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The Department Chair's Role in Fostering Equity: Family-Friendly Policies

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Institutions that support faculty in addressing life concerns while they perform their faculty roles are places that will retain talented faculty. Institutions able to meet faculty where they are—working with them to create schedules, departmental norms, and evaluations that are equitable—will improve academic workforce stability.

Each faculty member has unique needs. The goal is to meet those needs *equitably* rather than being concerned about whether everyone is being treated *equally*. For example, some women or their partners need accommodations early in their pregnancy with morning sickness or preterm labor while others want to work right up until they go into labor. After the child is born, some faculty parents are fortunate to have supportive partners or family nearby to help with childcare while others do not. Department chairs need to approach each faculty member's needs with flexibility and ask what type of support they need, addressing their individual needs on a case-by-case basis.

Sometimes there is time to come up with a plan that anticipates the faculty member's needs, such as with a scheduled surgery. However, there are many scenarios when an agile response is needed for an unexpected situation and the faculty member may be unavailable for consultation, such as an unanticipated medical emergency. Chairs need to take responsibility for developing an immediate strategy for handling these situations and need to do so without compounding the faculty member's feelings of conflict or guilt. For example, it must not be the faculty member's responsibility to find a replacement instructor or find an interim mentor for a graduate student or postdoctoral fellow.

Many institutions have enacted family-friendly benefits and policies beyond Family and Medical Leave Act benefits (including intermittent FMLA). These benefits may include stop the

tenure clock, flexible scheduling, and parental leave. Unfortunately, these benefits are underutilized. For example, Drago, et al. (2005) reported that 33% of university women and 19% of men did not ask for a reduced teaching load when they needed it for family reasons for fear of negative career outcomes. Informal norms and perceived sanctions pressure faculty to avoid using the available options.

Use of family-friendly benefits can increase long-term productivity and job satisfaction for faculty. Therefore, using family-friendly benefits and scheduling needs to be normalized for all faculty. Chair support is crucial in this effort for faculty to balance work and family and has been shown to be impactful (Drago, et al., 2006). In this paper, we present ways that department chairs can support their faculty members in using family-friendly benefits to help manage their work and family demands.

How do you get started?

Chairs and Deans rarely receive information or instructions about implementing family-friendly policies. However, Chairs and Deans are vital because they can help the faculty member navigate their options based on their specific situation. Human Resources or the Provost's Office should be good sources of information to get started.

Chairs must also be able to communicate information about policies and benefits to their faculty and indicate that they support their use. It is not enough for an institution to have family-friendly policies and benefits if no one knows about them or faculty are afraid to use them.

Faculty need to understand formal university policies and how these might play out at the department level. Teaching tends to be the most pressing concern. Some options to consider include the following.

- Is there time to shift courses or the teaching load across semesters?

- Which courses could be cancelled?

- Which courses could be moved online?

- Which courses could be moved to a half-semester format? Or change the number of days per week or time of day?

- Who will teach the course(s)? If unpaid leave is used, there may be lapsed salary available that could be used to support overload or hiring a part-time instructor.

Remember that there may be major service assignments that also need to be covered and, depending on your institution type, student advising or research mentoring that must be covered. In the interest of equity, ideally additional work should not be assigned to current employees without reducing their current workload or providing additional compensation.

What should you do when a faculty member comes to you with questions about leave?

- Support your faculty.

- Do not grumble as they (and you) have every right to these benefits.

- Ask if they have spoken to someone in Human Resources. (Leaves can affect both current and future benefits.)

- Talk to them (and point them to) the institution's family-friendly policies.

- Listen to their priorities and suggest options tailored to their needs.

- Give them time to digest material, consider options, and identify their preferences.

- Make schedule changes and find replacement instructors, if needed.

Note that it is also okay to reach out to a struggling faculty member and suggest that they explore their leave benefits.

Conclusion

Department chairs play an important role in assisting faculty members when they need work accommodation to deal with their personal or family life circumstances. Helping faculty navigate their challenges can help set them up for long-term success, which will also benefit the department.

In addition to supporting faculty with family-friendly benefits, Chairs can also help create an equitable climate by supporting inclusive excellence in faculty recruitment and hiring and faculty evaluation for tenure and promotion. To learn more about these additional topics, check out our follow-up articles appearing....

References

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