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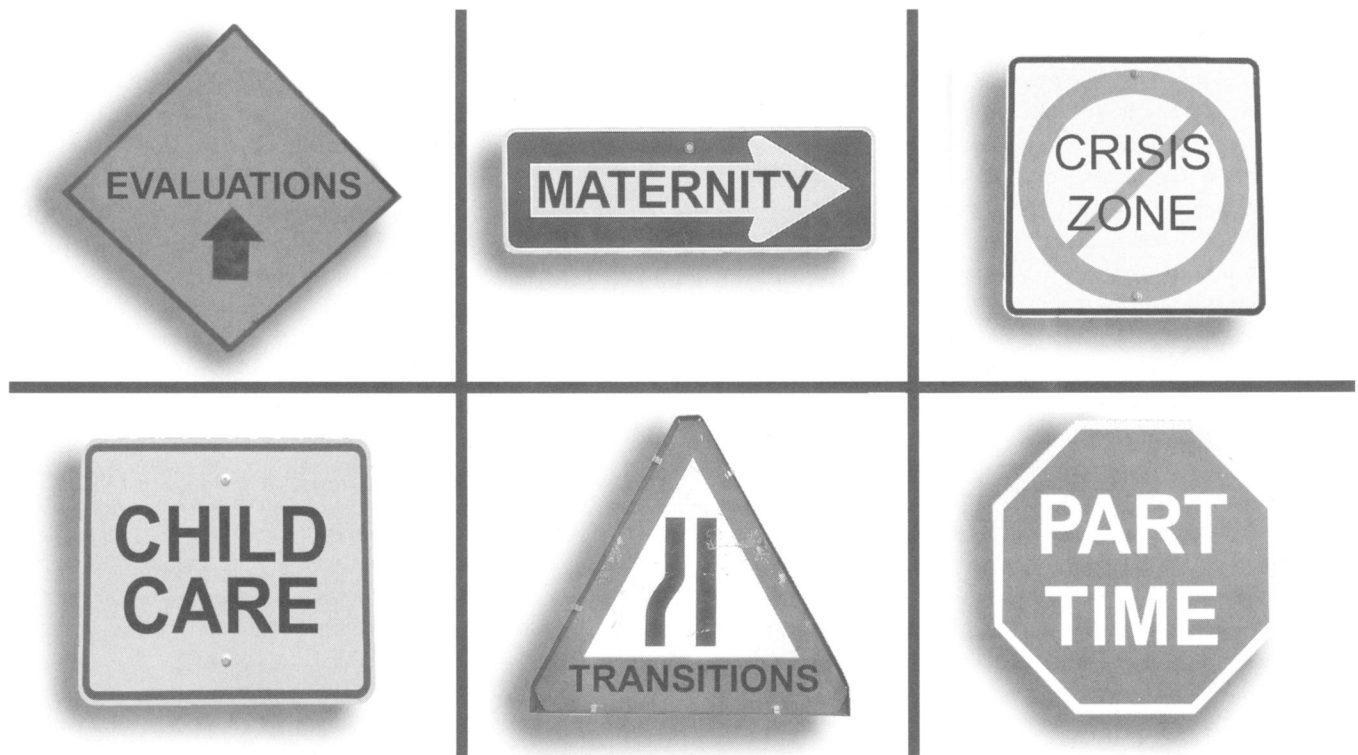


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Family-Friendly Policies and the Research University

There are plenty of pitfalls on the road to a family-friendly university climate. The commitment to a positive change must start at the top.



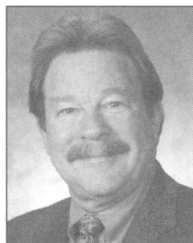
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Imagine, if you will, a major research university with family-friendly policies and practices, one that could serve as a national model for other colleges and universities. It might be expected that faculty members at such a university would be productive even amid family crises and transitions. Unfortunately, the reality of faculty lives at one such institution—the University of Washington—does not always coincide with expectations. Using the UW's experience as a case study, this article explores the difficulty of implementing family-friendly policies and practices in an academic workplace that values decentralized decision making.

Institutions of higher education nationwide have been adopting policies to help faculty members with primary caregiving roles to attain tenure, and much research has been devoted to their effectiveness. The range of policies and programs has expanded dramatically since the 1970s. Among the options now available are family leave, elder-care support, dependent-care assistance, on-site child care, tenure-clock extension, part-time tenure-track options, and support programs for faculty members with personal crises. Most family-friendly policies, however, fall within two major categories: dual-career accommodation and parental support.

The expansion of family-friendly policies has paralleled the redefinition of "family" and the entrance of more women into the workplace. "Family" now means something more than just a married man and woman and their biological offspring. Today, family responsibilities could include caring for step or foster children, elderly parents, or a domestic partner. Many universities have responded to changes in the definition of family by broadening eligibility guidelines for inclusion in employee benefits.

At the University of Washington, several constituencies, including the faculty senate and the university administration, have participated in developing policies to help faculty women and men balance the responsibilities of academic work and family life. Some of the benefits developed are specific to faculty, but many are also available to students and staff. The university unequivocally states its commitment to the policies on its Academic Human Resources Web site: "It is the goal of the University of Washington that each faculty member understands these policies and feels free to exercise them fully with no adverse effect on her or his academic career."

Nonetheless, the policies and practices that uniquely benefit faculty have been challenging to implement, and their use has been sporadic. In 2003, with funding from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and the National Science Foundation's ADVANCE program, the university initiated an in-depth examination of four policies and practices most relevant to faculty: part-time tenure-track positions, tenure-clock extensions with or without family or medical leave, "transitional support" for faculty undergoing life transitions, and dual-career hiring.

The Part-Time Tenure Track

The University of Washington has two policy options for tenure-track faculty members who want to work less than full time: a permanent part-time tenure-track option and a temporary part-time option that combines partial leave with a tenure-clock extension. Both options provide full benefits to faculty with appointments of 50 percent or more. The administration views these policy options as recruitment and retention tools.

The intent is to assist faculty in balancing academic careers with other life responsibilities.

Tenure-Clock Extension

The university does not count a year that includes six months or more of medical or family leave as a year toward mandatory tenure review. A faculty member may also request that the tenure clock be extended when he or she becomes a parent but chooses to take less than six months' leave, or when illness or other family-care responsibilities interrupt the individual's regular dedication to teaching or scholarship. The policy aims to "assist faculty women and men who become parents or are needed to care for a family member" and to provide temporary relief when a serious health condition affects a faculty member's ability to perform his or her job. Faculty members may also ask for a tenure-clock extension for work-related reasons such as a lack of lab or office space.

Family or Medical Leave

The university's family-leave policy permits faculty to request a temporary leave to care for infants, newly adopted children, or seriously ill family members. The temporary leave may be full time without pay or part time with prorated pay. Temporary leave is initially available for up to six months and is renewable after review. Full- or part-time leaves for infant care may not be extended beyond two years. Eligibility is tied to the standards of the Family and Medical Leave Act.

UW does not have a "maternity-leave" policy, but employees may use sick leave for personal medical reasons, including those related to pregnancy and childbirth. Faculty do not accrue leave, but have ninety days available to them each year for sick leave if a doctor deems leave medically necessary.

Transitional Support Program

The Transitional Support Program is administered through the university's ADVANCE Center for Institutional Change. It initially provided temporary support to faculty members in science, engineering, and mathematics who were dealing with major life transitions, but it was recently expanded to include faculty members from all departments on campus. Transitions can involve major illness, elder care, new positions or research directions, or the birth or adoption of a child. Types of support provided include funding for release time from teaching; research personnel, such as graduate students or postdoctoral assistants; and lab equipment. The program is meant to allow faculty to maintain research productivity while managing personal and professional transitions.

Dual-Career Hiring

The partners of all new University of Washington employees can take advantage of informal job-placement assistance, although placement of partners is not guaranteed. The provost's office works with hiring departments to facilitate placement of partners who seek faculty positions. In addition, an online guide directs job seekers to on- and off-campus resources, including listings for the Puget Sound area, colleges and universities, other local employers, and employment agencies. Through this informal assistance, the university acknowledges the importance of accommodating dual careers and demonstrates its competitiveness in faculty recruiting.

Issues and Challenges

As part of the university's review of faculty use of its family-friendly policies, we interviewed professors, academic department chairs, and university administrators. We found three major challenges to faculty use of the programs: (1) communication about policies and programs is inconsistent; (2) decentralized decision making at the departmental level influences how policies are implemented; and (3) inconsistent tracking and evaluation make it difficult to monitor the effectiveness of policies and programs.

Communication of institutional policies on a large, decentralized campus can be problematic. Some UW faculty members and department chairs, for example, did not know about the availability of the part-time tenure-track option. In other cases, there was awareness that a policy existed, but its details and validity were not fully understood, such as in the application of tenure extension for situations involving elder care or when no leave is taken. Sometimes, use of a policy was treated as a special accommodation rather than a legitimate academic career option.

Because most faculty learn about policies or practices from their academic departments, differences in how department chairs understand the policies lead to significant variances in their implementation. Rather than serving as facilitators to help faculty take advantage of policies and programs, department chairs often negotiate with faculty members about the conditions under which they may use them. Faculty members reported negotiating with chairs about how to provide course coverage in their absence, the amount of benefits or salary to be paid from research grants, and what to expect in terms of evaluation for promotion or tenure.

The ability to track use of policies and evaluate their effectiveness varies by policy or program. The university's Transitional Support Program requires interviews of each faculty award recipient about his or her use of the award, and it maintains records of these interviews. Tenure-clock extensions are processed through the provost's office, where records have been maintained since 2000 for all extensions granted. Tracking use of the permanent part-time policy is possible because details about appointments must be recorded in writing. When the partial family leave policy was adopted, however, no mechanism was implemented to analyze its use or effectiveness. Similarly, no formal mechanism exists to track dual-career hires or paid leave for childbirth.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on interviews with faculty members who have taken advantage of the university's family-friendly policies. We hope the recommendations will help other institutions that are developing similar policies avoid the problems encountered at UW. These recommendations have been shared with UW administrators and academic leaders, who are working to make existing policies and practices more effective.

Communicate broadly about the availability of policies. The details and importance of policies should be communicated to all faculty members, chairs, deans, and human resources administrators so that policy use will be seen as legitimate and treated as routine, and so that policies can be implemented consistently across campus.

Track use of policies. Determining the effectiveness of policies depends on tracking their use. Data should include

details about gender, faculty rank, departmental affiliation, reasons for policy use, and the effect of such use on the faculty member's career. In addition, the impact on departments—in terms of faculty workload, resources, and benefits—should be recorded.

Establish equitably reduced workloads and compensation. We recommend that a half-time faculty member be expected to teach half of the standard full-time teaching load. Similarly, the faculty member's research output should be expected to equal that of a full-time faculty member, in quality and quantity, after the extended period. Faculty receiving half of the standard salary should not be asked to perform in excess of half the standard duties.

Clarify what is expected from a part-time faculty member and how to evaluate him or her. We recommend that, once the standard for an equitably reduced workload is established, the part-time faculty member be evaluated by that standard by internal and external referees. The agreed-upon standard should be in writing and communicated to the review committee. The review committee and any external reviewers should be reminded to evaluate the totality of accomplishment, not the rate of accomplishment.

Establish routine methods to meet departmental teaching requirements. When a faculty member shifts to part-time status or uses leave, the department should have a plan to secure teaching coverage.

Specify whether teaching release is guaranteed or negotiable. When a faculty member takes leave for caregiving, he or she should know whether a teaching release is an option, or whether to expect that missed teaching will be assigned upon return.

Develop methods to remind tenure review committees of policy details. Whenever a faculty member has taken advantage of the part-time tenure track or the tenure-extension policy, the review committee and external evaluators should be reminded of university policy. The UW part-time tenure track prorates additional years to tenure review based on the full-time equivalent. Similarly, tenure-clock extensions waive years from the probationary period. Therefore, the quantity and quality of work submitted in a tenure package, after the extended period of time, should equal that of a full-time faculty member who did not work part time or stop the tenure clock.

Despite institutional commitment, faculty members and academic administrators may still resist implementing family-friendly policies, because the policies differ so much from the academic culture through which they progressed. This resistance can be directly or subtly communicated to junior faculty, who may therefore hesitate to take advantage of all of the options available to them. The University of Washington's administration brooks no such resistance. Its president and provost, working through the campus chancellors and college deans, demonstrate a formidable commitment to make the faculty employment environment family friendly. In doing so, they send the message that structures that enhance family-friendly values are absolutely consistent with excellence in teaching and scholarship. 