish, you have to go where [those] fish are.” As another chair explained, “In trying to recruit women to the faculty, we would never change the standards, but we would be willing to consider a woman candidate in fields that were outside the narrow area we initially were looking at. So we would not lower the expectations, but we would broaden the scope, and that enabled us to hire a number of extremely capable women.” (Uniformity)

Once hired, new faculty members are often unsure about the things they can expect and ask for as part of their initial employment packages. Or they are promised (or believe they are promised) things that they later do not receive. Best practices in this area lead to open, good-faith negotiations that clearly outline what options new people can and cannot expect to receive.

- Some department chairs negotiate for resources with a list of requested items from potential new hires. According to a faculty member from one such department: “Before the second visit/interview, the Chair requested that I draw up and forward to him a list of equipment that I would need to conduct my research. Before our interview, he reviewed the list to determine what equipment was already available (“used” or as community property). Then, during our interview, he told me what community equipment would be available to me, what “used but working” equipment would be deeded to me, and the sum of money that he had determined would be sufficient to allow me to purchase the remaining items (based on the cost estimates that I had provided). This distribution was negotiable; one costly item that they expected I would share with the other members of the department was in fact something my lab would use heavily and would therefore need to purchase new. Once I explained the situation, the Chair agreed and the cash portion of my start-up package was adjusted accordingly.” (Transparency, Uniformity, Assistance)
- Certain negotiated agreements can be especially valuable for new faculty members. Some departments allow a new hire to take off the first semester, delay teaching, delay start of the tenure clock, or reach other agreements to help with the transition to professional life. In addition, some departments provide start-up funds until the grant money can “kick in,” or they offer administrative, accounting, and technical assistants to help faculty members in the sciences to run their labs. (Assistance)

II. **Issues related to Providing Information.** Once on campus, new faculty members need all types of information, from where to get door keys, to how to access the Faculty Handbook

and other written and web-based documents, to where in the library to find lists of faculty members' salaries. Some departments have processes that make such information gathering easier.

- They have established communication systems and web sites that not only include relevant policies and procedures but also provide answers to questions both new and veteran faculty members might have about the department. As one chair explained, “I went to all of the new faculty members and asked, ‘What are the things you really wanted to know when you came here, or what you think you would have wanted to know?’ And I made a list of these things, and then they [new faculty members] were matched with faculty members in the department, and we gave the list to the faculty members and to the new people who had just arrived—in the hopes that they could then use it as the basis for starting a conversation. I’ll be interested to see how that works, but it’s spread over a lot of people.”
Q: “So you gave the tenured faculty the questions?”
A: “Yes, and also the people who were just starting out. And we’re going to modify the list. We also ended up putting it on our little, internal web site. So, if they forget their questions, they can go there.”

As another faculty member put it, “I would like a website that was completely and totally searchable and up to date with the latest information. The [rules and practices] have to be written down and accessible. I shouldn’t have to go to my chair and ask for the information myself. And then I’ll ask if I have questions, of course.”
(Transparency, Uniformity, Assistance)

- Some departments have special programs for new faculty members that consist of off-campus retreats at the beginning of the year and/or series of workshops throughout the year—intended to give new faculty lots of valuable formal and informal information. As one example,
“We have a program where new faculty get together for lunch meetings, which I thought was great because it gives you information about different offices—the minority office or information about the honors program and different things. And you get to be with the Dean, and you get to meet the other new faculty. So I thought it was a positive experience.” (Transparency, Assistance)
- Other departments optimize the information-gathering process by having the chair or some other senior member meet individually with each new faculty member. During these one-on-one meetings—usually held after the faculty member has been on campus for a short while—the senior colleague can answer specific questions that have arisen for the junior faculty member and offer additional relevant information. (Transparency, Uniformity, Assistance)

III. **Issues related to Mentoring.** Mentoring helps insure that no one—especially junior, women, and minority faculty—is allowed to “fall through the cracks.” Instead, one or more persons take it upon themselves—whether on their own initiative or as part of a formal mentoring program—to provide instrumental and emotional support and advice.

- Some formal mentoring programs consist of committees of between two and four senior faculty advisors for each new faculty member. The faculty member can meet with her/his committee as often as s/he wishes, and with one or more of the committee members at any given time. For example,

“We have mentorship committees with whom we meet once or twice a year. This is invaluable. They read things for us, give advice on where to publish, what research projects to really pursue, general professional development issues like how to network.... Mine helped me to feel integrated in the department and clear on what I need to do to achieve tenure.”

“The committee does not seem to have any charge given to it. But in my case, I communicate with members of my committee on a regular basis, from weekly to monthly.... We can call meetings of the committee as often as we like and can meet with members individually as often as we like. I think the committee is supposed to exist for the period up until tenure.” (Assistance)

- Some units establish other types of official mentoring programs for new faculty. The programs may consist of group meetings (“over lunch provided by the college—very important”) with school/college administrators. In one such program,

“A senior faculty member facilitated monthly meetings focused on a topic of interest to junior faculty. He would either provide specific information himself or bring in an expert. For example, one meeting was devoted to issues in publishing...led [by] a journal editor. Another was devoted to writing grant proposals, and another to the tenure review process. It was understood that the meetings were opportunities for the junior faculty to express concerns and frustrations and that these would not go beyond the room. Later on, we also had each junior faculty person share an in-progress manuscript for constructive responses from the other members. That was helpful in informing all of us about each other’s work. It also helped us understand the diversity of theoretical orientations and professional agendas.” (Transparency, Uniformity, Assistance)
- A senior faculty member in another large department set up a series of informal lunches with new women faculty, a chance for them to say, “Gee, I’m worried about X, Y, or Z,” and to get some feedback that might be helpful. These informal lunches complement a more formal series of monthly luncheon meetings for all junior faculty. Events such as these, which are held in more than one department, allow junior faculty to share information, learn from each other, and develop a voice in the department.

The lunches may also be good for recruitment. According to one senior faculty member, when her department invited two of its recruits to attend, “they both later commented about the esprit de corps among the junior faculty and cited it as a really important reason they decided to come here.” (Transparency, Uniformity, Assistance)

- Another mentoring format calls for more senior colleagues to reach out to their assistant and associate faculty members, offering to mentor them. The mentors may stop by their offices to raise such questions as “What are you spending time on?” “What are you doing next?” “Are you writing proposals?” or “Are you working on your book?”

Ideally, department chairs “actually go out of their way to spend time with individuals, to go and talk to individual faculty members on a fairly regular one-on-one basis. Somebody who does it well makes it look like it’s a purely chance meeting.” Other department chairs call in associate professors to talk about their plans for promotion to full professor. (Uniformity, Assistance)

- One senior faculty member described a system of “zone mentoring.” Under this plan, individual faculty members agree to mentor in a particular area. “Some successful faculty member who was a good researcher would agree to help the junior faculty with proposals, for example...Everyone in the department usually knows who are the best teachers, who are the best researchers, and so forth, so I think you can identify people who have been extraordinarily successful. Encouraging them to mentor will probably give them strokes as well.” (Assistance)
- Among other best practices that various UM departments have designed to support the careers of junior faculty are these:

Limit and control the junior faculty’s membership on committees, to avoid onerous service commitments and allow more time for research and publication.

Allow new faculty to teach introductory graduate classes, so they have a “first shot” at graduate students.

Assign junior faculty to manage departmental speaker series, so they become acquainted with major national and international scholars in their fields.

Designate specific fellowships for junior faculty to award to their graduate students. (Assistance)

- Several people said that mentoring is likely to be more effective when it is documented and when the people acting as mentors are rewarded for and/or held accountable for the task. One person suggested that mentoring be considered a service obligation to be used in place of a committee assignment.

“Their intentions are very good but the reality is that, once somebody is assigned to be a mentor, there’s got to be somebody else who makes sure that all the mentors are doing their jobs. And I think that very often the administration of the department will just say, ‘Well, I’ve assigned a mentor so now I can wash my hands of it.’ And maybe on their annual review, the chairman will, in their 15-minute meeting, give some kind of [mentoring] advice. I think the mentors need to be pushed and reminded... I’m not sure I would call it ‘accountability,’ but at least they need to be prodded and asked, ‘Did you do it?’”

“As soon as you get there you [should be] assigned someone as a mentor. The person actually knows that they’re assigned! And then in annual reviews— activity reports to fill out each year—the senior faculty member actually has to discuss their mentoring activities on the activity report... [And] something that may actually be a little more effective would be to have the junior people say what mentoring they’ve received [from their mentor].” (Assistance)

- Some UM colleges have created offices especially intended to support women faculty members; or they have incorporated such functions into already existing offices. These are places where faculty and staff can go for questions related to salary, career opportunities, promotion, and other issues, and where they can obtain help with problem solving. (Transparency, Uniformity, Assistance)
- Some faculty have suggested that the university establish an office on campus where faculty members can go to safely, sympathetically, and efficaciously report grievances and get official help with problems within their departments and colleges. [Many faculty members do not believe such a place now exists.] (Uniformity, Assistance)

IV. **Issues related to Review and Tenure Policies.** Transparency is nowhere more important than in annual and third year reviews and in the tenure process. Over and over again, faculty members stress the importance of well spelled-out, very specific evaluation criteria and feedback processes. Best practices in these areas address the problems of the lack of specificity in review documents and procedures and the lack of clearly explained and equitable tenure procedures.

- Some UM schools have detailed, specific third-year review processes:
 “One thing that was very helpful—as much as it was frustrating at some level—is that we developed a very involved mid-term review process.... It’s a hard and fast review as opposed to a formative review. And so they make us do it as [if it were for tenure review]. We have external reviewers and the like. And this is a new process they’ve started, because the old one was more formative than summative.” (Uniformity, Assistance)
- Departments may establish award committees, with junior and senior committee members appointed by the chair. A faculty member described one such program as follows: Each January, all faculty members complete an annual report form, describing their research programs and such activities as teaching assignments; committee service; numbers of advisees; collaborations; conferences attended; guest lectures presented; numbers of manuscripts and abstracts published; and current funding status, including grants pending. Two committee members, acting as primary and secondary reviewers, prepare a written summary of each report, including all teaching evaluations. At committee, the primary reviewer describes the person's progress, drawing attention to any achievements and/or problem areas. The committee members discuss and possibly amend each written report and then submit it to the Chair, who uses the committee's assessment as the basis for the annual conference with each faculty member. Frequently members of the committee discover situations that place a particular member at risk, and together the group makes specific recommendations to the Chair and to the individual to reduce that risk.
 “An important feature of the review process is that all junior faculty members serve on the P&A committee before their own packages are due to be evaluated. In this way, they learn the range of productivity and service characteristic of both junior and senior faculty. In addition, they see first-hand that the process is fair, open and compassionate.” (Transparency, Uniformity, Assistance)

- The more concrete the annual- and third-year reviews, the better:
 “One thing [I had at UM] was an annual meeting with the chair, so in theory you’re supposed to get progress reports. But what they do here [at current institution] is actually write you something each year. And they actually try to make the statements fairly concrete. They will say, ‘You need to improve your teaching’ or ‘You need to publish more papers.’ Those kinds of concrete statements, rather than the sort of ‘feel good’ things like ‘We value you.’”
 (Assistance)
- The practice in some departments is to place new faculty members onto the tenure portfolio committee, to allow them to watch the process. As one faculty member described such a program,
 “The tenure portfolio gets put together by the college and then it gets judged by the college. The committees that help the candidates put their portfolios together have tenured members, but they also invite a number of junior members to attend these meetings. And every first year faculty is part of this committee. I wasn’t a voting member, but I saw an entire portfolio. I saw how they talked about it. I saw how they chose external reviewers and what the letter looked like that went out to them—and all kinds of details that I never would have even thought of asking.... So you go through every single step, and you get to read the entire portfolio. And they discuss the personal statement: what’s good about it, what’s not... I know some departments do the kind of mentoring where you see a portfolio of someone who went through and got promoted last year or something. This was even better than that because you actually went through the steps together.” (Transparency, Uniformity, Assistance)
- Another practice among some UM departments is to set out a very clear-cut “weight system” for various research, teaching, and service activities. Because junior faculty “have only so much time,” said one faculty member, “they’re trying to figure out where to put their time.” Knowing, for example, that “an invited talk is worth ten non-invited talks and a review paper is worth half of a research article” makes those decisions easier. (Transparency, Assistance)
- Administrators may routinely link a junior faculty member with a senior colleague who acts as advocate during the tenure process. (Assistance)

V. **Issues related to Collegiality.** A sense of community within a department is a key component of job satisfaction. In addition to the mentoring luncheons, speaker programs, and other events already described in this report, faculty members told us about other departmental best practices that support collegiality and community.

- One faculty member praised the weekly lunches that administrators in his department host. “Because we are a large department, you normally don’t know everybody. But the lunches are a way for you to get to know your colleagues and talk with them on a regular basis.” (Uniformity, Assistance)
- Many departments hold picnics as a way to foster community. According a faculty member in one such department, “We have an active undergraduate group that has a

picnic twice a year, which everyone comes to and even brings their dogs! It's nice because it makes for a more congenial atmosphere to interact with your peers and the [graduate and undergraduate] students and to feel more like a community of people, of learners. (Assistance)

VI. **Issues related to Departmental/College/University Policies.** At various institutional levels, administrators have created and adapted policies and practices in order to ease the stress of academic life and increase research productivity. Women faculty members particularly value these efforts, both large and small, as ways to balance the many aspects of their lives: research, teaching, service, and family responsibilities. Other helpful programs for both men and women include these:

- LS&A offers a nurturing leave for faculty members in their fourth year. This leave is an entitlement for everyone, consistent across the college and not dependent upon individual negotiation. It gives all tenure-track faculty members one semester off from university responsibilities, in order to concentrate on their research. (Uniformity, Assistance)
- Some departments tailor the official UM modified duties policy to make it more beneficial.

They may very substantially decrease a faculty member's committee work for the semester of modified duties: One woman described her experience as follows: "The way the policy reads in the books is good to begin with, but I think its implementation in my particular unit was excellent. For example, the policy states that you still have to keep up with committee work and things of that sort. My committee work assignment for that term that I reduced my duties was minimal. And that was something that the department chair has to be credited with, I guess. I did do more committee work in the preceding and following terms to make up for it, but I think that was well worth not having to do much of it during the term that I was trying to reduce my duties." (Assistance)

They may also make sure to provide adequate coverage for faculty members on modified duties: "We believe that it's important that women are able to take the time necessary (as well as new fathers) and not be under pressure from their colleagues who are asked to provide coverage. Our incentive program provides generous financial remuneration for coverage." (Assistance)
- Administrators in some departments schedule no meetings before 9 a.m. or after 5 p.m., in order that parents can better manage their lives to coincide with their children's. (Assistance)
- Department administrators set a reasonable time limit for service on time-consuming committees, while—at the same time—insure that women get a chance to serve on important committees. (Assistance)
- Department administrators give junior faculty members some priority in teaching assignments. As one faculty member explained,

“The teaching assignments [in my UM department] were seniority based. So, if you once taught a course, you tended to keep it. Here [at current institution] teaching assignments give priority to the most junior people, to find out what they want to teach. And in fact some schools actually explicitly have a form that the junior faculty fill out for what they want to teach... Of course, that [may] make for ‘icky’ teaching loads for senior faculty, but I think it’s a lot healthier for junior faculty development.” (Assistance)

- A faculty member explained a “one-person committee” concept occasionally employed in his department.

“There are typically three people on these committees, and one person does all the work. The other two people are there, but we don’t really have any meetings. For instance, if I’m on the admission committee, I run things and do all the work. If I have any questions, I run them by the other two people. So basically everyone chooses the committee they think is important; you don’t have meetings, so you really are empowered to have an influence on things that you care about. [The other members offer advice and support], but you’re not inundated with meetings where people just want to talk.” (Assistance)
- A faculty member in one department described an unofficial agreement among the faculty to accept teaching duties; to work together to share the responsibility for getting courses taught—with the understanding that, if someone is willing to cooperate and compromise, s/he will receive some future concession in return. As he explained,

“For example, I can see that there’s a really hard class to teach this year and, based upon the schedule, not many ways to do it. So I agree to take the hard class, because we told the junior faculty member that he didn’t have to teach this first year so that he could get his research started.” (Uniformity, Assistance)
- At least one science department has established a “swing space” policy. Under this agreement, the department sets aside some community-owned lab space that rotates to different faculty members for a period of time, based upon their current research needs. (Uniformity, Assistance)

The examples in this report range from fairly obvious, frequently used practices to unusual ones that have limited application in other settings. These “best practices” have in common the fact that—because they embody the principles of transparency, uniformity, and/or assistance—they have made the faculty members who described them feel supported by their departments. We hope administrators, committee members, and faculty members can use these examples in discussions and plans to enhance their own departmental climates.