



Strategies for Effecting Gender Equity and Institutional Change

Strategic Intervention Brief #11

Strategies for Improving Departmental Climate

Programs to foster individual women's career success were fairly common at ADVANCE IT institutions, but efforts to address the climate and working conditions in their departments were less so. In this Brief we highlight initiatives that directly targeted departmental climate and culture. In decentralized institutions where departments have significant autonomy, policies and procedures for faculty hiring, advancement, and enabling work/life flexibility may also be strongly department-based, but these are discussed separately (see Briefs 5, 6, and 8), rather than as primarily departmental concerns. Likewise, we do not focus here on initiatives that were delivered through departments but did not target the department itself as the unit of change.

Rationale

The department is the home base for most faculty, the place where they spend most of their daily working hours. Departmental climate and conditions thus have an outsized impact on faculty job satisfaction, and faculty perceptions of these may be quite distinct from their sense of the institutional climate as a whole. Several studies suggest that collegiality and climate are particularly important to women faculty and faculty of color, thus initiatives to address climate at the departmental level may help to retain a diverse faculty (Bilimoria et al., 2006; Callister, 2006; Laursen & Rocque, 2009; Britton et al., 2012). As Britton and coauthors (2012) point out, despite differences in how various groups perceive work and contextual factors, the factors that predict satisfaction are the same across all faculty. Thus efforts to improve departmental climate benefit all faculty, not just women, and not just in STEM departments.

Purpose

Most departmentally targeted initiatives sought to enhance department climate through improved collegiality and communication. Specific issues might vary depending on the department, and indeed identifying needs and concerns was an important first step for many department-focused initiatives. For example, in some departments improved communication and greater transparency in departmental decision-making were key; in other cases, it was important to increase faculty members' understanding of each others' intellectual interests and thus everyone's sense of being valued and supported by their department.

The history of the department and the field more broadly were often important in understanding the origins of department-level dynamics. For example, generational divides might arise when differences in hiring rates over time left a gap in faculty age and career stages. Intellectual divides might emerge when disparate departments were merged or as new research methods and interests arose in a field over time. Tensions might occur when some but not all faculty had obligations to other disciplinary units or externally funded research centers. Such differences could lead to factionalism, isolation of some individuals, or discomfort and uncertainty for newer hires asked to take sides; faculty and chairs might not have all the interpersonal skills needed to manage these challenges. Department climate initiatives sought to help departments reduce conflict and find ways of working that were less emotionally demanding and more productive for everyone.

Audience

A defining characteristic of these initiatives is their targeting of the department as a whole. Some approaches involved all department members, engaging them in department-wide discussions at workshops or retreats. In other cases the main target was the department chair or head, whose skills, knowledge and leadership capacities were recognized as crucial in setting a tone and managing department operations.

Models

Four models appeared in the data from ADVANCE IT institutions. Two models placed responsibility for the nature of the initiative in departments' hands: they empowered the department to identify its own problems and propose its own solutions, but provided some support for enacting these solutions. The other two models placed more emphasis on departments implementing recommended changes identified by ADVANCE as effective for improving departmental climate. These two types of models may be viewed in the extreme as bottom-up and top-down, but in practice the differences were less stark: faculty buy-in was important for the success of any of these approaches, and guidance from ADVANCE and other institutional leaders was important in shaping the most successful approaches.

Department-initiated approaches

- *Departmental grants* offered support for departments to pursue a strategy of their own design that addressed a climate-related problem of their own choice. Commonly these were awarded in a competitive proposal process that required evidence of faculty buy-in to the project and/or their active involvement at some level. Several institutions used this approach. Awards of \$10,000-\$20,000 were large enough to motivate departments to apply and to support a project of substance.
- *Departmental consultation* was a more intensive approach that involved close work with departmental faculty to identify issues and develop and institute collaborative solutions. Departments might be invited to apply or selected based on administrators' recommendations. Often a first step was data collection to identify issues of concern through faculty surveys, interviews, or focus groups, perhaps augmented by input from chairs and deans. Using these data to identify particular climate concerns, facilitators worked with faculty to prioritize issues and devise and implement solutions, drawing upon ADVANCE for ideas and material support where needed.

Institutionally designed approaches

- *Work with department chairs or heads* targeted these leaders in their personal roles of setting a tone for departmental interactions and in their professional roles of hiring, mentoring and promoting faculty, distributing resources and making work assignments. Through workshops, retreats, panels or lunches, many institutions sought to help chairs develop the knowledge and skills to do their jobs effectively, to generate awareness of policies and procedures (e.g. work/life policies), and to inform them about ways bias can arise in evaluating job applicants or faculty candidates for promotion. Brief #4 addresses leadership development in detail, and Briefs 5 and 6 address implicit bias training including that targeted to chairs or heads. As with other forms of education and training, the use of interactive teaching approaches was important. Peer-to-peer models such as panel discussion or engaging chairs with a campus reputation for effectiveness were seen to be particularly effective.
- *"Quid pro quo"* models were used at some institutions whereby departments gained access to ADVANCE resources in return for taking part in specific activities. The departments might be self-identified but were more often recommended by administrators as benefiting from assistance. For example, the *University of Rhode Island* expected departments who had received support for a Faculty Fellow to participate in a departmental climate workshop. At *Kansas State University*,

ADVANCE-designated departments received funds they could use for faculty support and in turn took part in activities such as gender equity workshops, a review of departmental tenure and promotion procedures and documents, and a review of the departmental website.

Examples

The *University of Michigan* ADVANCE project offered Departmental Transformation grants in a range of sizes, both smaller grants for self-study and larger ones to support self-initiated projects. For example, the chemistry department used its grant to enhance faculty recruiting, mentoring and success of current women faculty, and general departmental climate. They invited women faculty to give talks, awarded travel funds to female faculty and graduate students, organized forums for junior and women faculty, supported summer salary for female faculty, and administered a departmental climate survey. The department credited its strong growth in women assistant professors (from 10% to 41% over the grant period) to these initiatives.

At the *University of Rhode Island*, department climate workshops were provided to all STEM departments using an Appreciative Inquiry framework. During the initial 3-hour workshop, faculty identified features of an excellent working environment and explored ways to achieve these features in their departments.

Departments identified their own goals, for example:

- Plan for people to get together to decrease isolation
- Create a positive and constructive review process
- Encourage active recognition
- Protect junior faculty from department politics
- Celebrate how well we do with the resources we have
- Communicate with the administration better.

During follow-up sessions, departments met for 1.5 hours to review the goals set in the first session and to develop action plans that identified specific steps, responsible persons, and timelines.

At *Utah State University* (USU), nine departments were identified through climate survey data and through the recommendations of faculty, deans and the provost, and invited to participate in a Departmental Transformation process. This process sought to help the departments become more productive by identifying and ameliorating dysfunctional behaviors that interfered with a positive work environment for all. Their approach included extensive data collection and customization:

1. The ADVANCE PI, co-PI, or an outside consultant interviewed all department members to assess climate concerns across the faculty and among subgroups.
2. The interview data were analyzed and themes from this analysis presented in a facilitated retreat.
3. As a group, department faculty drew upon the data to identify the issues they wanted to address, brainstorm solutions, set goals, and develop a plan of action.
4. The department then wrote a proposal to ADVANCE to fund its proposed initiatives and received funds to implement its proposed strategies.
5. ADVANCE leaders checked in and worked with the department as desired along the way, although the department was empowered to pursue a course of action of its own choice.

Various departments undertook actions around faculty recruiting, strengthening research support and collaboration, increasing interaction and informal networking, improving the effectiveness of department meetings, bridging generation gaps, or supporting particular women faculty. For example, one department furnished a space to enhance department members' interaction; they established a regular coffee hour and seminar series to learn more about each others' research. Members of another department were surprised to

discover through this climate review process that their habits of sports-related socializing excluded some faculty from informal exchange of useful, work-related information; in response they initiated new activities that emphasized finding common intellectual interests. In a third case, institutional leaders became aware of how bias entered the faculty hiring process and took active steps toward improvement.

The USU team reported some significant successes—confirmed by improvements in departmental climate survey data. Even in cases where the departmental consultation process was less successful, the effort drew administrators' attention to intractable problems that required administrative intervention, such as removing specific individuals from decision-making roles. Active involvement of the department head was essential. However, the USU team found this customized approach to be labor-intensive and thus unsustainable in the long run.

The *University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP)* applied a collaborative leadership model to engage department chairs in “chair chats” or focus group discussions to brainstorm ideas for how to establish a positive climate that facilitates women’s retention and promotion.

ADVANCE at the *University of Washington* emphasized developing leadership skills among its department chairs and potential future leaders. Departmental grants coupled with UW’s workshops and “chair school” offered a multi-pronged strategy for addressing departmental quality of life.

Evaluation

ADVANCE leaders reported it was difficult to directly measure the impact of department-targeted climate initiatives, yet they often cited anecdotal evidence that these efforts had positive impact on relationships, satisfaction, and interpersonal dynamics. The impact of some department-level initiatives could be tracked in numerical indicators such as hiring, but in other cases the time lag between departmental actions and opportunities to recruit or retain women faculty meant that quantitative indicators did not show rapid change.

At *Utah State University*, the project monitored outcomes that had been targeted in departments’ action plans. For example, in one department, faculty reported more interaction around the office, more participation in department meetings, and broad participation in newly instituted brown-bag seminars. In some cases, climate survey data showed improvements over time on departmental means for items such as intrinsic task motivation, perceived access to resources, reduced isolation, and satisfaction with promotion processes. In other cases, possible improvement in climate indicators at the department level was masked by general, university-wide declines in morale attributed to faculty concern about institutional budget-cutting.

At the *University of Colorado Boulder*, Department Enhancement (DE) grants were initiated in response to data identifying faculty needs for improved department collegiality and climate (Laursen & Rocque, 2009). A simple qualitative analysis of outcomes described in short reports from units awarded DE grants showed that grants targeted collegiality, mentoring, and effective departmental function and had high return on investment (Laursen, 2008). Receptions to honor grant recipients added to the grants’ symbolic importance.

Affordances and Limitations

Advantages of a focus on departments include the following:

- **High importance.** Departments are a crucial locus of faculty job satisfaction. Interventions targeted here have the potential to make a very big difference for faculty in the unit.
- **Manageable scale.** As a unit of change, the department is more amenable to interventions, and climate change may be more observable at this scale, than at the institution-wide scale. Moreover, working with a few departments at a time is a practical way to divide up a large campus or to pilot new ADVANCE initiatives with early adopters. At *Case Western Reserve University*, ADVANCE

made certain forms of faculty support available to new sets of departments each year, thus distributing this resource equitably over time without overburdening ADVANCE resources.

- **Opportunities for strategic choices.** Department-focused initiatives may seek to engage well-functioning departments who want to learn and improve their diversity track record and who can serve as models for others or may choose to address departments with known problems in need of solution.
- **Enhanced relationships.** Several ADVANCE leaders noted the importance of building helpful and collaborative relationships with department chairs, from whom they learned much and whom they drew upon as advisors, allies, and sounding boards for other ADVANCE efforts.

Limitations of department-focused climate initiatives include the following:

- **High degree of difficulty.** ADVANCE leaders who had undertaken significant work on departmental climate reported that this work was slow and required excellent interpersonal skills. It was challenging to offer feedback to departments on dysfunctional behaviors and have it be well received and taken seriously. Not all efforts at departmental change were successful.
- **Measuring impact.** Campus-wide climate surveys were often felt to be blunt instruments for measuring effectiveness at the departmental level. Response rates were not always high enough for data to be sensitive to change over time or to differences by department. Quantitative measures of women's representation may not reflect changes in department climate on the timescale of the grant.

Different models offered different affordances and limitations.

- A focus on department chairs targets individuals with high influence and important roles. Some campuses found chairs receptive to ADVANCE resources that helped them do their job, while others reported difficulty in getting chairs to attend events and participate actively. Chairs' roles may vary widely depending on campus structure and culture.
- A focus on departmental grants or consultations empowers departments to take steps they self-identify as needed. However, some departments had trouble identifying actions that would truly impact climate, proposing instead actions to help individual women. Some ADVANCE projects debated whether to support a proposal that was less than "transformational" but might build good will and provide opportunities to work further with the department. One interviewee reported that perceptions that ADVANCE "beat up on" some departments deterred other units from participating.
- The "quid pro quo" model offers departments resources to carry out specific changes that are evidence-based and that could be transformational. However, departments may resist changes that they perceive as undermining their autonomy.

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