



W I S E R I

Women in Science & Engineering Leadership Institute
University of Wisconsin-Madison

CASE STUDIES FOR DISCUSSION: Hiring, Retention, and Promotion of Women Scientists

Case Study #1(Retention and Promotion): Fight or fright?

You are in your second year as an assistant professor in the job of your dreams. You are at one of the best universities in your field, you get fabulous graduate students, you teach a graduate course in your specialty, and you like most of your colleagues. You have struck up a very productive collaboration with a colleague in another department that has already started yielding exciting results. Your husband also has a perfect job at the same university and you have many friends in town. You are both eager to get tenure and make your life here permanently.

You were the first woman hired on the faculty in your department and your colleagues made a point of saying how happy they were to have a woman, especially one who was so extraordinarily qualified. They welcomed you warmly and seemed genuinely pleased that you accepted their offer.

However, you have noticed a few odd things over the last 22 months on the faculty:

- A large group of male colleagues in your department play basketball together at noon three days each week and have lunch together on the other days. They never invite you along. You have the sense that departmental decisions are being made on these outings because there often seems to be a subtext that you don't understand at faculty meetings when this group brings up ideas for discussion.
- One of your senior colleagues often comments about the way you look, complimenting your new hair cut, commenting when you wear a skirt instead of your usual slacks or jeans, and noticing when you look tired. He never talks about anything professional with you.
- In faculty meetings, you find it difficult to make yourself heard. You don't like to interrupt other people, but your chair rarely recognizes you when you raise your hand to speak. When you do speak, senior men often interrupt you and sound as if they didn't even hear you speaking. Sometimes your ideas will be ignored and then an hour later, one of the senior men will say the same thing and heads will start nodding and people murmur, "Great idea....let's go with that."
- The chair of your tenure committee asked you if you and your husband are planning a family.

- The women graduate students in the department have flocked to you for advising. Some want advice about how to handle their advisors, one thinks she is being sexually harassed by another member of her lab and wants to know what to do, many want career advice, and in the last month alone, five women graduate students and postdocs have asked you about how to combine family and science. You are eager to help these bright young women make their way in science, but it is beginning to eat up your time. When you tried to discuss this with your department chair, he smiled and said, “Get used to faculty life – we all advise students.”
- You find out that your department head nominated the new assistant professor, hired a year after you, for the university’s prestigious “O.N. Mitchison Outstanding Junior Faculty Award,” which comes with five years of support for a postdoc. You find this odd because the new assistant professor was nominated based on work he did as a postdoc, and your lab already has independent results. In fact, you just published a paper in *Science* that received a lot of good press, which you think would make you a good candidate for the award. But when you ask your department head why your recent discovery didn’t qualify you for the Mitchison nomination, he said that since the work was collaborative with your colleague in another department, no one really knew what your contribution was and he didn’t think your nomination packet would be competitive.
- You begin to wonder about fairness, so you look at the salaries in the department and find that the new assistant professor was hired at a salary \$10,000 higher than yours. You have been told that the single biggest determinant of salary throughout a faculty member’s career at this university is starting salary, so this seems unfair in the short term and potentially grotesquely inequitable in the long term.

What should you do? On the one hand, all of this seems trivial because you love your job and things are going wonderfully in your lab. On the other hand, you worry that you are not being treated fairly and wonder if your tenure decision will be fair.

Facilitator Questions:

(Note to facilitators – be aware of the tendency for young people is to say that a case like this is exaggerated or unusual. Don’t let them believe that. This case is based on interviews with dozens of women and is an accurate representation of what seems to be a common experience of junior women faculty.)

1. Ask discussants to identify behaviors that are inappropriate or unfair.
2. What is the risk of addressing these behaviors?
3. What is the risk of not addressing these behaviors?
4. Who should you approach?
5. Should you deal with all of these issues? If not, which are the most important?
6. Are your colleagues bad, mean, or ill-intentioned?
7. How can you protect yourself against possible unfairness in your tenure decision?

Case Study #2 (Hiring): A pregnant technician?

You have just received your first NIH grant and you need to start producing results. You decide to hire a technician, so you place an ad in Science and in your local job listings and you receive a pile of applications. You settle on two candidates as being the best fit for the job. One, Sarah, worked as an undergraduate in the lab where you were a postdoc and you know her work. She is excellent. The second, Jeff, you have never met, but his recommendations are outstanding. Although he has research experience, it is not quite in your area, but you expect that you will be able to train him quickly in your lab's techniques. You interview both candidates and you like them both – they seem like conscientious, smart, energetic scientists. Everyone in your group liked them, although they were able to talk more about their science with Sarah because she had worked on a project that was closely related to theirs. You think that either candidate would be great, although Sarah could probably hit the ground running and Jeff would take some time to get going. However, at the interview, from looking at Sarah, you realize that she is pregnant (she looks to you like she is about five months along) and you are concerned that she will need time off and you can't afford it; you need to be productive if you are to achieve tenure and renew your grant. So you decide to hire Jeff.

Facilitator questions:

1. Who would you have hired? Why?
2. Are you making any assumptions about Sarah (that she is pregnant, that she will take time off)?
3. Are you making any assumptions about Jeff (that his wife is not pregnant, that he won't take time off)? (Imagine that you hire Jeff and he announces that his wife is going to have a baby in a few months but can't get any time off from work, so he wants to work half-time for a few months to take care of the baby. How would you feel?)
4. Are you being fair?
5. What is your responsibility to provide a workplace in which people can be scientists and have families?
6. Are there benefits for everyone in the lab and for productivity to providing flexibility and supporting the rights of employees to have family lives? (Some benefits might include building long-term relationships and employee loyalty.)
7. What is the responsibility of your university? What could your university do to make it easier for you and your employees to combine family and science?