

Improving the Status of Women in the Academy

by Michele V. Gee and Sue Margaret Norton

While women have always faced gender inequities in the general workplace, the academic world has traditionally prided itself on equality and transparency. Sadly, despite substantial gains in the number of doctorates awarded to women and in their employment in academic institutions, there is still much room for improvement in the academy. The purpose of this paper is to articulate some of the challenges impeding women's progress in higher education, and to identify some best practices for recruiting and retaining women faculty, thus helping maximize their success and career satisfaction.

Women now comprise more than half of the population of undergraduate students and earn nearly half of the terminal degrees awarded in the U.S.¹ Ideally, such numbers should bode well for women in higher education. If they are earning more of the degrees, then more of them may potentially pursue graduate degrees. And, if there are more women in graduate school, then there will be more women in the pool of potential tenure-track faculty. And, if there are more women on the tenure track, there will be more women who earn tenure. Finally, if there are more women who earn tenure, there will be a larger pool of women who can potentially earn rank of full professor.

For the last two decades, colleges and universities have instituted policies aimed at recruiting and retaining female faculty.² Such policies have included stopping the tenure clock for child-bearing, establishing dual-career programs for couples, conducting sensitivity training, assigning mentors, and attempting to minimize service

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commitments. But, while women have clearly made progress in the academy, they have not achieved gender equity. The image of academe as an egalitarian, nurturing, protective environment is not borne out by objective evidence.

The American Association of University Women (AAUW) notes that women still earn less, hold lower-level positions, are less likely to have tenure, and are much less likely to earn the rank of full professor.³ Women academicians tend to be over-represented in lower-paying disciplines and under-represented in higher-paying disciplines. Even within the higher-paying disciplines, women overwhelmingly earn less than their male counterparts.

In terms of academic rank, women have made progress, but there is still much room for improvement. In 1982, for example, barely 10 percent of full professors were female. By 2005, 25 percent of full professors were female. However, given that women are now receiving slightly over half of all doctorates awarded, it is troubling that this percentage is not higher. Table I provides some historical perspective on rank for male and female faculty.

TABLE 1
Percentage of Full-time Faculty by Academic Rank and Tenure
1981-82, 1999-2000, 2005-2006

| | 1981-1982 | | 1999-2000 | | 2005-2006 | |
|-----------------------|-----------|-------|-----------|-------|-----------|-------|
| | Men | Women | Men | Women | Men | Women |
| All Full-time Faculty | 73.3 | 26.7 | 62.5 | 37.5 | 59.4 | 41.6 |
| Full Professor | 89.7 | 10.3 | 79.1 | 20.9 | 75.0 | 25.0 |
| Associate Professor | 79.2 | 20.8 | 64.5 | 35.5 | 61.2 | 38.8 |
| Assistant Professor | 66.5 | 33.5 | 54.2 | 45.8 | 53.8 | 46.2 |
| Instructor/Lecturer | 57.2 | 42.8 | 48.7 | 51.3 | 47.2 | 52.8 |

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, multiple years.

As for earnings, discrepancies exist both within and across disciplines. The highest-paying disciplines continue to be business and engineering. Women are under-represented in both, as they make up 27.6 percent of tenure-track faculty in business and only 9 percent of tenure-track faculty in engineering.⁴ In business, the problem is exacerbated by the fact that salaries in various business specialties can vary considerably. In finance, for example, 89 percent of faculty are male and only 11 percent are female. The average male in finance earns \$106,567 while the average female earns \$89,909. It is not clear how much of this discrepancy is due to differences in status (e.g., associate professor compared to full professor) and how much is due to other factors, such as differences in research productivity or in the rigor of the institution (an Ivy League institution versus a regional institution). Table II provides some male/female comparisons for selected disciplines.

TABLE 2
Mean Salaries by Gender in Selected Disciplines

| Discipline | Male Average (% male) | Female Average (% female) |
|------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| Dramatic Arts | \$62,888 (53%) | \$47,591 (47%) |
| Finance | \$106,567 (89%) | \$89,909 (11 %) |
| Computer Science | \$84,485 (91%) | \$53,559 (9%) |
| Electrical Engineering | \$93,966 (96.6%) | \$106,566 (3.4%) |
| Psychology | \$84,646 (60.6%) | \$68,256 (39.4%) |

Source: Toutkoushian and Conley, 2005.

Nor should the plight of women in contingent, non-tenure-track positions be overlooked. Explosive growth has occurred in the number and proportion of contingent faculty in all types of colleges and universities. Between 1997 and 2007, for example, the increase in full-time faculty members was only 23.7 percent while part-time faculty increased by 58.6 percent.⁵ It is significant that the majority of new faculty hired in academic institutions since 1990 are employed as contingent workers and are disproportionately women.⁶

Contingent faculty positions, either part-time or full-time non-tenure-track, are characterized by being temporary and low-paying, with higher teaching loads, often without usual employee benefits such as health insurance and retirement savings. Contingent faculty work on the periphery of their departments, lack power, and may be treated like second-class citizens. Feminization of the contingent academic workforce is occurring while states are drastically decreasing financial support to institutions, endowments have lost value in the distressed economy, and private and public institutions are competing for dwindling resources. The result: fewer and fewer dollars for full-time, tenure-track positions while more contingent workers are added as instructors. While women are earning more doctorates, their chances of landing full-time tenure-track positions are shrinking.

Clearly, there is much room for improvement. We need to address both what individual women can do and what institutions can do. The recommendations that follow are key for new women faculty but are applicable to women regardless of their faculty status. Individual practices include networking, documenting professional contributions, and devoting one's time to the most strategically important activities. Institutional best practices include creating positive and supportive work environments (including zero tolerance for sexual harassment), providing mentoring opportunities, designing flexible arrangements for course scheduling and tenure, and having in place objective, written standards of performance that are consistently used for performance reviews and promotion and tenure decisions.

Networking. Cultivate a professional network both within your department and institution and outside. Jenni Hart of the University of Missouri College of Education, writing in the *NWSA* (National Women's Studies Association) *Journal*,

contends that it is essential for women faculty to understand how to create networks to be successful in academe.⁷ You may find opportunities for collaboration in teaching or research, for example. Making professional presentations, on and off campus, can be helpful in developing and maintaining your network.

One of the authors of this article presented a paper on fetal protection policies at a university-wide research symposium and ended up writing a chapter on workplace teratogens in a textbook. The other author was asked to develop a book chapter about gender and race in the workplace after an editor attended a presentation she made on international business. Networking can also provide guidance about committee work (which committees are most helpful for promotion and tenure and which you might be better off avoiding). An added benefit of developing and maintaining a professional network may be that you develop friendships.

Document your work. It is essential to keep track of how much you contribute to your students, your department, your institution, and your profession. While many universities use some type of electronic system in which faculty are expected to record their activities, some of these systems may not allow a user to record everything, such as number of hours spent on community service or the number of times research has been cited. Create a separate file to document the activities above and beyond the standard contributions you may have made.

Protect your time. It is perfectly okay to ask yourself the WIIFM question: What's in it for me? A number of researchers have discovered that women shoulder a disproportionate amount of the service workload at many institutions. Many service commitments require a great deal of time, which can compromise a woman's ability to produce an adequate amount of research. As Crystal Gafford Muhammad of East Carolina University notes, also in the *NWSA Journal*, that every minute spent on committee work is a minute not spent on scholarship.⁸ In



addition to the time commitment, service is rarely, if ever, given the same weight as teaching or research in a tenure decision. A woman may agree to heavy service commitments in the interest of good institutional citizenship only to find that such service contributions are not valued.

Some institutions pressure women to serve on high-profile committees, such as search-and-screen committees or advisory boards, to create the perception of inclusion. The mentality seems to be that “we need a woman on this to make it look like women are key players here.” In reality, some of these commitments are hugely time-consuming but ultimately not recognized. An early mentor of one of

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the authors advised her to minimize service. Yet this same mentor, an administrator, often asked her to take on extra, time-consuming service commitments.

Strategies that an individual woman can use may be beneficial in terms of being successful in academe. Ultimately, however, institutions need to make changes in order to ensure fairness to women.

Clear standards. Institutions need to develop and disseminate clear, objective written standards for expectations in teaching, research, and service. What is the standard teaching load? Is teaching undergraduate versus graduate courses taken into consideration? What, if any, expectation is there regarding new preparations? How is the supervision of independent studies or graduate theses counted? What constitutes acceptable creative activity? How is quality of creative activity measured? And finally, how is service defined and counted? Sharon Leder, Professor Emeritus at Nassau Community College and co-coordinator of Feminists Against Academic Discrimination, suggests modifying tenure requirements to reflect a more holistic vision of what it means to deliver a quality education to students.⁹

Policies on what constitutes appropriate research can recognize the value of interdisciplinary work such as women’s studies. The AAUW notes that, in many academic disciplines, women’s studies research is considered inferior to more traditional research, even though such research may be rigorously peer-reviewed, widely read, and widely cited.¹⁰ One of the authors of this article remembers being told by a colleague, early in her career, not to get involved in any way with the women’s studies program, because “that stuff is never taken seriously.” The other author was given the same advice by some of the senior faculty in the same department several years later about “not wasting your time” on gender-related research or scholarship focusing on race and ethnicity issues.

Regular Performance Reviews. Departments should conduct annual performance reviews with clear, explicit written feedback on relevant aspects of

performance. If the departmental faculty members have determined that, at a minimum, three articles in peer-reviewed journals are required, for example, then an annual performance review should articulate where the individual is in relation to those standards. This can be helpful for female and male tenure-track faculty. In addition, non-tenure-track faculty should have annual reviews that measure their performance against appropriate professional standards.

Put service in perspective. Department chairs and other administrators need to protect women from excessive service commitments. As noted above, a common—and unfortunate—practice is to pressure women to be involved in high-

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profile service activities, such as search-and-screen work or new student orientation, to create the appearance of inclusivity. As a result, women end up with a disproportionately heavy service load, which is not valued in tenure or promotion decisions, or in decisions to continue the employment of contingent faculty.

Provide mentoring opportunities. A tenure-track woman should be provided with a mentor within the department. Ideally, the mentor will be tenured already, and able to guide the candidate through the sometimes thorny thicket of departmental and campus faculty life. Mentoring can be very beneficial for any tenure-track faculty member and is most effective when there is a good fit between the mentor and the protégée and when the mentor is formally recognized and rewarded for his/her efforts.

Eliminate sexual harassment. Institutions need to work to guarantee that there is a healthy, supportive work environment for women (zero tolerance for sexual harassment). Ongoing training helps ensure that all faculty and staff are aware of the nature of harassment and the potential impact on self-esteem and morale. One of the authors remembers being visibly pregnant, and in the chit-chat before a department meeting, hearing a colleague ask, “What are we talking about today, anyway.” A male colleague said, “I think we’re going to talk about who the real father of her baby is, and who gets to father the next one. Sign me up!”

The other author—who is African-American—during her years as a tenure-track and then tenured faculty member, encountered several male colleagues in equal or more powerful positions who made comments to her about desirable women in general or their preference for women of her race in particular.

Be flexible. It is tremendously helpful to be flexible about processes like course scheduling and the tenure clock. All faculty deserve to be treated with respect for their personal lives. When scheduling of courses, for instance, a reason-

able, equitable approach may be to rotate days of the week (Monday/Wednesday/Friday versus Tuesday/Thursday) semester by semester. With respect to tenure decisions, the AAUW strongly recommends that institutions allow women the option of delaying a tenure decision for pregnancy and childbirth.¹¹ For example, if a woman chooses to take a semester off after the birth of a child, she should be able to delay the tenure decision for up to an entire academic year.

Despite the significant advances women have made in the world of higher education, low-paid, low-status, temporary positions in academic institutions are

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increasingly and disproportionately populated by women. This paper recommends several best practices that can help at the individual and institutional levels. Possibilities for future research are numerous and the authors are currently involved with several related projects. One question worth additional research concerns the seemingly universal challenge of too many service commitments for women. Why do women so often end up shouldering a disproportionate service load? What is—and what should be—the true value of service? How are women who say “no” to service perceived by their male colleagues?

A second important issue concerns the impact of universities’ increasing reliance on contingent faculty. What is the impact on students and on the continuity and overall strength of academic programs? Also, what is the potential impact on the individual employed in academe on a contingency basis?

A third question involves the scarcity of women administrators in higher education. As noted above, administrators often have critical input into decisions such as hiring and tenure. The lack of women in administration may automatically put women faculty members at a disadvantage during such decisions. Do women shy away from administrative positions, or are there personal or professional barriers that tend to sidetrack the administrative careers of women?

Finally, an overarching consideration for higher education in general is the future of the tenure system. As resources continue to dwindle, administrators in higher education will increasingly be faced with difficult decisions about resource allocation. Is the tenure system a practical model in today’s economic climate? How do the benefits of tenure compare to the potential costs? Are there alternative models that could replace the traditional tenure system, or is tenure, as it is typically been defined, a best practice in and of itself?

Clearly, the nature of higher education has changed and will continue to change. For universities to do their best work, it is essential to recognize the value of women in higher education and to take steps to ensure that women have opportunities and support that will allow them to be successful and satisfied. There are many steps individual women can take to give themselves the best chance to be successful. There are also many steps administrators and institutions need to take. As Morrissey and Schmidt note, ultimately we need to fix the system, not the women.¹² 

ENDNOTES

1. National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics*.
2. Wasburn, "Mentoring Women Faculty," 57-72.
3. AAUW, *Tenure Denied*, 2-7.
4. Toutkoushian and Conley, "Progress for Women in Academe," 23.
5. See note 1 above.
6. Touchton, *A Measure of Equity*, 3-6
7. Leder. "Issues Before and Leading to Tenure and Promotion," 1.
8. Muhammad, "An Oasis with a Desert Place," 69.
9. See note 7 above.
10. See note 3 above.
11. Ibid.
12. Morrissey and Schmidt, "Fixing the System, Not the Women," 1407.

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