Faculty–Staff Focus Group Findings

Faculty–Staff Interaction Committee

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The ADVANCE Faculty–Staff Interaction Committee is working to increase STEM faculty and staff awareness of intentional or unintentional bias toward female faculty by augmenting existing training related to gender equity and diversity.
The focus group questions were designed to accomplish three things:

1. explore the nature of the interactions between STEM faculty and staff;
2. identify potential viable interventions to enhance interactions between STEM faculty and staff; and
3. elicit baseline information.
Methods – Focus Group Questions

I. The nature of interaction between faculty and staff

A. How would you describe the nature of interactions/relationship that currently exists between faculty and staff? (probe for descriptions of incidents)

B. What about your interactions/relationship with faculty do you feel good about? Do you not feel good about?

C. Reflecting on the elements of the relationship you do not feel good about, what are the actions and attitudes of faculty who engage in these behaviors? How many people are we talking about?

D. Reflecting on the elements of the relationship you feel good about, what are the actions and attitudes of faculty who engage in these behaviors? How many people are we talking about?

II. Gender differences in interactions

A. How are interactions different with male and female faculty?

B. I am going to make several statements about women. Tell me if you see evidence of these in your work environment.
   1. Women faculty exaggerate problems at work
   2. Women faculty are too easily offended
   3. Most women faculty interpret innocent remarks as sexist
   4. When women faculty lose fairly, they claim discrimination
   5. Women faculty seek special favors under the guise of equality
   6. Women faculty are making reasonable demands
   7. Women faculty are not seeking more power than men
   8. Women faculty seek power by gaining control over men
   9. Women faculty should not be bosses

III. Impact of faculty/staff interactions

A. How has the nature of faculty/staff interactions affected you professionally? Personally?

IV. Actions and improvements

A. What could be done to enhance/improve interactions between faculty and staff?
Methods

Sample
- Randomly selected faculty and staff from 39 departments in the Colleges of Science, Engineering, Liberal Arts, Agriculture & Life Sciences and Geosciences at Texas A&M University
  - College Station campus only
  - Tenured or tenure-track faculty
  - Staff in deans/department offices but not custodial, food services, wage, or student workers
  - Letter to Department Head encouraging participation, contacted by email with phone follow-up

4 Focus Groups
- 1 male faculty, 1 female faculty, 2 mixed-gender staff
- Lunch provided with option to win iPad2 as incentives
- Data recorded, transcribed, unitized, and coded
Findings – Climate

- General progress for women
- Nature of a public institution
- People work here because it’s a nice environment
- The relationship between faculty and staff is not that bad
- Interpersonal relationship issues (e.g. dating, degree of friendliness)
- Duration of employment, job satisfaction
- Academic hierarchy (inequity between faculty and staff)
“In my department, 99% of the people are hardworking and willing to go the extra mile for you especially if you’re a nice person. There’s just that 1% that can make your life tough.”

– Female Faculty
“This is something I like about interacting with the faculty. In our department, we do a lot of conferences throughout the year. During those conferences, especially like the week-long ones when faculty and staff are really working together, it’s more or less an “even playing field.” Those are my favorite times. I don’t know what makes it different than the everyday interactions that I have with them, but it’s something. It seems like we know each other on personal level better during those times.”

– Staff Member
“I love the staff. I have a special relationship with staff because I’ve always been taught staff are the ones who keep things going.”

– Female Faculty
Findings – Climate

- Resources
- Pay/benefits
- Unequal pay across colleges/units
- Bureaucracy (difficult to get rid of bad actors)
- No formal recourse for staff against difficult faculty
- Staff and faculty workloads and funding
- Geography
- Departmental structure and culture
- Impact of leadership
“This new budget is really making staff too afraid of doing anything, and that’s affecting the relationship.”

– Female Faculty
“It needs to be said on the front end: the staff here are paid pretty miserably. In our department, we have four highly overworked people for a twenty-six or twenty-seven member department. When I started, there were eight staff, and every year there are fewer and fewer people. We have a really strong group right now. We are all by and large very appreciative, but I’m sure the staff have a very different perspective in the sense that they are being paid a pittance to do an enormous job. If the university wants to improve faculty and staff interactions, start paying the staff more of what they’re worth.”

– Male Faculty
"If there’s a legitimate complaint against a staff member, there’s a formal process involved with it. It goes through HR, steps are taken, counseling etc. It’s formally documented. It’s not that way for faculty; there’s no formal process. It doesn’t go to HR. It goes to the dean of faculties. It’s all very informal. I was helping someone who was having trouble with her supervisor who is a faculty member. She tried to make complaints about it and it just fell on deaf ears and nothing happened. It was a very abusive and hostile atmosphere this staff person was in. She complained to the dean’s office. She tried to talk to other people and nothing ever happened because it’s not a formal process. So you go to the dean of faculties and make a valid complaint against a faculty member. Where does it go after that? At least the other way, HR has a process that you have to follow. And there are implications for the staff member. There’s not that on the faculty side, especially if they’re tenured. There’s nothing."

– Staff Member
“What we are hearing is that it works best when there is mutual respect and a degree of professionalism and sharing of responsibility. And that comes down to people. So how do you get that across a wide spectrum of folks? I think our administration needs to help build the trust because I can say in the current climate, I don’t trust the upper administration.”

– Male Faculty
“The staff evaluations are done by the staff supervisors who may not be the person they are working for. It could be the administrative assistant in that department, clerical staff, or it could be the assistant department head. But the clients are never asked about how the particular person being evaluated worked with them.”

– Male Faculty
“The department head has the authority to make things better and sometimes they don’t. So if they make things clear and set the tone, things can be improved a lot.”

– Female Faculty
“I wish the previous few department heads had stopped this [bad behavior] and said “No, we don’t treat people that way.” And they didn’t. They just let it go. And I’m not the only one who noticed it.”

– Female Faculty
“With real problem faculty, the department head or whoever his or her supervisor is, needs to take an active role in dealing with it. When there are serious problems involved, they need to take an active role.”

– Staff Member
Findings – Context

- **Staff**
  - Don’t feel safe
  - Are vulnerable for termination
  - University doesn’t appreciate staff
  - Stress from work impacts physical health

- **Faculty**
  - Sink or swim
  - Administrative realignment impacts faculty
  - Staff know university processes more than faculty
  - Faculty uncomfortable with southern culture
“I have stress and pressure in my job and I’m the breadwinner in my family. I do live in fear that if I have a negative interaction with a faculty member, I’ll lose my job. And I don’t want that to happen.”

– Staff Member
“As new professors, all of a sudden you have grant money or start up money and no one teaches you, “Well this is how you get on Maestro or Canopy to actually see your money” or “This is an 02 account versus an 06 account, and it has different rules and you need to know those rules.” [No one is] actually explaining it because people think you’re just supposed to know.”

–Female Faculty
Findings – Themes

- Understanding roles and demands
- Interdependence of faculty and staff
- Negative behavior
- Faculty/staff perceptions of staff
- Faculty/staff perceptions of faculty
- Diversity bonds faculty/staff
- Faculty peer relationships
- Use of power structure
- Rankism
“The administrative assistant sits in on our promotion and tenure committee. We discuss issues that as faculty we decide on and the vote has to be unanimous. And then we find out after the meeting that the administrative assistant is saying that what we decided isn’t right and we should try to change the mind of the chair. So that kind of crossing the line just because she has been here forever and knows more – I don’t know why – but she knows more than we do about the process. That’s something I don’t feel good about, and it’s happening.”

– Female Faculty
“Without the assistance of that team of people, what we’ve accomplished would not have been possible. A lot of what I’ve gotten and achieved as being a full professor here is a result of the staff’s hard work.”

“My success as being a leader of that group was made because I was leading a great group of people. Without the staff here at the university, we would have never have gotten to be a Tier 1 institution.”

– Male Faculty
“I've had experience as an administrator. I’ve seen some of the staff get chewed out by faculty when all they were trying to do was follow the rules as stated in the catalogue or on the website – they weren’t making stuff up – but the faculty were just downright ugly to them.”

– Male Faculty
“I absolutely hate the comment: It’s not in my job description. I always feel like writing them a note: to administrate means to facilitate and not hinder in any way. The behavior that I like the least is when somebody tells me it’s not their job and they have no idea whose job it is.”

– Female Faculty
“I don’t judge it much, but I do suffer it a lot: the accountants make lots of mistakes and sometimes make decisions about where to charge things… including charging my husband’s student’s tuition to my startup account! I know they’re overworked and overwhelmed, but I spend a lot of hours clearing up accounting errors and begging them to fix them…I dread every time I have to go through Maestro to do my detective work and make sure that the previous errors have been fixed. To me, that’s a big obstacle because I waste a lot of time on that.”

– Female Faculty
“It’s more likely –unless I am very, very strong in my suggestion that I need it done now– that they’ll do the obnoxious person’s request first, nice person’s request second.”

– Female Faculty
“So you say “Well, did you do so and so?” and they say “Um, I need to get back with you.” But they’re sitting there on the computer playing Solitaire! Or the department head is sending out his own memos because he doesn’t trust his support staff to send stuff out. It took us two years to get rid of this person. One of the big things is just dealing with HR when there are issues regarding how to take steps to reprimand a particular staff person…and you can’t.”

– Female Faculty
“The staff attempt to cater more to the faculty who have more power – full and associate professors, associate department heads and department heads. They’ll treat them with a lot more respect than they would treat an assistant professor like me, and I find that very frustrating.”

– Female Faculty
“Faculty are on a different level. They’re tenured and have much more power and respect than we do. And they should; they’ve achieved a lot – more than I have in life. But you know, I’m here to serve…not only them but the students.“

– Staff Member
Findings – *It’s not just gender*

- Individual personalities
- Difficult behavior does not depend on gender, rank or position
- Culture influences gender roles
- Depends on situation
- Generational differences
- Modern work environment stressors
“[The relationship between faculty and staff] really depends a lot on both individuals and also the positions they’re in relative to where you’re at.”

–Male Faculty
“[How you get along], for me, really depends on the individual staff member.”

–Female Faculty
“There are faculty prima donnas who are women and there are faculty prima donnas who are men. There are people that are hard to get along with that are female, there are people that are hard to get along with that are male. So I don’t see any disproportionate amount. Perhaps it’s because we have fewer women that there are not as many stories to tell.”

– Male Faculty
Findings – Gender

- Female Staff
  - Empathize with female faculty
  - Take care of female faculty
  - See female faculty as one of them
  - Give female faculty priority
  - Influence male staff to treat female faculty better than male faculty

- Younger Male Staff
  - Treat female faculty poorly
  - Give male faculty priority
  - Are helpful to female faculty
“When it was time to submit my papers, no other faculty member, not even the P&T committee, asked to see the stuff ahead of time to review it for me. The staff did...I got tenure because of them. All those dots and periods and crossing Ts.”

– Female Faculty
“I found that the staff actually do things faster for me than they do for my male colleagues. They’re very protective of me. They want the women to succeed. I’ve noticed they’ve done it for young female colleagues who’ve come along behind me. They’re very protective in an essentially all male environment. To get those few initial women through, they’ll do almost anything.”

– Female Faculty
Findings – Gender

- **(Older) Male Faculty**
  - Treat all staff and female faculty poorly
  - Treat female faculty like staff
  - Stand up for female faculty
  - Get resources female faculty don’t
  - Enforce traditional gender roles

- **Female Faculty**
  - Don’t want to be thought of as staff
  - Senior female faculty mentoring to female faculty more important than staff to faculty mentoring
  - Harder on staff
  - Better to work with
  - Have to work harder to get ahead
“When I first got here, at the colloquium the department head looked at me and said, “Make the coffee.”

– Female Faculty
“My pet peeve is with a certain collection of male faculty who consider the staff dirt...I notice they are rude, they are demanding, they are unreasonable. I’m having trouble deciding whether it’s staff or sexism because they tend to push me back, too. But they’re a little more respectful of me than they are of the staff.”

– Female Faculty
“Oh, they definitely do not realize! I’m not saying that any of them are purposely being rude, but they treat me the way they treat the female staff.”

– Female Faculty
“It seems that the people that have been the hardest on the staff or the least understanding have been the female faculty members or these particular two that I’m thinking about.”

– Male Faculty
“Female faculty are worried about the perception of being lumped in with female staff…they want to make sure they’re not mistaken for female staff. And I think there’s a generalization that regardless of what position you’re in, if you are a female staff member, you’re a secretary. And “secretary” is a title that even this university has pretty much abandoned. Yet there are some female faculty members that insist on referring to you as the secretary even when that has absolutely nothing to do with what your position is.”

– Staff Member
“I was actually shocked when my first year here at Christmas I was handed an envelope of money as a Christmas tip. I was shocked and offended to think that I was being tipped like a doorman or something like that. And the first time I got it I was just too shocked to say anything. The next year I let it be known that they should not include me in collecting money from faculty members. I thought that was highly inappropriate. And they were surprised. I knew they collected and gave money to some of the custodial staff, but I just felt like it was diminishing my status to be given cash. And it was a couple of hundred dollars; it wasn’t fifty bucks. And I was really offended.”

– Staff Member
Findings – Gender

- Difficult for female faculty to break into ol’ boy network
- Like genders bond/socialize together
- Low #s of female faculty
- Female staff and faculty don’t identify with each other due to status
- People are more aware of female faculty behavior
- Women faculty respond differently to gender challenges
- More women in administrative positions is a good thing
- Historically male faculty refused to mentor female faculty
“But one of the things I really don’t like…is if someone says to me, “I can’t find your husband. I’d like an appointment to see him at 4 o’clock”.

– Female Faculty
Findings – Gender

- Hard to know what is appropriate
- Reverse discrimination
“Now I’m more guarded because I had an instance where a female – I don’t know if she’s faculty – was upset because of the way I treated her. I don’t treat anybody differently, male or female. But apparently she felt like I was treating her differently because she’s female. So now, as a man, I have to make sure that I’m not [being] sexually discriminating when I’m talking to a female. I still today don’t know what I said…”

– Staff Member
“Is there a male guilt? It’s much like white guilt when you’re dealing with the race card and everything else. Is there a male guilt out there when you’re dealing with a female colleague or faculty member? I try to treat all women the same. But those that speak loudest, you know I will, I do have this [inaudible]. I need to watch myself here, you know. This cautious, cautiousness. I don’t know how the female members here react to that. I mean, because I’m not a woman. But as a man I want to make sure I don’t step on a landmine. It would be the same if I was working in an all white environment and all the sudden a black person shows up, you know, we have to make accommodations for that. And, I don’t think it’s a guilt or anything, it’s just, it’s just a matter of being cautious because of the reality of the situation. This is a new environment. Here at A&M there’s more and more women on faculty now so we have to be careful. I think personally I’m more careful with women who are the loudest, are most aggressive. Because then they pursue, you know, their own interests. If I do something stupid, you know, make an unintended remark or whatever, you know. That’s true for staff members, I have to, you know, as a male I have to be aware that.”

– Staff Member
Findings – Gender

*in response to specific gender questions*

- There are no innocent sexist remarks
- Women don’t demand enough
- Female faculty under utilize their power
- Gender is irrelevant
- No bias indicated
- Why are we doing a gender separation in the focus group?
- Don’t know if gender is an issue
“I had a lot of younger men that helped because they respected good scientists as colleagues and it didn’t matter what gender you are. They want to work with you because you are good.”

– Female Faculty
“It would be a gender thing if men would not do that sort of thing (seek power) or in lower proportion. Because I think people obviously do that whether it’s gender or not.”

– Female Faculty
“I would say that they [female faculty] are trying to climb the ladder just like any one of us are. Exactly, they are seeking the same power as men.”

– Male Faculty
Findings – Gender
in response to specific gender questions

Typically one person responding
- Traditional gender roles still influence people’s attitudes
- Gender bias in use of titles (Dr. vs. Miss or Mrs.)
- Female faculty exaggerate problems
- Women faculty too easily offended
- Female Faculty tend not to notice when sexist remarks are made
- Women claim discrimination unnecessarily
- Women seek special favors
- Women demand too much
- Female faculty get power by controlling men
- Women faculty try to control male faculty
- Women should not be bosses/full professors or administrators
“We don’t have enough female deans or department heads, and the reason could be because we don’t care. We don’t go after that. We don’t want the power.”

– Female Faculty
“I do have one woman faculty member who – and I think this is because she’s from another country – wants me to speak for her in some situations because she feels like a man can do more in that situation. And it’s a weird thing. It’s a cultural thing. It’s Russian. So I think some women carry this with their culture, where they feel like a man’s word will carry more weight than a woman’s and they carry this inferiority with them. So this particular person who feels inferior to men probably wouldn’t be a good boss. She doesn’t see herself as a colleague. But other than that, I can’t think of another instance where [a woman being a boss] would be an issue.”

– Staff Member
Findings – Solutions

- Training
- Dialogues
- System/structure/policy
- Mentoring
- Empathy building exercises
- Assessment
- Social activities
- New faculty training
- Utilize department heads
- Faculty–faculty accountability
- Foster mindset of partnerships
- Professionalism
“I don’t recall that faculty–staff issues really come up in faculty meetings at all. I’m wondering if there could be a place once a year to get feedback from the staff, [to hear] what they feel they need or aren’t getting and likewise, too, to get feedback from faculty to see what they need or aren’t getting and have that exchange of information. I can’t remember, since I’ve been here, us ever discussing staff.”

– Female Faculty
“We [faculty] need to have more input in terms of their [staff] performance...In my department, the boss of all the staff does all the evaluations. She’s better friends with some of the staff than others, so when it comes time for raises, it’s kind of biased. I don’t think that’s really fair, especially for the staff who are doing a great job.”

– Female Faculty
“As a recent [faculty] hire, the best thing that could’ve happened as you’re getting your orientation is to meet with whoever is the top of the chain of command for staff members and have that person say, “This is so–and–so and her job is such–and–such. If you need this done, go here. If you need that done, go there. If you don’t know where to go, start here.” So then you have it laid out, and now all the staff members know that you’re the personnel they have to answer to and you don’t have to figure out how to interact with them. They’ve just been told, “You will do this for this person” because their boss just said that. I think that could go a long way.”

– Female Faculty
“I often think we don’t see the staff as partners in this process. In those departments where you do see a lot more give and take, the staff tends to be happier.”

– Male Faculty
“…If you have a professional trajectory for staff, you can keep the staff that you’ve trained and value. [That would] show that you appreciate them and don’t have them jumping all over the place. You end up with a happier group of folks overall.”

– Male Faculty
Findings – Advice

- Focus on solutions not personalities
- Don’t take a punitive approach
- Recognize it takes work to maintain respectful relationships
- Don’t trivialize
“I don’t necessarily think that getting everybody together in a room and saying “Let’s make nice–nice and understand that faculty have to do research and teach. They’re under a lot of pressure to make tenure.” Staff has their own pressures; that’s not going to work. They’re going to resent coming into a meeting like that and being told that they’re bad children. Even if they are bad children.”

– Staff Member
“Unfortunately, it’s the kind of behavior taught at a kindergarten level. If people who get to be faculty and staff are lacking that, it seems like a tough job to carry out remedial education. I’m a little pessimistic about how far we can take that.”

– Male Faculty
Conclusions

- Faculty–staff interaction is complex
  - Perceived bias may be attributable to something besides gender bias (e.g. personality, culture, generational differences)
  - A myriad of environmental issues impact the relationship in a more overt way than gender bias
  - Gender issues are tightly coupled with inequity, hierarchy, and rankism which is a significant component of the faculty–staff relationship
- Context impacts faculty–staff relationships, staff morale, and the ability to recruit and retain faculty, staff, and students
- Dealing with small #s – actions of a few are creating the perception that there are many
- Focus group participants overwhelmingly felt the gender bias questions were irrelevant
- The potential for female faculty to be treated as staff impacts female relationships more
- Good/bad behavior is gender neutral and is embedded in staff/faculty ranks
- Neither faculty nor staff fully understand the other’s roles and demands
- Faculty aren’t set up for success which impacts their relationship with staff
- Leadership sets the tone
- Faculty peer relationships and psychological/emotional trust factors need to be considered when designing interventions to improve the treatment of female faculty
Recommendations

An intervention must:

◦ Foster an understanding of each other’s roles
◦ Build trust between faculty and staff
◦ Define and engage departmental leadership
◦ Transform relationships

The ADVANCE Committee needs to determine the extent to which we will address the system, structure, and policy issues that impact the faculty–staff relationship