

External Evaluation Report for Texas A&M ADVANCE - Year 1, May 2011

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I interacted with the Texas A&M team several times this year: met with PI Sherry Yennello at the ADVANCE PI meeting in October 2010, visited the campus in College Station in January 2011, and spoke with the PI and staff members Linda Stelly and Christine Kaunas by telephone in May 2011. During my January campus visit, I met with several of the project's activity leaders, supporting administrators, and members of the internal evaluation and social science teams. This report is based on these conversations and my review of the proposal, the two quarterly reports completed so far, the evaluation and dissemination plan, the project web site, and several other documents shared by the team.

Barely halfway through its first year of funding, TAMU ADVANCE is making good progress on several fronts. The work to date will serve as a foundation for future efforts: building infrastructure, beginning to offer useful activities to campus participants, and defining its agenda and image as the project makes itself known on campus. The new ADVANCE Center for Women Faculty will serve as a home for ADVANCE IT activities and as a hub for connections to other campus groups that serve women.

Following upon several years of university "reinvestment" in hiring over 400 new faculty, the Center has positioned itself as protecting this investment in now-tougher economic times, by ensuring that the new hires are retained, supported to do good work and satisfied with their careers at Texas A&M. This message should resonate well with constituencies concerned with research excellence and competitive advantage over peer universities. Others will be attracted by the Center's focus on gender equity and diversity. Establishing a "psychologically healthy workplace" based on principles defined by the American Psychological Association is another way that the project frames its work. It's unclear to me whether this framing will particularly resonate with faculty, but it has advantages in offering some coherence to the activities while also suggesting how all will benefit from the ADVANCE work, and it may prove useful in communicating with other groups such as staff.

Efforts to establish a physical and intellectual presence on campus include hiring a project director and coordinator; acquiring and furnishing space for offices and meeting rooms; setting up an initial web site to disseminate information while continuing deeper development of web content; and meeting with important campus constituencies (colleges, departments, committees and administrative councils). Project coordinator Linda Stelly is an experienced staff member with strong connections to STEM units and to other administrative offices that can assist the project in acquiring data, mobilizing resources, and solving problems. Project director Chris Kaunas is an experienced researcher who brings energy, resourcefulness, and project management skills to the post. Both will be key assets to the project.

TAMU's ADVANCE initiative is organized around three main approaches to supporting women STEM faculty: improving campus climate, recruiting and retaining diverse faculty, and fostering

faculty success. Twelve distinct activities are organized under these three broad strands, including anti-bias and civility education for several different audiences, incentives for diversity-related activities in departments, efforts to raise the visibility of women STEM scholars on campus, and professional development opportunities for women at several career stages. In the internal and external communications that I reviewed, the objectives of each activity are clearly and consistently stated in relation to the over-arching goals of the project.

To date, the start-up progress on these activities is variable. While it is normal that some will get off to a faster start than others, it is somewhat concerning that not all activity committees had yet met by the end of this first (partial) academic year. However, initial activities such as success circle workshops have launched and are bringing some visibility and momentum to the project. The call for departmental proposals for small grants to improve climate for women netted over a dozen proposals, of which about half were funded; this program is likely to become even more popular. These grants serve multiple functions by making faculty aware of the ADVANCE project, generating positive impressions of it by distributing resources to departments, and providing incentives to foster diversity. As these activities and their outcomes can then also be documented in departments' annual diversity reports to the provost, a positive feedback loop is built. Recruitment of applications for ADVANCE Scholars is also underway with a broad effort to spread the word about this opportunity targeted to STEM women of color. Two rotating administrator positions have been developed and are expected to be active in the coming academic year. These are designed to provide supportive opportunities for women to 'try on' a leadership role while also accomplishing important work in the host office; the positions are intended to become permanent when the grant ends. Planning for 2011-12 launches is underway on several of the training and education interventions. Overall, the project team is in contact with all the activity committees and aware of where they can step back and let things happen, and where they may need to facilitate action. I am confident that all the activities will be well underway by this time next year.

The organizational structure of this initiative is one of its interesting features. The three strategic approaches are co-chaired; each strategic area in turn involves several activity leaders who chair sub-committees to plan and organize each activity. Each committee has a clear charge and considerable autonomy over the nature and implementation of its specific activities. Ultimately, this approach seems a good bet to establish broad ownership of the project's aims, get the word out rapidly through the individual networks of many faculty, and distribute the workload. Over the long time span of an ADVANCE project, it may also prove easier to replace leaders who need a break with committee members who are already in the loop. However, this approach also brings costs, including a high level of meeting activity, some challenge in coordinating activities to work together to accomplish the broader goals, and the need for support by skilled personnel who can discern and respond to differing leadership styles while keeping all the moving parts moving. Consistent communication and coordination from the central office will be critical to keep things moving forward. From an evaluator's perspective, the distributed nature of the work

offers potential challenges in understanding the cumulative impact of the project and assessing the value added by each activity to the larger whole.

The evaluation plan is comprehensive and tightly organized. Progress on gathering the baseline indicators in the NSF-required set is good. Additional evaluation work focuses appropriately on tracking participation and describing activities and their short-term outcomes (e.g. participant satisfaction with the activity). Initially, this comprehensive approach to data-gathering will be useful to the project; down the road, I can imagine that certain evaluation activities will prove more useful than others. I hope the evaluators will be open to adjusting priorities and alert to emergent opportunities and issues, including formative or needs assessment work that may help to discern and diagnose any difficulties. As noted, the distributed nature of the project's work also poses some challenges for evaluation. I suggest that the internal evaluation team periodically capture occasional 'snapshots' of the broader picture of what the initiative is accomplishing. While assessing the impact of the project as a whole is also my task as external evaluator, there is no way that I can gather the same rich and detailed view of the project as can those directly involved and knowledgeable about campus cultures and structures; their complementary perspective will be essential.

The evaluation work is complemented by a set of six social science studies that will examine the outcomes of particular activities, especially in terms of how they contribute to a psychologically healthy workplace for participants. Data from the university's baseline climate survey is providing information about TAMU faculty needs, and the social science researchers are already actively disseminating this work in their professional circles. In offering a close look at specific interventions, these studies will also aid in (primarily) summative evaluation of specific activities in later years. While the studies are thoughtfully designed, given their tight links to specific TAMU ADVANCE programs, it is less clear at this time the extent to which these studies will be able to provide more generalizable or transferable research results. That said, results about the effects of specific program designs are likely to be useful to those in the ADVANCE community seeking to develop similar programs. The inability to hire graduate student research assistants to contribute to the evaluation and social science studies seems an unnecessary impediment to good progress in this domain, as well as a lost opportunity for graduate students in social science fields to observe and learn from an institutional change initiative at close quarters.

Overall, at this stage the TAMU ADVANCE initiative is clearly off to a good start, with vigorous effort on several fronts, a solid infrastructure in place, and a team with considerable self-awareness and savvy in communicating with multiple stakeholders. I look forward to seeing what they can accomplish in the coming year, now that structures and people are in place and the work has begun.