

External Evaluation Report for Texas A&M ADVANCE Year 4, June 2014

Sandra Laursen

Ethnography & Evaluation Research, U. Colorado Boulder

This report is based on telephone conversations with project director Chris Kaunas in February and March 2014, and a visit to campus April 24-25, 2014. During my campus visit I met with 16 individuals from the TAMU ADVANCE team, including the theme co-chairs, evaluation and social science studies teams, the core team (Kaunas, PI Sherry Yennello, coordinator Linda Stelly), and the new dual-career coordinator, Leslie Tomaszewski. I met with a focus group of eight women STEM faculty. I reviewed the project web site, recent quarterly and annual reports, and some new reports from the project, evaluation and social science studies teams received during my visit.

Overview—Strategic Approach and Progress

Approaching the end of its fourth year, the ADVANCE Center maintains a high level of activity and high engagement with a wide range of campus units. The leadership team works well with active involvement of key administrators. Twelve activities are clustered into three themes: Recruitment and Retention, Success Enhancement, and Climate Change. Each activity is tied to one or more principles for a “psychologically healthy workplace” that address job satisfaction and work environment.

Project Activities

The project’s reports to NSF outline individual activity committees’ work and progress. Here I offer comments on selected interventions where new progress is evident since my last visit in fall 2013.

Climate Change

The Climate Change effort continues to make notable progress. This strand addresses faculty’s everyday interactions with colleagues, staff and students, and leaders’ awareness of gender bias.

The LEAD program offers professional development for department heads, presenting both research-based knowledge about gender equity issues and practical strategies to address these issues. LEAD’s most recent activity was a joint effort with the Faculty Recognition committee to discuss faculty awards. This effort fits well with interest from the Provost’s office in enhancing nominations of TAMU faculty for national awards, an area where the university is seen to be lagging behind peer institutions. This is a good example of how ADVANCE initiatives can meet with better success when they align with other institutional goals.

Efforts to work with students continue to focus on new student activities as venues for sharing messages that emphasize respect and other “Aggie values.” Working with students requires substantial time, especially given student leadership turnover. Evaluation of this activity focuses

on detecting change in student end-of-course evaluations, but this will be difficult to attribute to new student activities. As a way to determine the mechanism for any change observed, and thus to more directly attribute it to the ADVANCE effort, we discussed possibilities for evaluating the impact on the Fish Camp student leaders, who experience a more significant intervention (by planning and performing skits) compared to the first-year students who view the skit.

No new information was provided about Departmental Mini Grants. A revised approach to soliciting proposals is planned, with more effort to prepare departments to develop proposals and to monitor funded projects, as detailed in my report of 10/2013.

No new information was provided about the FASIT program. Faculty/staff pairs are working on their departmental projects.

Recruitment and Retention

This strand focuses on recruiting more diverse faculty and helping them succeed and thrive.

The STRIDE training is finally fully underway and meeting with good initial success. The committee is seeing increased invitations to present, including in non-ADVANCE units. One college is now requiring search committee members to participate (although participation by other faculty is variable), and another is requesting a version of the training that focuses on promotion and tenure. A second cohort of STRIDE leaders is now preparing to take on the trainer role. It has been important for the project to understand the original ‘train the trainer’ model from Michigan and especially to embrace the need for leaders to invest intellectual effort in learning the material so that they can take responsibility for leading the trainings in the future.

The Faculty Recognition group see new opportunities to engage with a new campus assessment that is using academic analytics to develop measures of departments’ research, teaching and service activities in a “report card” format. Activities that help women faculty and departments think strategically about awards can also enhance departments’ success on the report card metrics. As noted, this is a strategic alignment with other institutional goals.

The Roadmap workshop was offered this year to new assistant professors and some participants from outside A&M. At this point it has largely saturated its market and will need to look to other audiences if it is to be sustained; the committee sees this as “ready to be taken up” by others. We discussed possibilities for retooling this workshop for graduate students and postdocs in ways that might also engage other offices on campus to help support it.

The ADVANCE Speaker series continues to be popular but is proving cumbersome to run. There is some feeling that it is not making an impact commensurate with the effort and some sense that there are too many events. We discussed a variety of visiting speaker models used on other campuses.

Success Enhancement

This strand focuses on enabling women already at the institution to flourish in their careers.

The ADVANCE Scholars program matches early-career women faculty of color with on-campus advocates and off-campus mentors. A program evaluation was completed this year; I was able to review the executive summary of this report, which indicates the value of connections made internally among women of color and among mentors, and externally by the women to the wider scholarly community. The first cohort of Scholars has completed its two-year cycle and will be acknowledged at an upcoming celebration. We discussed possible ways to follow up on this program, both to continue to help the Scholars engage with each other, and to offer the program to non-STEM women of color (there are no new STEM women of color hires at present).

The Administrative Fellows program placed two more women this year. We discussed concerns about how the program is perceived and how they might be addressed. Perceptions of the program as an ‘escape route’ from poor department environments might be reframed as an opportunity to focus on improving those environments, rather than questioning women’s motives for seeking an alternative work setting. Concerns about how participation might affect a Fellow’s advancement to full professor raise legitimate questions; however, rather than deciding on her behalf, these questions should be raised with candidates. They might be addressed through career planning with candidates or incorporated into the application process. Conversation about these issues presents an opportunity to re-focus the program on its goals to interest women in positions of power and authority and to help influence the gender-related culture of the office in which they are involved. It may be helpful to place more emphasis on leadership development and on the skills and new insights that the Fellow brings back to her department, and for that reason it is an important moment to summarize and share early findings from the social science study of this program.

No new information about Success Circles emerged during this visit.

Engagement and Sustainability

The project continues to expand its reach into other university units. The ADVANCE Center signed an MOU with the College of Medicine and expect to complete one soon with Veterinary Medicine. The Bush School of Government and Public Service has requested STRIDE trainings. Efforts in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (where non-STEM departments have been included in ADVANCE activities under COALS support) are gaining further traction. ADVANCE is actively engaged in campus groups such as the Women’s Faculty Network and the Council of Principal Investigators. The project has begun to recognize that presentations of evidence from research (e.g. the evidence base on implicit bias) and local evaluation (e.g. campus data on the status of women) are powerful assets in communicating with campus stakeholders. Through a contact at the A&M system level, the project will offer a workshop in July for department heads system-wide.

I have already noted the ways in which the ADVANCE Center’s work on faculty recognition is synergistic with larger campus goals. Another example of such synergy is ADVANCE support for units’ annual diversity reports to the Vice President and Associate Provost for Diversity (VPD). ADVANCE reports to the departments on their engagement in ADVANCE and these

data can be used by units in their reports, which are tied to annual merit awards for progress toward institutional diversity goals.

In my last report I called out two important areas for the ADVANCE Center to address as it works to secure its future. The first of these is building awareness of the many faculty involved in ADVANCE activity committees, and thus enhancing the potential of this group—who are already engaged—to advocate more effectively for the project as a whole. Indeed, this need was underscored by my conversation with STEM women in a focus group. While all were aware of some ADVANCE programs and were keenly interested in gender equity on campus, and many had personally participated in programs, it was clear that most did not know of the full range of ADVANCE work or were misinformed about it. Thus this conversation highlighted the potential for better communication with and engagement of STEM women as a key group of allies.

The TAMU ADVANCE Center began this awareness-building work at a community retreat in fall 2013, which drew ~60 people to discuss ADVANCE activities and their linkages to the campus strategic plan. Unfortunately the opportunity was missed to evaluate outcomes of this retreat, such as increased faculty awareness or learning about the broader ADVANCE goals, and to identify their current advocacy roles (or absence thereof). Nonetheless the retreat seems one useful strategy for developing what the Center calls “educated advocates” who can communicate and correct misconceptions about ADVANCE in their own settings and thus raise faculty awareness and understanding of ADVANCE work beyond the individual activities. I have separately shared additional communication ideas suggested by the women faculty focus group with the project team. Communication strategies were also a focus of a brainstorming discussion with the leadership team during my campus visit, where additional strategies and core messages were proposed. The team is aware of potential synergies from aligning these messages with broader institutional goals and messages.

Alongside the need for general faculty awareness of ADVANCE and its work, there is a need for highly engaged faculty who can in turn enlist others to act as change agents. Susan Sturm¹ defines the role of organizational catalysts, influential senior faculty who are situated at points of intersection within the university and who hold legitimacy and power from their distinguished record of scholarship and from a track record of advancing women and people of color in the academy. Sturm (2007b)¹ defines three key functions for organizational catalysts:

- 1) use data to mobilize action—by feeding information to decision-makers in the right form and at the right time, and providing information in a language that each constituency understands;
- 2) diffuse and coordinate leadership—by identifying and empowering formal and informal leaders who can solve problems in their own contexts. These may include “unlikely allies among people in positions of power who are persuaded by the data and willing to harness their intellectual and social capital to the effort” (p. 10).

- 3) develop and sustain collaborative networks—by building communities of practice from people who share common interests and concerns but lack opportunities to work together. In Sturm’s view, this involves framing issues in a way that shows how they overlap with those of interest to different individuals or constituencies, bolstering “everyday leadership at key pivot points defining access and participation” (e.g., search processes), and thus redefining the everyday ways in which the institution operates (p. 10).

While members of the leadership team already play these roles to varied degrees, I see both potential and need for more people who can function as organizational catalysts in a wider range of units across the campus. The STRIDE team members may be particularly well suited to this role; others may emerge from new connections to units beyond the original STEM departments. I urge the leadership team to consider ways they can build a robust network of people who will support sustained implementation of ADVANCE goals after the grant ends.

Research and Evaluation

The second area of progress relates to the effective use of data in communicating the ADVANCE goals. I was encouraged to hear of several examples in which presentations from the social studies and evaluation teams had been well received and seen as having impact, or of ways data have been used to influence decision-making (e.g. in salary equity). The social studies team has also been active in presenting work at off-campus professional meetings. The evaluation team has some institutional analyses that would be useful to other institutions as models for analyzing institutional data; I do not know if they plan to pursue publication of any of these. I also reiterate my support for and interest in the innovative ‘difference in difference’ analysis planned for the summative institutional evaluation

That said, one area of concern remains: I do not yet have a good grasp of what has been learned so far from the social science studies that has been fed back to and used by the project. It seems that some of these studies should yield information that is useful in making decisions on how to refine or sustain the program—perhaps information that is not central to the main research question for the researchers themselves, but is informative about the program design and impact. So I still have questions about what information about the impact of individual activities can be provided to the leadership team and institutional leaders as input to the sustainability planning that is already underway. I view providing such information as an essential function of the evaluation and research activities combined. Some specific questions:

- The most recent evaluation plan forwarded to NSF lays out evaluation approaches for three phases of each activity: participation and satisfaction, intermediate, and institutional transformation. Many of the intermediate outcomes are measured with selected scales from the climate surveys that are expected to reflect the activity (and are also aligned with the Psychologically Healthy Workplace framework). However, many of these intermediate outcomes are based on data from the planned 2015 climate survey. Other measures come from some social science studies. So, while these outcomes are ‘intermediate’ from the point of view of the progress and impact of the activity, their reporting appears to be ‘final’ or

summative in the sense that data on them will not be available as formative input to the leadership team in planning their sustainability strategies. What other analyses could offer useful information to the leadership team in a timely manner that helps their decision-making?

- The evaluation team intends to measure “departmental” impact in relation to departmental “engagement” in various ADVANCE activities, using as measures primarily items from the climate surveys. In some cases, the proposed measures are fairly described as departmental and they are also related to the ADVANCE Center’s activities. For example, LEAD participation is expected to improve department heads’ skills, and climate survey items directly address faculty perceptions of their head’s effectiveness; it will thus be fair to argue that a change detected at the whole-department level is meaningful and attributable to LEAD involvement. For other programs, faculty engage as individuals, and only subsets of the department members might be affected (e.g., Success Circles, Roadmap Workshop), yet “departmental” impact on climate measures is still anticipated. What mechanisms are hypothesized to generate such an effect? That is, what is the team’s conceptual model for the relationship of engagement to impact at the departmental level; which programs are truly expected to have real impact on a unit’s culture and working environment versus more localized effect on women’s experiences?
- The social science team has concerns about scooping themselves by sharing conference papers or posters on the project web site before they have published the work. What alternate ways can the team find to report evaluative findings in digest form? For instance, would there be merit in a two-page “brief” about each activity summarizing key observations or “lessons learned” so far, to be shared with project and institutional leaders? This would be focused on results useful to the leadership team and would not require theoretical or methodological details or contextualization in the literature.

Thus I am not yet persuaded that the concerns I have previously raised about timing, integration and reporting of research and evaluation are being addressed: How will the leadership team know what is working well and offering the greatest return on investment, soon enough to make informed decisions about sustainability? As these decisions approach, project leaders should have evidence to use in forming their plan and making their case.

For my next visit, I am requesting to receive updates from the social studies and evaluation teams in advance, so that I can digest their abundant information on my own time and use our time together to address questions and discuss issues. I’d be glad to participate in further conversation with the team in response to these comments.

Project Management

Recent personnel changes should assist the ADVANCE Center in solidifying its work. Chris Kaunas is being promoted to executive director and Linda Stelly to program coordinator. Both of these changes reflect the high-level work that these individuals carry out; they will enable

Kaunas to address messaging and sustainability, and Stelly to more directly work with Center activities. A new office associate will assist with the increased load of accounting and scheduling work that has come with the Center's expanding campus involvement.

Leslie Tomaszewski is the new, full-time dual career program director who works with ADVANCE and the Dean of Faculties' office. She is working very actively to make connections within and outside of the university and is setting up tracking mechanisms that will help to document the impact of this work on faculty hiring and retention. Her focus on dual-career support is important; likewise it is important that she is strategically included in broader conversations about ADVANCE programming and sustainability so she is aware and can help to spot potential synergies with other activities and place her work in a broader context. Indeed, it seems quite possible to me that institutionalizing this position may depend on demonstrating the value of the local knowledge and networks Tomaszewski is developing not only to dual-career couples but to other campus constituencies, such as career development for graduate student and postdocs.

Summary

This project has many strengths; the team gets a lot done and their persistence through challenges has paid off on several programs that took some time to get underway. They are now appropriately shifting attention to broader issues of communicating with campus stakeholders and planning for the future. I hope that the forthcoming research and evaluation work can be shaped such that useful information about the contributions of specific activities to the overall institutional transformation effort is available to project and institutional leaders to support their decision-making for sustainability.

¹ Sturm details this idea in a lengthy article: Sturm, S. (2006). The architecture of inclusion: Advancing workplace equity in higher education. *Harvard Journal of Law and Gender*, 29, 247-334.

More readable references are: Sturm, S. (2007a). Gender equity as institutional transformation: The pivotal role of "organizational catalysts." In A. J. Stewart, J. E. Malley, & D. LaVaque-Manty, eds. *Transforming science and engineering: Advancing academic women*, Ch. 16, pp. 262-280. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Sturm, S. (2007b). The architecture of inclusion: The role of organizational catalysts. Presented at *The Science of Diversity*, Columbia University, New York, New York, 16 November 2006. Online version dated February 11, 2007. <http://www2.law.columbia.edu/ssturm/pdfs/2-23-07%20buffalo%20talk.pdf> (accessed 6/1/14).