

External Evaluation Report for Texas A&M ADVANCE Year 3, October 2013

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This report is based on telephone conversations with project director Chris Kaunas in April and August 2013, and a visit to campus September 19-20, 2013. During my campus visit I met with 14 individuals, including the theme co-chairs (who include the Dean of Faculties and Vice President for Diversity), evaluation and social science studies teams, and the core team (Kaunas, PI Sherry Yennello, coordinator Linda Stelly). I reviewed the project web site, quarterly and annual reports for the past year, reports and presentations prepared for the NSF third-year site visit in April 2013, the site visit team's and program officer's reports, and the ADVANCE Center's responses to the latter. I also participated in the NSF site visit by teleconference.

Overview—Strategic Approach and Progress

At the end of its third year, TAMU ADVANCE has all its planned initiatives underway. The ADVANCE Center is busy, productive, and engaged with a wide range of campus units. Over 100 faculty are involved in activity committees and others participate in specific tasks. Synergies are emerging among the different activity strands; the leadership team is attentive to these and proactive in solving problems. The program's reach is expanding, as non-STEM departments in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (COALS) have joined the project at COALS' expense, and the TAMU-affiliated Health Science Center will participate in some programs.

Twelve activities are clustered into three themes that together protect and enhance TAMU's sizable investment in faculty lines in the 2000s. Efforts on Recruitment and Retention, Success Enhancement, and Climate Change seek to ensure that the new hires are retained, supported to do good work, and satisfied with their careers. Each activity is tied to one or more principles for a "psychologically healthy workplace" that address job satisfaction and work environment.

Project Activities

Reports to NSF detail the activity committees' work and progress. Here I offer comments on the interventions and their contribution to the project as a whole.

Climate Change

Climate Change is the most difficult part of the TAMU ADVANCE portfolio, and activities in this strand have made the greatest progress since my last site visit in May 2012. Together these activities target multiple levers of change in the system, including faculty's everyday interactions with colleagues, staff and students, as well as the leaders who control resources and set a tone.

Departmental Mini Grants have been successful in garnering attention from STEM departments and applications have become competitive. However, the committee observes that some proposals are better targeted to address departmental climate and structural barriers, while others

are targeted to individual women—“fixing the swimmer” instead of “draining the pool of inequity.” In response, the committee is revising its RFP to focus more strongly on climate issues that involve larger numbers of faculty, not just a subset of women. They will give preference to larger projects that reach more faculty and are more likely to make a difference, and will put in place some additional review mechanisms for funded projects. The reach of this program will expand through funds from the Dean of Faculties and Vice President for Diversity that will support collaborative projects across units or with campus-wide organizations.

The best opportunity here is to improve the front end of the process—to strengthen the nature and quality of proposals. This will require departments to diagnose their own climate-related challenges and to propose meaningful approaches to address them—not an easy thing for most. Thus I see the greatest promise in the committee’s plans to offer a pre-proposal workshop for interested departments, where they can educate faculty about climate issues and how these may be gendered, and can encourage proposals that include development of self-awareness of their own, localized climate issues (such as use of an external facilitator). For this purpose it may be helpful for departments to have access to department- or college-level climate data. This approach has been used successfully in other ADVANCE institutions, but it does raise the need for policies or principles about whether and how climate survey data will be reported or shared. Routine data-sharing will also generate an additional workload that goes beyond what the grant and climate study team can support, but should be institutionally supported if this use of data is seen as valuable. We discussed some promotional strategies that might help to get departments thinking about meaningful activities before proposals are due. We also discussed the need to raise committee members’ consciousness and ability to distinguish initiatives that might be more likely to have a broad impact on climate: what reading or training will help them do a better job in coaching proposers, evaluating proposals, and raising the quality of this activity overall?

The LEAD program provides professional development for department heads, offering research-based knowledge about gender equity issues such as implicit bias, and practical strategies to address these. Heads’ engagement also sets a tone for their colleagues. Several topical, half-day programs have been offered, others are planned, and LEAD is already linked with ongoing leadership development activities by the Dean of Faculties. The program will include non-STEM departments in 2013-14. This program is viewed as having high potential to improve climate at Texas A&M.

The FASIT program is innovative within the ADVANCE community in seeking to improve climate and reduce bias in faculty/staff interactions. This activity committee collected and analyzed focus group data to identify issues of importance. The data identify both structural issues, such as role clarity and evaluation structures, and issues of interpersonal civility that are exacerbated by gender schemas, hierarchy, and rankism. Data were used as the basis for a workshop with faculty/staff pairs who will now initiate a project of their own design in their own department to raise understanding, build trust, and improve relationships. The ADVANCE team is optimistic about this effort; I like their data-driven and collaborative approach, but I don’t yet

have a good feel for what they expect to emerge. Thus I look forward to learning more as FASIT progresses about what kinds of departmental initiatives are fruitful and can serve as models for other units. I hope that the committee will also share its research findings with administrators who can attend to systemic issues of structure and policy that the data clearly show to influence faculty-staff relationships, in addition to the interpersonal issues that FASIT teams will address.

Student Diversity Training has gained significant momentum in the past year. This activity seeks to address students' implicit biases, prejudices, and stereotypes about women and minorities and thereby improve women faculty's experiences of uncivil behavior from students. After some experimentation, the committee has developed a partnership with TAMU's first-year student orientation programs, to incorporate messages about respectful and professional treatment of faculty into new student activities. "Fish Camp" counselors receive training on implicit bias and prepare skits, while short videos are shown to participants in required first-year student conferences. This approach is quite specific to TAMU's student culture and plays to "Aggie values" of respect and excellence. It is hoped that the importance of tradition will help to incorporate these skits into Fish Camp routines; first-year students are targeted because faculty report problems there. Overall this is a distinctive initiative that addresses a problem that TAMU faculty report as significant, in a manner that is well adapted to local campus culture. It is less clear that this approach will be portable to other campuses that do not share this student culture.

The Merit Pool Incentives are intended to reward departments for diversity efforts by adding to base funding for units whose diversity activities are deemed meritorious. Due to financial issues, base funding has not been raised, but one-time awards have been made; the Colleges of Science and Engineering (at least) have each received a sizable share of these funds. It is not clear what role faculty diversity activities have played in assigning these awards. Greater transparency in the process and community celebration of units whose work is called out in this way might well have high symbolic value and raise the degree to which these funds indeed serve as incentives.

Recruitment and Retention

This strand focuses on recruiting more diverse faculty and helping them succeed and thrive. Together the activities target several levels of this problem, not only fostering success for early-career faculty but also educating those who will evaluate them for promotion and awards, and celebrating women's accomplishments at all levels.

The Roadmap workshop was offered for a second time in 2013. It is seen as a high-profile activity that supports early-career and potential faculty while engaging faculty and departments with ADVANCE. Two annual workshops have engaged about 60 assistant professors and postdocs on topics including academic portfolios, teaching, research, service, work-life balance, and mentors. Immediate post-surveys are providing useful feedback to refine the workshop program and activities. Because the pool of participants is limited, some creativity will be required to keep this program fresh over time; however, new participants from Veterinary Medicine and the medical school will be invited in 2014.

Since my last visit, the STRIDE (Strategies and Tactics for Recruiting to Improve Diversity and Excellence) activity has made great progress. After some initial struggles to define the model, and with some help from the original Michigan STRIDE team, the first round of “eminent scholars” have educated themselves through a faculty reading group and will begin giving research-based presentations around campus on implicit bias and gender equity. These are already in high demand: for example, the College of Liberal Arts has requested that all 34 of this year’s search committees—not just those in STEM departments—go through STRIDE training. The Dean of Faculties, who was himself a reading group member, also intends that campus awards committees receive this training. A second cohort of scholars is being recruited. This initiative is viewed as having very high potential to raise awareness by educating high-status faculty to serve as thought leaders and informed advocates—thus influencing not only specific processes (such as hiring, promotion and tenure) but climate more generally. Variations of the STRIDE presentation will be useful assets to several other ADVANCE activities in educating both activity committee members and participant groups, and a “mini” version of the STRIDE reading group model may also be a useful method for activity groups to educate themselves about gender equity issues in their own domain of work.

The Faculty Recognition committee has featured some 200 “women of accomplishment” on the web site and gathered and publicized data on campus and national awards. Having taken these steps, the committee is “hibernating” at present, and we discussed some ideas they might pursue. There is potential synergy with STRIDE by incorporating data on gender bias in awards into STRIDE and related presentations. Civil Engineering is piloting an effort to compile a sequenced map or spreadsheet of awards that early-career faculty should pursue at various career stages. After piloting, the CVEN version can be shared as a template for other departments. If departments constructed such a map for their own field, they could be more systematic in nominating faculty for awards that will advance their careers. The committee is also involved in events to recognize distinguished campus women.

Several ADVANCE Speakers have given well received talks; they offer talks on diversity as well as in their technical field. Events like these serve as community celebrations that raise the profile of ADVANCE on campus and draw in a wide range of faculty and other researchers.

Success Enhancement

This strand focuses on enabling women already at the institution to flourish in their careers. Alone, this strand could not accomplish institutional “transformation,” but it is necessary to support women working within the system as it is, even while other efforts seek to change that system to one that is more equitable and that is not based on a traditional male career model.

The ADVANCE Scholars program remains a strong component, matching early-career women faculty of color with on-campus advocates and off-campus mentors. Anecdotal reports indicate benefits to the Scholars and advocates alike, and positive response from the mentors. I am glad to learn that an evaluation strategy has been agreed to and implemented, as it is important that this program be well documented using solid social science methods. I look forward to seeing

the first results. The Vice President for Diversity sees good potential for sustaining this program and recognizes the merits of expanding it to a wider pool of faculty who would benefit.

The Administrative Fellows program has successfully placed several women and continues to spread into other university units. Former Fellows have taken continuing positions in their host unit. The Fellows provide links across several ADVANCE activities through their involvement in LEAD programming, STRIDE activities, Roadmap workshop sessions, and to other campus leadership development programs such as the Southeastern Conference (SEC) Fellows. Extensive data is being collected about this program; I look forward to learning more about its outcomes. There is some concern that the program not come to be seen as an escape route for people unhappy in their units. We discussed potential connections between the Fellows and a newly formed group of women heads, possibly through the Success Circle mechanisms.

Success Circles have been an interesting but challenging initiative. Broadly conceived, they offer a means for the Center to convene and then support groups of women faculty to become peer mentors for each other; the challenge has been in identifying “sticky” topics that bring people together. Workshops on professional topics, especially writing, have been most successful in seeding Circles; the new women heads group offers a new angle. We discussed possible seed topics for other groups of faculty, such as associate professors who are preparing for a promotion review, or separately, women who have been at the associate rank for some time and may benefit from concrete support to prepare for promotion. At least one Circle has spun off from the Roadmap workshop; this kind of synergy and follow-up should be encouraged.

Portfolio as a Whole

A new initiative will strengthen support for dual career couples in the coming year, as TAMU has won a competitive award from NSF’s Career/Life Balance initiative to support a full-time dual career program director who will work with ADVANCE and the Dean of Faculties’ office. This program will augment the existing bridge program that is available to help in placing a partner in an academic position, expanding capacity to make needed connections and facilitate placement, especially in non-academic positions inside and all types of positions outside the university. There is good potential for synergy here with STRIDE, LEAD, Roadmap and other activities, and a chance to strengthen the “onboarding” process as new faculty join the community and settle into their new positions. This Center has not previously ventured into work/life issues directly.

As in other ADVANCE IT efforts, activities that target individuals took off faster at TAMU, but now activities targeting institutional structures and climate are building strength and gaining visibility. The distributed nature of TAMU’s model has strengths in engaging many faculty across the campus in real decision-making about their activity area—but for this broad engagement to be a deep rather than surface-level strength, such faculty must be well informed about the issues that ADVANCE is addressing and how their own activity contributes to the broader goals. While it is appropriate to be sensitive to faculty time commitments, it is also important that the programs be effective and aligned with overall ADVANCE goals. Thus I

strongly encourage the Center to make sure these faculty can serve as informed advocates, even if this raises the ante for participation. The upcoming all-hands retreat is a good step in that direction. It will be important to assess faculty learning from this event, and perhaps also gather evidence about whether and how participants are indeed serving as advocates in their own spheres. The team should also consider follow-up activities that will provide this broader group with opportunities for more learning and cross-conversation among activities and strands.

It is encouraging to see multiple synergies emerging among individual activities. It is important not only to recognize and take advantage of these, but to work deliberately to spot and construct opportunities. This is in fact the main strength that comes from having an ADVANCE Center and dedicated team to coordinate, deliberate, and connect initiatives, now and in the future.

Research and Evaluation

Six studies carried out by the social science studies team have been described in project reports. Several of these studies are appropriately described as evaluation research related to specific program activities. The team is also providing additional services to the ADVANCE Center and campus by presenting relevant findings to campus stakeholders, offering advice to departments on their diversity plans, and carrying out ad hoc data-gathering efforts when specific information is needed (e.g. dual career faculty needs). Increased graduate student support is helping the team cover these added duties. These services are important (to do and to communicate) given the ADVANCE community's expectation that research conducted under ADVANCE projects feed back into practice in the community, whether by benefiting the campus project directly or by benefiting the community at large. I urge this team, as it carries out analyses and plans its reporting and publication strategies, to consider this immediate community need as well as the investigators' professional needs for scholarly products in their own field. That is, how will data from these studies help to inform the Center about whether and how its activities are working, and what value they have as part of the overall portfolio? Such analyses will be useful sooner rather than later, as the Center begins to make plans for sustaining its work.

The evaluation team has a somewhat split identity, assisting the leadership team with formative evaluation of the individual activities, while also seeking to measure overall project impact through the "NSF-10" indicators and similar campus-wide data. The team's approach is based on the department as the unit of change; they are compiling "input" data about participation in a variety of activities and also "output" or "response" data in the form of climate survey data and institutional indicators such as hiring, retention, promotion, salary, etc., then will carry out difference-in-difference analyses to link departments' participation in ADVANCE to these indicators of impact. Their careful baseline analyses of the institutional indicators provide the baseline for measurement of differences and draw attention to some interesting discrepancies that have been usefully shared with department heads and other institutional leaders (for example, the salary study has been used to address inequities). Thus the team is beginning to build a regular clientele for these data and their use in institutional planning.

This creative approach to measuring institutional change has potential to make a strong contribution to the ADVANCE community in piloting a highly innovative method for evaluating the net impact of multiple, interlinked interventions. Texas A&M is an excellent place to try this approach, because the large faculty size can support the sample size required to analyze climate surveys by department, and the multi-faceted design of the project means the impact of numerous interventions can be examined both separately and as a whole. The team's recent articulation of the evaluation plan including initial, intermediate and institutional-level outcomes is a most helpful clarification of their strategy. However, I worry that this approach risks missing explanatory insights about the hows and whys of the change process: how individual interventions contribute (or not) to net change, why some are more or less influential overall. If the statistical findings are ambiguous, how will we know why some things worked in some units but not in others? Such process-oriented information will aid the summative evaluation; before that, it is critical for the Center to be able to draw upon such data as conversations about sustainability get underway. I do not want to reduce this innovative analysis of net impact to a sum of parts, but I am nonetheless concerned that some useful information about the mechanisms by which individual interventions do or do not contribute may fall through the cracks.

My concerns about timing, integration and reporting of research and evaluation share a common theme: How will the leadership team know what is working well and providing the greatest bang for the buck, soon enough to make decisions about sustainability? As these decisions approach, project leaders should have evidence to use in forming their plan and making their case. This is a joint question for the evaluation and social science studies teams, because there is high reliance on the 2015 climate survey for final outcome measures, and because producing scholarly research papers out of the social science studies will not be fast: every analysis can't be done last. Is it possible, or will it be possible soon, to lay out a schedule of what can be reported when? Much data collection is still underway: when will there be enough data to conduct a preliminary analysis that is useful to the leadership team? When is it time to stop collecting data and get on to the analysis? For some data sets, might this point come sooner than originally conceived? For which programs would it be most useful to have that kind of analysis, and in what form? Who will do it? As the grant period passes the midpoint, this is a good time to look at the big picture for analysis and reporting to meet project needs.

Project Management

The management team is strong, with good internal communication and transparent operations. They make good use of their connections in and out of the institution and take a can-do approach to problem-solving. Kaunas and Stelly are busy with day-to-day operations, working at their limits already, yet still making new contacts and serving new clientele that can expand the impact of ADVANCE. It is important that they have some time to reflect, to act on lessons learned, and to plan for the future; I hope that a capable intern or similar help can be found to assist with the everyday scheduling and communication required to manage this complex project.

Inclusion of the Dean of Faculties and Vice President for Diversity on regular planning meetings strengthens connections among activities and should highlight opportunities for sustainability.

Summary

This project has many strengths in design and personnel. It is delivering on essentially everything it proposed, with appropriate adjustments where the first iteration was not successful. The research and evaluation efforts can be further enhanced by maximizing what promise to be very strong contributions to the project and to the ADVANCE community.