

THE CLIMATE AT UW-MADISON: BEGINS SUNNY AND WARM, ENDS CHILLY¹

Executive Summary

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The following is a summary of the results of semi-structured interviews with nine female faculty members who left the UW-Madison and seven faculty members presently employed at the UW. The interviews were conducted on behalf of the Women in Science and Engineering Leadership Institute (WISELI), an initiative funded by the National Science Foundation³ that seeks to increase the number of women as faculty and as leaders on the UW-Madison campus. To achieve this goal, WISELI staff and the leadership team envisioned the campus as a living laboratory to promote gender equity for women in science and engineering by conducting “issue studies,” carrying out dynamic research and evaluation, and continuing and developing campus initiatives and programs. The following documents the third and final issue study funded by this grant.

Initially, sixteen interviews were conducted and the data were collected for two separate studies and purposes: 1) to identify the factors that influenced women faculty in science and engineering to leave the UW-Madison and, 2) to explore dual-career hiring experiences of university employees. It was only after the interview data from both studies were analyzed that we began to see how many of the findings were actually related. The executive summary explains the interrelated nature of these studies; the technical report⁴ explains the methodology and results for each study separately.

Cross-cutting Findings

Interviews with seven men and women who were hired at the UW-Madison with their spouses indicate that the university is doing good things to attract dual-career couples. The interviewees described how the university had been “accommodating,” “proactive,” and “helpful” overall. In these cases, each member of the couple was offered a position at the university—the ideal situation for the couple’s personal and professional needs. In all cases, the initial hire received the desired faculty position and in two cases, the “trailing” spouse went into an academic staff position.

The results from interviews with nine women faculty who left the university reveal two central themes—negative departmental climate and work-life balance issues. The women faculty consistently described specific negative incidents from their personal experience and how those

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⁴ Technical report available upon request.

incidents affected their decision to leave the UW. Further, competing and often conflicting demands between rigorous professional responsibilities and those of their families provided further justification for their decisions.

The interviews to discover why women faculty leave the university demonstrate that the issue of negative climate seems to be interwoven with the experiences of dually-hired couples. It appears from the interviews that these hires are a very attractive means for recruiting professional couples to campus. According to the results of the dual-career study, the university is successful in attracting these couples. Once the couple is here however, both individuals are not necessarily happy. Surprisingly, approximately half of the interviews with women faculty who left revealed that their husbands were not having positive experiences within their departments, which ultimately prompted both to seek positions elsewhere. In these instances, the wife made the decision to leave the university, which is of particular concern since many of these women were successfully recruited into a science or engineering department.

In summary, there appears to be a discrepancy between recruiting couples to campus and actually retaining them. This disconnect influences the decision for either or possibly both members of the couple to leave the university. In these instances, if the husband was unhappy in his department, but the wife content in hers, she ultimately made the decision to leave the university with him. The positive experiences with dual-hire recruitments seem, for some, to have been overshadowed by the spouse having a negative departmental climate experience.

Recommendations to Improve Recruitment, Retention and Overall Climate

Based on the stories of the women and the dually-hired faculty described in the subsequent technical report, several recommendations emerged. These recommendations are aimed at improving the overall experience of faculty in science and engineering departments with recruitment, retention and improving the climate for all.

Recruitment

- Make sure start-up packages include items such as space, personnel, and other resources—enough to ensure a successful beginning for a new hire.
- Honor contracts offered during recruitment efforts.
- Delineate tenure guidelines immediately.
- Make spousal hire policies transparent; document and communicate what they are and how they are implemented.
- Disseminate information regarding sick and maternity leave, tenure-clock extension, and other UW policies.
- Ensure that the “trailing” spouse is offered a position that is consistent with her/his professional and personal needs and goals.
- Encourage collaboration across departments to make spousal hires a possibility.

Retention

- Integrate new faculty into the department with deliberate strategies to address isolation.
- Offer an initial reduction in teaching loads, advising, and committee work for new hires.
- Delineate and document tenure and promotion guidelines.

- Support realistic performance expectations within varying specialties (i.e., clinical expectations in addition to grants, teaching, research, and publishing).
- Provide guidance for junior faculty in seeking grants, teaching, publishing, research, and clinical work.
- Improve departmental mentoring, both formal and informal.
- Implement strategies to decrease isolation felt among women, those doing non-mainstream research, etc.
- Invest in a new hire for their own well-being, the department's and for the university.
- Fund permanent positions for dual-career hires.
- Offer life-cycle research grants in times of personal and professional struggles.
- Create and sustain zero tolerance policies on illegal and unethical practices in departments.
- Designate an ombuds position to address dual-career and climate issues on campus.
- Develop and disseminate information about work life-family balance policies.
- Increase opportunities for networking with women scientists and other professionals.

The interviews that were conducted for two separate research studies—dual-career hiring and why women leave the UW-Madison—are more meaningful when they are described together. Separately, the two studies are just a few brushstrokes on a canvas. Together, they describe the stories and experiences of couples hired at and then leave the UW-Madison.