





Flexibility in Faculty Careers

By Gretchen M. Bataille

Several years ago when my colleague Betsy Brown and I set out to write a book on flexibility in faculty careers, the world of higher education was a different place. The healthy economy made it possible for us to make recommendations about faculty renewal, sabbaticals, shared positions, and flexible benefits. Much has changed since then, and university presidents are struggling to ensure that students can be admitted, that faculty can be hired to teach them, and that those same faculty will receive appropriate salaries and support.



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It would be easy to shrug our shoulders and say that we just can't address the needs of our faculty in this economic climate, but I would argue that this is an important time to do so if we are to preserve a future for higher education that enables our faculty members to do what they do best—teach our students, contribute to research and creative activities, and serve the greater good.

We can be flexible by changing who we hire, what our faculty do, and how we reward them. We know that the number of tenure-track hires is decreasing and being replaced by contingency faculty. We should declare that the model of the “freeway flyer” or the “trailing spouse” is over and instead explore hiring a cadre of faculty who bring a different set of experiences to the classroom. The University of North Texas (UNT), for instance, has hired an attorney to teach estate planning in the College

of Business and an executive of a non-profit international council to teach international studies. In addition, two administrators who were hired last year asked if they could teach as part of their responsibilities because they still want to work with students. As “new” faculty, these administrators bring a unique set of experiences to the classroom that enhances the educational experience. They already are covered by insurance, have offices, and, most importantly, are receiving positive student evaluations.

In that same vein, creating opportunities for faculty to opt for positions such as “professor of the practice” or “teaching professorship” provides ways to hire those who don't

want to have a career that includes both research and teaching. Faculty who opt out of the traditional research role will teach more students, be more creative about content and assessment, and will lead the way in addressing students' different learning styles. These faculty members' “research” will be about how institutions can do a better job of addressing the changing demographics of our student population and creating content relevant to a changing world.

One Size Does Not Fit All

This kind of flexibility is essential to removing barriers to success, which often come as faculty try to balance work and life obligations. This is even more of an issue for women who are in the professoriate. Research has shown that women who complete a doctoral degree take longer than men, have more debt, and have had less satisfying teaching assignments. A recent Modern

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Language Association study showed that women who teach English and foreign languages make slow progress moving through the ranks; some often find that their progression is fraught with personal decisions about marriage and children.

UNT has joined more than 130 other universities in participating in the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) survey of junior faculty. With a 77 percent return on the surveys, we have a good sense of the changes that are necessary to support our next generation of tenured faculty. The survey results have demonstrated the need for institutions to explore shared positions; delay the tenure clock for childbirth, adoption, or caring for aging parents; offer flex-time, maternity and paternity leave, domestic partner benefits, and mentoring programs; develop opportunities for improving collegiality among untenured faculty; and offer tenure for those in less than full-time appointments.

The reality is that our faculty demographics are changing, not just because of gender or race; these days, faculty diversity is defined as much by lifestyle and career choices. As institutions, we must address individual abilities and disabilities, sexual preference, nontraditional lifestyles, varying points of view, and career plans that stray from the traditional tenure



track. No longer can we take a one-size-fits-all approach as we create policies or define our institutional culture.

Bringing About Balance

At the conclusion of our book, Dr. Brown and I determined that what all faculty want most is a satisfying balance between work and personal life. UNT's COACHE survey results convey the same

expectations. Recognizing the inherent challenges in maintaining that balance and addressing them appropriately allow an institution to recruit and retain the best scholars who will contribute to academic excellence. UNT's policies allow a tenure-track faculty member to request that up to one year be excluded from the probationary period, under certain circumstances. Such circumstances

may include the birth or adoption of a child, responsibility for managing a family member's illness or disability, serious persistent personal health issues, and the death of a parent, spouse, child, or domestic partner.

UNT's faculty applicants increasingly come as part of a couple, so we created the Dual Career/Partner Assistance Program to help ensure that that



Preparing for the Faculty of 2050 at Iowa State University

By Gregory Geoffroy



The people we serve, the people we educate, and the people we employ are at the center of Iowa State University's (ISU) strategic plan for 2011–15. As we plan to address major challenges facing our world in the coming decades—including energy and resource sustainability, human and animal

health, and food stability and safety—we recognize the need to attract and retain a high-quality faculty, as well as the need to be versatile and flexible in designing and supporting their work.

Like other universities, we are constantly recruiting the next generation of faculty; even while facing budget challenges, we have hired 30 percent of our current tenured and tenure-track faculty in the past five years. Our new faculty fit the national profile in that they are more diverse, usually have professional partners seeking career satisfaction, and value community as well as work-life balance. They also are committed to being leaders in their fields, providing a top-notch education for our students, and producing groundbreaking research. For our part, we want them to succeed at Iowa State, so we are proactive in assisting them.

With leadership from the Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost and innovations of the ISU ADVANCE Program (a National Science Foundation-funded initiative to increase the presence of women and women of color in science, technology, engineering, and math [STEM] disciplines), we are bringing diverse faculty to campus in ways that strengthen the university.

ISU's strengths lie in the interdisciplinary intersections of science, engineering, and technology, so ISU

ADVANCE has designed a "bottom-up/top-down" approach to create an optimal environment for the faculty—new and established—who are or will be leaders in their science.

Our academic departments design and manage faculty hiring, review, and promotion, but they often are constrained by precedent. In our "bottom-up" work with some of our best STEM departments, faculty have agreed to take part in "collaborative transformation"—first defining the strengths and weaknesses of their climate, practices, and priorities, then designing ways to build upon what works to improve the department. ISU ADVANCE facilitates the process and encourages other departments to follow suit.

Complementing this department-level effort is the "top-down" component that engages vice presidents, deans, department chairs, and other administrators in promoting more flexible faculty policies, accommodating the professional partners of new faculty, and collecting data in ways that will allow us to analyze how best to maintain productive and inclusive faculty communities. An October 2008 national conference ("The New Norm of Faculty Flexibility: Transforming the Culture in Science and Technology") put our campus in the center of conversations about the imperative to strengthen STEM faculty through flexible approaches to science as well as personnel. (See www.advance.iastate.edu/conference/conference.shtml.)

We know that many young scientists and engineers are opting out of the academy because they see it as an uninviting career option. ISU wants to make clear that we have a small city noted for its high quality of life, a lively campus grounded in science and technology, and an administration committed to changing as faculty change. Recognition of this need for responsiveness will serve us well in 2010, 2015, and certainly in 2050. ■

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we can successfully recruit, retain, and advance productive faculty and staff. At a minimum, we provide information on existing vacancies at UNT and within the region, but we also have policies that enable us to waive the normal search process for an existing vacancy if the partner is judged as “competitive” with other candidates.

Often, higher education focuses on hiring new faculty without paying attention to the development and needs of faculty who already are part of the institution. In many cases, there are low-cost ways to address the needs of current faculty—needs that should be addressed in any case but now may serve to retain those who have been loyal to our institutions. For instance, health insurance, retirement benefits, tuition benefits, and other benefits accorded to legal spouses and children are usually not available to the partners of gay and lesbian faculty. Extending these benefits to their families when possible within state policies can ease economic burdens and give these faculty members incentive to stay. Such benefits will add costs to already depleted budgets, but the costs of recruiting new faculty must be balanced with keeping current faculty.

Addressing the Needs of Aging Faculty

We must not overlook faculty with disabilities or those who must cut back on their workload because of life circumstances or aging. Institutions that insist on a uniform teaching load doom themselves by not taking advantage of faculty strengths. Making internal adjustments, such as implementing variable workload policies, can retain faculty and keep them doing what they do best, whether it is teaching or research. Similarly, opportunities for faculty to teach online courses or to take advantage of technology to teach and advise students can make a difference for a young mother or a faculty member with mobility issues.

At UNT, faculty can opt for a modified service appointment when they reach age 55 or when their combined years of service and age equals 80 years. Modified service allows them to reduce their workload while still serving students and the institution. There may be opportunities for many of our aging faculty to remain in a modified capacity, allowing the

institution to take advantage of their abilities while reducing costs, as their salaries are adjusted, commensurate with their workload. It is important that health benefits continue in these modified appointments, either through institutional policy or retirement plans.

Many of our most loyal faculty are seeing reductions in their retirement income funds, so institutions must explore the current array of retirement plan options

to make sure they reflect today’s economic climate. As time passes, many institutions have added more options for faculty and staff. Unfortunately, some retirement plans include higher costs for participants. When the returns were increasing, little attention was paid to these costs, but now these costs can be a burden. This is a time for human resources departments to compare costs and streamline if necessary. The UNT System, for example, is reducing its faculty retirement plan options from more

than 30 plans to just four. As a result, the system is eliminating plans with higher costs, saving employees money and reducing institutional processing time and effort.

Preserving the Future

At a time of decreasing resources, presidents must be more engaged than ever in adapting to the needs of a new generation of faculty while still addressing those of current professors. In the end, most faculty want the same things: a secure environment in which to do their research and engage in creative activity, the opportunity to teach an interested and interesting group of students, and an environment that supports their interests and lifestyle.

The economic recovery in America is as much about an educated population as it is about “cash for clunkers” or “bank bailouts.” This economic restructuring can drive us to despair or lead us to greater innovation, efficiencies, and enhanced productivity. Universities have the means and creativity to find ways to respond to the economic pressures while providing job satisfaction for our faculty. Ultimately, our purpose and obligation as universities is to teach each new generation of college students and fulfill the demands of the marketplace. ■

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