Abstract

The Texas A&M University ADVANCE Program proposed an initiative to engage staff in workplace climate improvement for women STEM faculty. In order to inform program design, four focus groups were conducted with STEM faculty and staff to explore the nature of their relationships. Focus group findings indicate that gender bias is present and should be addressed. However, greater influences include individual personality, faculty and staff rank, lack of knowledge of each other's roles and demands, and to a great extent - leadership tolerating bad behavior. Cultural and generational biases were also expressed.

Institutional Data: Informing Program Design for a Workplace Climate Improvement Intervention

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Focus Group Goals

1. Explore the nature of the interactions between faculty and staff
2. Identify potential viable interventions to enhance interactions between faculty and staff
3. Elicit baseline information

Qualitative Methods

Focus Groups
- 4 groups with 8-12 participants each
  - 1 male faculty group, 1 female faculty group, 2 mixed-gender staff groups

Sample
- Randomly selected faculty and staff from 39 Target Departments
  - Tenured or tenure-track faculty
  - Staff who had the greatest contact with faculty (college and department offices but not custodial, food services, wage, or student workers)

Findings

The intervention must:
- Foster an understanding of each other's roles
- Build trust between faculty and staff
- Provide tools for workplace climate improvement
- Engage departmental leadership

Conclusions

- Faculty-staff interaction is complex
- Neither faculty nor staff fully understand the other's roles and demands
- Negative actions of a few are creating the perception that bad behavior is pervasive
- Good/bad behavior is gender neutral and is embedded in staff/faculty ranks
- Gender issues are tightly coupled with inequity, hierarchy, and rankism which is a significant component of the faculty-staff relationship
- Female faculty are more likely to be treated as staff than male faculty
- Perceived gender bias may be attributable to personality, culture, or generation
- Environmental issues impact the relationship in a more overt way than gender bias
- Focus group participants overwhelmingly felt the gender bias questions were irrelevant
- Faculty aren't set up for success which impacts their relationship with staff
- Leadership sets the tone