



## **The Impact of Work/Life Balance Policies on Faculty Careers**

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# The Impact of Work/Life Balance Policies on Faculty Careers

## Abstract

Even though the number of doctorate degrees awarded to women in recent years has increased, the gender gap among tenured and tenure-track faculty has persisted.<sup>1</sup> This gender gap is even wider in disciplines such as engineering. In 2012, women earned just 22.6% of the 8,110 doctorate degrees awarded in engineering.<sup>2</sup> During this same year, women comprised 14% of tenured and tenure-track engineering faculty in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Research indicates that gender gaps are in part due to institutional climates, including gender inequality and discrimination<sup>4</sup>, gender bias<sup>5</sup>, and unconscious bias<sup>6,7</sup> that impact the professional success of women faculty.<sup>8</sup> Other factors such as marital status and parenting young children provide possible explanations for the gender gap in tenure-track promotion.<sup>1,9</sup> Research institutions in particular have competitive environments that demand long work hours to meet publishing, entrepreneurial and instructional requirements. These work intensive environments lead to a less work-family friendly atmosphere<sup>8</sup> that often supersedes institutional gender-neutral work-life balance policies and may result in penalties when such policies are used by faculty.<sup>10</sup> In addition, department chairs and colleagues may not perceive family care giving as valuable experiences and believe that these responsibilities only affect women faculty.<sup>8</sup>

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of work-life balance policy perceptions on faculty members' careers across disciplines at a Southeastern research university classified as a very high research activity institution. Using a mixed methods approach, the study draws from institutional records, survey data, and faculty interviews. This paper focuses on the qualitative data. Findings reveal that the work-life policies have challenged some of the gender biases and gender inequality that existed in the institutional culture, and have resulted in faculty members valuing the work-life policies and recommending that other faculty members take advantage of them. Nonetheless, there continue to be gender differences in family formation and career progression within the institution. Initial findings from this study have implications in the development of institutional policies and the study of faculty career progression and job satisfaction.

## Introduction

Even though the number of doctorate degrees awarded to women in recent years has increased, the gender gap has been slow to decrease among tenured and tenure-track faculty.<sup>1</sup> This gender gap is even wider in the discipline of engineering. In 2012, women earned just 22.6% of the 8,110 doctorate degrees awarded in engineering.<sup>2</sup> During 2013, a total of 10,764 doctoral degrees were awarded in engineering, of which 22.4% were earned by women, and women comprised 14.5% of tenured and tenure-track engineering faculty.<sup>3</sup>

Previous research indicates that gender gaps are in part due to institutional climate factors including gender inequality and discrimination,<sup>4</sup> gender bias,<sup>5</sup> and unconscious bias,<sup>6,7</sup> that impact the professional success and family formation of women faculty.<sup>8</sup> Other factors such as marital status and parenting young children provide possible explanations to the gender gap in tenure-track promotion.<sup>1,9</sup> Research institutions in particular have competitive environments that demand long work hours to meet publishing, entrepreneurial, and instructional requirements.

These work intensive environments lead to less work-family friendly atmospheres<sup>8</sup> that often supersede institutional gender-neutral work-life balance policies and may result in salary penalties when such policies are used by faculty.<sup>10</sup> In addition, department chairs and colleagues may not perceive family care giving as valuable experiences and believe that these responsibilities only highly affect women faculty.<sup>8</sup>

Within the last 10 years, many universities nationwide have adopted work-life policies as a means to address the gender gaps among faculty. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of work-life balance policy perceptions on faculty members' careers across disciplines. Specifically, we examined perceptions of work-life policies for gender-neutrality, inclusion of all faculty members, how well the policies addressed faculty members' needs, the amount of support given for the use of the policies, and the effect of policy use on faculty careers. Understanding how these perceptions impact the use of work-life policies and their impact on faculty careers will inform the further development of institutional policies.

## Background

The National Science Foundation began their ADVANCE program in 2001. Between 2001 and 2014, NSF awarded 297 grants to 199 institutions.

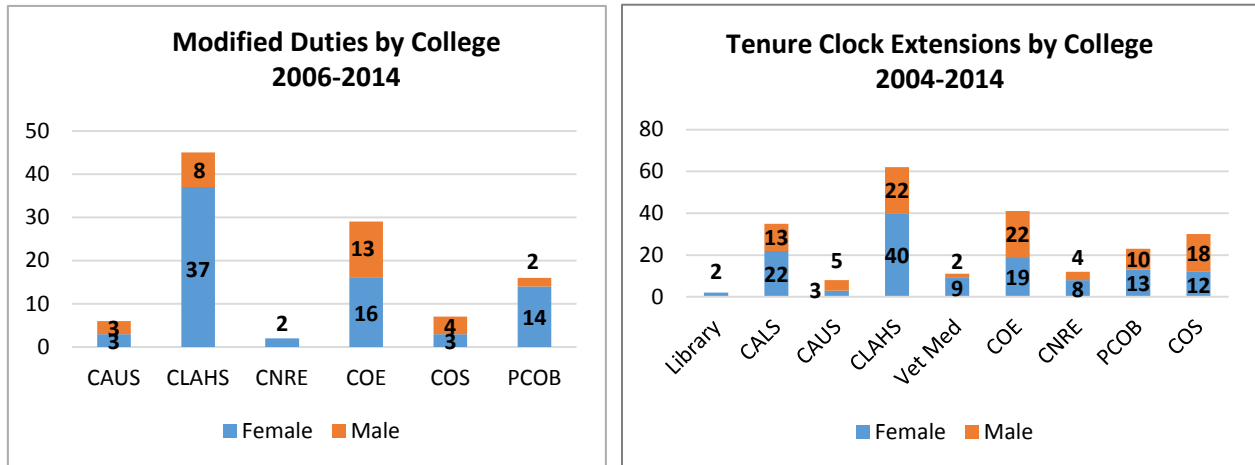
*“The goals of the ADVANCE program are (1) to develop systemic approaches to increase the representation and advancement of women in academic STEM careers; (2) to develop innovative and sustainable ways to promote gender equity in the STEM academic workforce; and (3) to contribute to the development of a more diverse science and engineering workforce. ADVANCE also has as its goal to contribute to and inform the general knowledge base on gender equity in the academic STEM disciplines.”*<sup>11</sup>

NSF has established several tracks for accomplishing these goals, one of which is the Institutional Transformation (IT) track. The IT track is designed to support comprehensive transformation at a large-scale to accomplish gender equity for academic STEM.<sup>11</sup>

This study took place at a research university in the southeastern United States, classified as a very high research activity institution. In 2003, the university received an IT grant from NSF to address gender equity in academic science and engineering careers. The institution has since implemented a number of work-life balance policies university-wide and across all disciplines. The study focuses on the modified duties and extending the tenure clock work-life policies. The modified duties policy changes a faculty member's workload and allows for a flexible schedule during a specific time period. The tenure clock extension policy extends the tenure clock by one year. Both policies are granted in response to life changing events (e.g., childbirth, illness, etc.).

A total of 105 individuals used modified duties between 2006 and 2014. The majority of faculty members who used the modified duties during these years were from the colleges of liberal arts and human sciences (CLAHS), engineering (COE), and business (PCOB) (see graph below). Faculty members in the colleges of architecture (CAUS), science (COS), and natural resources and environment (CNRE) had lower use of these policies. Overall, more female faculty (n=75) used the modified duties policy than male faculty (n=30).

Between 2004 and 2014, 224 individuals extended the tenure clock. The majority of faculty members who used this policy represented CLAHS, COE, COS, PCOB, and the college of agriculture and life sciences (CALs) (see graph below). Faculty members at the library, CAUS, veterinary medicine, and CNRE were less likely to use this policy. Of faculty members who extended the tenure clock, 128 were female and 96 male.



## Methodology

This paper reports on part of a larger study conducted through the institution’s provost office to assess the impact that work-life policies have on faculty careers. An assistant provost served as principal investigator with graduate students as co-investigators. The principal investigator had access to university records that identified faculty members who had used the tenure clock extension and modified duties policies between 2006 and 2013. The study was designed as a mixed methods study, drawing from survey data and faculty interviews. However, the survey data presented limited results so this paper focuses on analysis of the qualitative data.

### Survey

A total of 168 faculty members who had been identified through university records and had used the tenure clock extension and/or modified duties policies between 2006 and 2013 were invited to participate in an online survey. We received a 38% response rate (n=64). Respondents either used tenure clock extension (n=37), modified duties (n=14), or both policies (n=11) within the time frame of the study. Survey respondents were 37.5% male (n=24) and 62.5% female (n=40). There was representation across all ranks (25 assistant professors, 35 associate professors, and 4 professors). Respondents included faculty in the colleges of engineering (n=15), business (n=4), science (n=7), agriculture and life sciences (n=9), liberal arts and human sciences (n=20), and veterinary medicine (n=3).

### Interviews

A subset of faculty members who completed the survey (n=6) was purposefully selected for interviews. Purposeful sampling refers to the sampling technique in which participants are not randomly selected, but are rather selected by the researcher for specific reasons that will best

help the researcher understand the problem and research question.<sup>12</sup> Faculty members were purposefully selected to include both men and women who represent various colleges across the institution. Of the six faculty members interviewed, three were men and three were women. All faculty members interviewed were tenured and married. Participants represented the colleges of engineering, business, science, agriculture and life sciences, liberal arts and human sciences, and veterinary medicine. Department heads (n=4) and promotion & tenure committee members (n=3) who had experience working with the policies were also interviewed for the study.

### *Data Sources*

Data sources for this study included respondents' responses to the open-ended survey question "In what ways could [the university] make the work/life policies more effective?" and data from one-on-one, semi-structured interviews<sup>12</sup> lasting 25 minutes or more. The interviews were conducted by co-investigators and focused on the experiences of faculty members with the tenure clock extension and modified duties policies. Interview questions examined the experiences of faculty, institutional and departmental support in using the policies, challenges and advantage of the policies, faculty members' ability to balance their work and home roles, and recommendations for improving the polices. Upon completing the interviews, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant.

### *Data Analysis*

Data was collected and analyzed for the survey item and the interviews. First, responses to the single survey item were coded and organized into themes by one of the researchers. Second, each researcher transcribed and completed line-by-line coding for all of the interviews he/she conducted. A total of three iterations were completed. During the first iteration, a provisional "start list" of codes that was based on literature reviewed served as a guiding foundation, but as the inductive nature of coding allowed, new codes emerged.<sup>13</sup> Codes were grouped into categories during the second iteration. Finally, in the third iteration all transcript codes were organized into themes using participants' words.<sup>14</sup> Codes and themes were mapped<sup>15</sup> to ensure transparency. Narrative components were used<sup>16</sup> to develop a shared narrative that was representative of all 13 participants. The researchers triangulated the interview data with other data sources (e.g., previous institutional climate surveys) in the institution to establish trustworthiness of the findings.

### *Findings*

Findings are presented in two parts. The first part focuses on the themes that surfaced from the survey item and the second part discusses themes identified from the interviews with faculty members, department heads, and P&T committee members.

#### *Part One*

When respondents were asked "In what ways could [the university] make the work/life policies more effective?" four themes emerged in their responses: Childcare, Training, Extending the Policies, and Campus Culture.

### *Childcare*

The most frequently mentioned area for improvement was the need for more daycare facilities. Respondents suggested the university provide more daycare facilities closer to campus or on-campus. This would make the facilities more accessible. Others mentioned reinstating a work-life listserv that identified babysitting services.

### *Training*

Respondents also suggested that more training be given to department heads about the existence of the policies and their use. Responses on this topic demonstrated that policies are not being uniformly used across campus. Some department heads are not as supportive of their faculty members using these policies. In addition, some of the respondents who had used modified duties found that all the work that had been reduced during the semester of using the policy was later added to their workload the following semester.

### *Extending the Policies*

Some respondents felt that these two work-life policies are not inclusive of some family life situations. Suggestions included receiving the same amount of leave and having flexibility for how soon this leave can be taken when adopting a child. Participants also asked for the university to include visiting professors in the modified duties policy. Other respondents suggested that the university have a matching service for faculty members who required dependent care. Several participants explained that the cycle of the policies sometimes reduces the amount of time faculty members can actually use the policies depending on the timing of the qualifying event or when they file the paperwork (e.g., less than 12 months for the tenure clock extension).

### *Campus Culture*

Several participants also commented on the need to change the perceptions of the policies. They identified a need to promote a culture across campus that values work-life policies and the need to achieve this by having strong and visible leadership. Some respondents expressed that they did not feel that the modified duties policy within their departments was being applied equally to male and female faculty. Others recommended that modified duties be applied to both parents if the two of them were employees of the university.

## Part Two

Findings from interviews reveal that these work-life policies have challenged some of the gender biases and gender inequality that existed in the institutional culture, and have resulted in faculty members valuing the work-life policies and recommending that other faculty members take advantage of them. Nonetheless, there continue to be gender differences in family formation and career progression within the institution. Themes that emerged from the interviews with participants included: Changing the work culture, Gendering policies, Work-life policies do not impact tenure review, and Changing gender roles and home responsibilities. These themes are presented in narrative form in this section.

## *Changing the Work Culture*

In 2006 the university made extending the tenure clock automatically approved for male and female tenure-track faculty members in the event of birth or adoption of a child. This changed the culture of the institution, making the policies more transparent and accessible by eliminating the requirement for department head approval. Ana, a department head, explained that “[the policies] are administered in a very sort of straight forward way that creates a good climate.” The new institutional culture has created an expectation among faculty members for the policies to be offered and reduced hesitation to use the policies: “No, I don’t think [faculty members] hesitated at all, I think they expected it given the way it was positioned to them [by the institution]” (John, department head). Faculty members feel that they are supported by the institution: “[a]ssistant professors can talk with the senior faculty members about work-life issues and get recommendations, especially from those who have used the policies, in addition to talking to the department chair” (Karen, faculty member). In some departments the policies have not resulted in a complete cultural transformation, but have initiated discussions. Cynthia, a faculty member, shared how within her department it has challenged the culture of work “I think [the policies have] helped raise awareness...to talk about it probably a little bit more in the department and so I still believe there is stigma there that if you are not available to work 24 hours a day, there is still a little thing in there.”

The policies have also increased equity among men and women faculty members. One participant stated that “[making extending the tenure clock automatic] basically said “it’s yours and take it.” I think particularly for men that was a key moment because I think very few men would claim a childbirth as a legitimate work-life up to that point” (Timothy, faculty member). Overall faculty members felt that the institution was being gender neutral and “ha[d] done a very good job of highlighting that men can do extended duties as well as women” (Nancy, faculty member). Faculty members felt that the institution was acknowledging their work-life needs regardless of gender: “I think there is high expectations for performance, but I think there is also a recognition that you need to spend the time that you need to, to care for your family” (Matthew, faculty member).

## *Gendering Policies*

As participants discussed the advances the policies have made, they also described some of the gender bias that remains in the implementation process. Donna, a faculty member, discussed how some department heads believe that the policies are geared for women and “they seem more willing to help women than they are to help men.” The perception is that men do not need to make use of such policies. Chris, a faculty member, explained that women sometimes also do this themselves and create groups that exclude men to discuss work-life policy issues. “If there really is a just cause that needs to be forwarded, and the women are trying to spearhead that they are missing half of the assistance in making that case” (Chris). Such exclusion can lead to faculty members misinterpreting the policies and assuming that the few using it are “getting special treatment” (Nancy, faculty member). To change this gender bias, Ronald, a department head, explains that men and women both have to use the policies, “I really encourage men and women to use those policies ...women shouldn’t have all the burden to do all the childcare and we can help with that with this policy too.”

### *Work-Life Policies do not Impact Tenure Review*

Promotion and tenure committee members discussed how tenure reviews of individuals are not questioned if there was a tenure clock extension because the policies are widely accepted and valued. “I think it’s pretty well accepted that this is the way it works, if you don’t like it too bad. You know people can have their own opinions but I think if they had those opinions they would have kept it to themselves” (Peter). Martha also explains that the policies are not an issue or even discussed: “the committee members came across to me as not holding it against anyone. It was stated as a fact, this person had another year...It was just a non-issue.” External reviewers are informed that a candidate has received an extension to his /her tenure probationary period and asked to evaluate the faculty member’s record as if it had been accumulated during the normal six-year probationary period. Simon (department head) stated “we ask the external reviewers to just give their scientific evaluation of how the person is contributing to the field. We don’t ask them to look at how long they’ve been in process.”

### *Changing Gender Roles and Home Responsibilities*

For some faculty members, knowing they had more flexibility at work as a result of the work-life policies allowed them to better enjoy their family. Donna, a faculty member who is married to another faculty member, felt that the policies allowed them to redistribute the home responsibilities: “[the work-life policies were] a great help for him and me too, going from one to two kids, having a small baby, he could take more of the burden. It was so helpful.” Chris, another faculty member, explains that he and his spouse decided he should use the tenure clock extension policy “we extended the clock so that I can be more present [at home].” Overall, faculty members felt that the policies alleviated some of the stress and anxiety of having to balance work and family and allowed them to be more involved at home. “I think there is always a little pressure to perform and do the work that is expected, but knowing that I had that year made it a little easier when my daughter was young to be able to feel like, you know what, it’ll be okay” (Matthew, faculty member).

### Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore the effect of work-life balance policy perceptions on faculty members’ careers. A multilayer narrative emerged depicting the various climates within the institution, each containing different faculty members’ perceptions of the work-life policies. Participants had mixed perceptions about the way work-life policies were implemented and promoted throughout campus.

Although some of these policies have existed at the university for about 10 years, the institution must continue efforts to transform the campus culture in a variety of ways. First, there is a need to continue making the policies more widely accepted and increase consistency in the implementation. Second, these policies have to become more inclusive of the university’s faculty members’ various family situations. In other words, the policies have to continue evolving to reflect faculty’s needs and the type of campus climate that is being promoted around work-life balance.

Simultaneously, while the work-life policies have helped progress towards establishing more of a gender-neutral climate, there continues to be some bias in the institutional culture that prevents



faculty members from feeling fully supported. For some participants, the institution had done a great job in making the policies gender-neutral, allowing faculty members to not feel so stressed at work and be more involved at home. Other participants felt that more effort needed be put forth to ensure that men were also using the policies to eliminate any stigmas. Department heads and promotion and tenure committee members interviewed were supportive of the use of the policies because they felt that these challenged the patriarchal structure. However, not all faculty members surveyed felt that their department heads were knowledgeable or supportive enough about the use of these policies.

More importantly, it is imperative to continue assessing the impact and perceptions of the work-life policies. At this institution, the policies have positively impacted career progression for most faculty who have used them, including underrepresented faculty. Faculty members often expressed that without their use of the policies, obtaining tenure would have been much harder to accomplish. Therefore it becomes important to ensure that university-wide perceptions about the use of these policies are consistently positive and supportive.

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