

Converting Academic Staff to the Tenure-Track at the UW-Madison: A Viable Strategy?

The ADVANCE program at UW-Madison proposed to study the impact and feasibility of moving outstanding non-tenure line researchers into faculty positions. We thought that we could increase the number of women faculty in many departments simply by converting academic staff positions to faculty positions for women who wish to expand their roles. A number of women on our campus who hold academic staff titles pursue independent research and have teaching reputations and credentials equivalent to those in faculty positions. Many of these women entered science at a time when nepotism rules, prejudices, or their own life choices prevented them from entering tenure-line faculty positions. In the present era, a number of these women might have become faculty members through dual career recruitments. At the time of proposal preparation, a number of high-level campus administrators agreed to an exploratory study of the development of a program that would offer faculty appointments to selected non-tenure line women in science and engineering. We intended to establish a working group, including representatives from the Academic Staff Council and administration, to determine the number of possible track switches and identify administrative, financial, and attitudinal barriers to accomplishing conversions. If such a program would have a positive impact, then we would work with campus administration to develop a systematic process for such track conversion.

That was the plan. The reality was that these kinds of track conversions are not simple, straightforward, nor can they be accomplished in bulk; rather, they are individual, idiosyncratic, time-consuming, and ultimately not an effective way to quickly increase the numbers of women on the biological and physical science faculty. Since 2002, WISELI co-Directors have spent considerable time and personal energy on six individual women who wanted to make a switch from their current non-tenure-track position to a tenure-track faculty position. Of the six, two have been successful, three have been unsuccessful, and one is in process.

What we have learned:

1. We have been most successful with clinical faculty. At UW-Madison, there is a group of academic staff who, within their Schools, are considered “faculty” even while considered academic staff to the rest of the University outside of these Schools. We have found that they have often been advised that “it doesn’t matter” which track you are on because within the School all are considered “faculty.” But it *does* matter—tenure-track faculty have tenure and voting rights; other “faculty” do not. Willing clinical faculty who would like to make the switch have very often been successful, partly because they are already seen as “faculty” within these schools.
2. The lowest success rate has been with “teaching” academic staff; those who would apply for tenure with a teaching record rather than research record. These cases have been decidedly unsuccessful. In general at UW-Madison, going for

- tenure as a teaching case is difficult; to make the switch from academic staff to a tenured position in this situation seems to be practically impossible.
3. One of the biggest obstacles is convincing the tenured faculty in a department to see an academic staff member as a colleague, rather than as “just staff.” We have not yet found a solution to this problem.
 4. As one case was moving towards an eventually unsuccessful vote, we were able to obtain a commitment from the Graduate School and the Provost to treat a tenure-track conversion case as any new hire so that an adequate startup package would be provided in such cases. To date, we have never had the opportunity to test the veracity of that promise.

Next steps:

1. We will continue to pursue conversions whenever a promising candidate emerges (including the still-pending case.)
2. Conduct an “issue study” on this project, with in-depth interviews of the women who attempted track conversions (both successfully and unsuccessfully) to document commonalities in the processes. From this report, a “roadmap” to conversion will be developed with advice and process suggestions.

Ultimately, this is an example of an initiative that did not live up to its promise.