

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Results of the 2006-2007 Study of Faculty Attrition at UW-Madison

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BACKGROUND

In the spring semester of 2007, Vice Provost Laurie Beth Clark approached the WISELI staff about conducting a research study of faculty attrition at UW-Madison. This request came on the heels of a report disseminated in 2006 about why female faculty in scientific and engineering fields leave campus.ⁱ Using similar methodology, the following describes a study of both female and male faculty members from across campus who left between the fall of 2006 and summer of 2007.

METHODOLOGY

The names of 48 faculty members who left UW-Madison between 9/1/06 and 8/31/07 were provided to me in the fall of 2007. From these names, 42 former faculty were eligibleⁱⁱ for participation in the study; contact information was found for 35 of them. An email invitation, which described the study and included a link to the Provost's memo about the study,ⁱⁱⁱ was sent to 31 former faculty members; mailed invitations were sent to the other four faculty. From these invitations 16 individuals agreed to be interviewed for a participation rate of 46%.

Each participant was sent or emailed an Informed Consent^{iv} form that they signed and returned. I conducted all interviews between November 19, 2007 and February 14, 2008 using a standardized interview protocol.^v All participants agreed to be audiotaped. The taped interviews were transcribed, resulting in an electronic version of the text, which was inserted into ATLAS.ti—a software program used to organize, sort and code qualitative data. The interview data was then analyzed using traditional qualitative methods—portions of the text were coded, aggregated, and summarized into overarching themes. I also mapped out each individual's path at UW-Madison and noted the reasons why they left, weighting these reasons based on their relative importance to each interviewee (e.g., primary reason, secondary reason). This process of investigation allowed me to identify crucial themes and underlying areas of concern in faculty's decisions to leave.

FINDINGS

It is impossible to capture all that was discussed in the approximately twelve hours spent with the faculty participants and the corresponding analyses of the data. Not surprisingly, each participant's situation was different, yet a number of themes emerged to provide a greater understanding of the factors that affect faculty members' decisions to leave UW-Madison. Once identified, the themes were categorized and weighted based on whether they were primary reasons or secondary factors for the participants. Underlying categories were used to explicate the overarching themes. From this process, the following emerged as critical areas of concern:

- **Issues with Research and Tenure, as reflected in**
 - Research not Supported or Understood
 - Positions Misaligned with Tenure Criteria
 - Ineffective Mentoring

- **Economic Issues, as reflected in**
 - The Financial Relationship between the State and the University
 - Effects on Faculty, Staff and Students
 - Lack of Raises and Salary Compression

- **University and Departmental Climate Issues, as reflected in**
 - Experiencing Discrimination, Harassment and other Behaviors
 - Lack of Recognition and Overall Morale
- **Balancing Professional and Personal Lives, as reflected in**
 - Respecting the Needs of Family
 - Consideration of the Faculty Lifestyle

RECOMMENDATIONS

Not every faculty member felt that 100% retention should be the goal of UW-Madison administration. Four of the sixteen participants (25%) described how the perfect combination of opportunity and dissatisfaction caused them to leave, and had no regrets about doing so. The other twelve cited a myriad of personal and professional circumstances that led to their attrition. Despite any individual differences seen among these faculty members, general suggestions from the participants themselves are essential for a dialogue about changing the traditions, practices and policies at the UW-Madison to retain a greater number of faculty members.

- **Provide Assistant Professors with an environment that encourages them and leads to their success.**
 - Delineate the criteria by which Assistant Professors will be evaluated for tenure.
 - Make sure that new faculty's job positions are aligned with the criteria that will be used to evaluate them, especially when given responsibilities outside the norm or when they have joint appointments/departments.
 - Ensure that new faculty's research agenda at the time of hire will lead to tenure.
 - Provide new faculty with mentors and committees that are going to enhance their progress, not impede it.
 - Decrease their teaching and service responsibilities as a means to jumpstart and sustain their research progress at critical points in their pre-tenure years.
 - Communicate with divisional committees about cutting-edge research, methodologies, and areas of study to inform members of changes and growth in disciplines.
- **Provide Associate and Full Professors with an environment that encourages their retention and success.**
 - Develop and put into practice creative incentives to support faculty, such as: nominating faculty for awards, providing course buy-outs, providing extra TA or RA support during critical times, recognizing them publicly, allowing them a sabbatical leave, decreasing service or other departmental responsibilities.
 - Provide raises to ensure salary equity within departments and as a preventive attrition measure.
 - Treat faculty work equally, despite differences in research, teaching, service and outreach/extension responsibilities.
 - Highlight the local, national, and international success of faculty.

- **Address University and Department Climate Issues**
 - Ensure that sexual harassment and discrimination are handled appropriately and quickly. Provide a safe environment for the victims.
 - Understand the essential role that department chairs play in creating successful environments for faculty. Ensure that department chairs are capable of performing this critical position and are effective once in the position.

- **Understand the Important Need for Balance in the Professional and Personal Lives of Faculty**
 - Create and communicate dual-career programs that are available to new and continuing faculty.
 - Identify conventions, practices and policies that privilege traditional family norms and values within the University or departments. Ensure that no faculty members are isolated or excluded due to these practices.

Fourteen of the participants in this study knew they were unhappy or were considering leaving for at least a year before doing so. On average, the length between consideration and leaving was 2.35 years with a range from one to four years. The individuals who agreed to participate hoped that their stories would initiate change and perhaps help faculty who are considering leaving. The recommendations above could easily be implemented during any of those critical years for current or future faculty who are considering an exodus, which is what the participants hope for.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ O'Connell, K., Pribbenow, C.M., & Benting, D. (2006). *The climate at the University of Wisconsin – Madison: Begins sunny and warm, ends chilly*. Madison, WI: The Women in Science and Engineering Leadership Institute.

ⁱⁱ Six faculty were not contacted at the request of the Provost's office.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.provost.wisc.edu/memos/exit.html>

^{iv} This study was approved by the Social & Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board, **SE-2007-0242**.

^v Interview protocol found here: http://www.provost.wisc.edu/docs/fac_exit_attach.pdf