

Objective 1:
Identify the pattern
of representation of
women in STEM
disciplines

Four activities were planned to address this objective:

1. Policy & Program Review

Dr. Robin Zhang led in this area, compiling an extensive comparison of policies. Building on the matrix available from the ADVANCE Implementation Mentors Network resources, the review also included 32 benchmark institutions. A report summarized the findings and how MSU compared to the reviewed institutions.

2. Analysis of Existing Data

Dr. Maeve McCarthy led this project component, and the Murray State Office of Institutional Research and Office of Institutional Diversity, Equity, and Access were very helpful. Data is broken down to look at MSU as a whole, and also the subgroups: JCSET, STEM, SBES, and STEM plus SBES. This data can be generalized as showing that the percentage of women is generally higher in the non-tenure-track category across the board. A slight upward trend from 2013-2017 is apparent in most categories, but overall percentages are markedly lower for all the subgroups than for MSU as a whole. This data provides a good baseline to track changes moving forward.

3. Focus Group Interviews and Individual Interviews

The choice was made early in the project to use individual interviews

A strength of the project was regular meetings of the PIs with deans, upper level administrators, and chairs of STEM departments and programs. The presence of upper administration at these meetings showed support for the program. Particularly noteworthy is that MSU changed presidents during this project, and the new president also attended every one of these meetings, expressing interest in following up on survey findings about faculty wanting to leave MSU.

Open conversations at these meetings not only raised the visibility of the project and its findings but gave stakeholders not a part of the research team an opportunity for input. Comments about the meetings from participants included that they were well-organized, focused, and respected the expertise of participants. Conversations at these helped figure out ways to obtain data or approach policy changes that would be more productive. All members of the project team are very highly respected.

Objective 3:
Improve campus climate by establishing a sustainable mentoring program for women STEM faculty

Two activities contributed to this objective:

1. Peer Mentoring Circles

Due to the early funding decision, peer mentoring circles have had three cycles of implementation and refinement. After initial training provided by an external expert (Dr. Christine Grant from North Carolina State University via Google Hangouts), later mentor trainings were locally developed and implemented.

This program is in the process of being institutionalized, with scheduling handled by the faculty development center. Administration has voiced some support for the funding of the mentors, which is an important recognition of this being valued service.

2. Assessment of the Impact of the Circles

Each year, assessment of the peer mentoring circles has been conducted. The three years of data show strong positive response. The increasing positive trend may reflect some self-selection, as those for whom the groups are beneficial hear about the program.

Evaluation of whether the role of mentor and facilitator was blurred was specifically requested. Participants and mentors indicated that the line between mentor and facilitator was fairly clear. While the facilitators are respected and their opinion is valued if they choose to contribute, the groups seem to understand that they are all expected to contribute support consistent with the concept of *peer* mentoring. The circles have already served important supportive functions for some members, who have felt more confident in their actions due to the sounding board available through the circles.

Each year, the topics have been reviewed and, in some cases, updated. In discussions about the long-term functioning of such groups, a number of ideas were voiced: having folks who have been in the circles before bring a fresh resource; finding different ways to approach perennial topics such as imposter syndrome; considering whether to open peer circles to men (although there were some strong thoughts that this should be optional and would change the nature of the discussions); and whether some people would take a break from the circles and then return to participating. The circles are already being expanded beyond the original design to include more women.

Other observations

Three of the external speakers who came in to give workshops (Objective 3.2) were also members of the external advisory board, which strengthened those connections and facilitated communication.

The meetings of the internal advisory group contributed to related activities are able to move forward synergistically, rather than in ignorance or competition. For example, work by Human Resources to better publicize existing policies can proceed in consideration of survey and interview findings but also with assistance from dissemination avenues provided by grant activities, and possible revisions of policies can be discussed more comprehensively. This bodes well for the larger ADVANCE grant now underway at MSU.

Various groups on campus are also acting on survey results, such as trying out different mentoring approaches in their own areas or how to better publicize and utilize existing policies. Administration has expressed interest in further exploring or acting on some of the survey finding, particularly those about stressor and issues related to why faculty might leave MSU.

In various conversations with faculty, there was strong support for ADVANCE goals, but also frustration that progress in this area can be so slow not only at MSU, but nationwide and socially. Among the points of frustration mentioned: the slow rate of change; losing outstanding faculty because their partner cannot find employment in the area; an inability to compromise when someone is an excellent teacher and a partner of a current faculty but their research interests do not align with departmental needs; variations in negotiating power between departments in hiring; difficulty with some administrative positions where a person may not be open to new initiatives but cannot be replaced; lack of clarity on recusal and conflict of interest procedures (that can contribute to reluctance to hire or promote partners); difficulties in hiring women when a department currently has none or very few and cannot offer a salary competitive with comparable universities. There were also comments that finding time to attend seminars is difficult, but that the dissemination of reports was helpful. Overall, the tenor of my conversations during the site visit suggested that there is support for more work to hire women faculty.

The peer mentoring circles provide a venue for guidance through policies and practices that may be hard to ask about, such as maternity leave and the promotion & tenure process. They also build social networks a finding in the survey, but mentioned by participants as fostering connections some cases, have become close friends.

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