



Making the Most of Upcoming University Transitions: Perspectives from the ISU ADVANCE Program

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Preamble: With the additional reductions in funding expected to Iowa State University, many academic units are re-evaluating their budgets and going through changes, including restructuring. Because these changes may significantly influence the way that faculty and staff conduct their work, this is an important time to re-assess existing departmental cultures, structures, and practices. In some cases there may be opportunities to eliminate historical inequities. Given this environment, ADVANCE collaborators asked the question “How can lessons learned from ADVANCE be applied to assist colleges, departments, and faculty to make the most of these upcoming university transitions and achieve the best possible outcomes?”

ISU ADVANCE: The ISU ADVANCE Program is a 5 yr NSF-funded initiative to improve recruitment, retention, and advancement of women faculty and women faculty of color in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math). It is one of many such initiatives across the country (see ADVANCE Portal link below for details). ISU ADVANCE participants work within departments using a “collaborative transformation” approach to improve the work environment for all faculty members. The program identifies cultures, practices, and structures that enhance or hinder the careers of ISU faculty, and engages faculty and administrators to transform university policies, practices, and academic culture in pursuit of a diverse, vibrant and productive faculty in STEM disciplines (for methodologies, see Bird and Hamrick, 2008).

In examining ways to remove known barriers to the advancement of women faculty in STEM disciplines, research through ADVANCE has identified conditions that help departments function well for all faculty members. This document details suggestions derived from these findings that relate specifically to upcoming university transitions.

Overview: The university and its academic units should 1) be cognizant of the importance of transparency and provide safe opportunities for individual opinions to be expressed regarding important issues, 2) use restructuring as an opportunity to reduce or eliminate existing inequities, and 3) minimize isolation and provide good mentoring, especially in restructured departments.

Transparency and Expression of Opinion: If changes are expected at the department or college level, administrators should provide venues for open discussion and use meeting structures that maximize the opportunity for all voices to be heard. This is particularly important in the case of departmental mergers and/or reorganizations. If departmental restructuring occurs and faculty members are required to change their home department, it is important to provide opportunities for all parties to participate in these decisions. This approach will facilitate smooth functioning of the newly assembled groups. Executive or

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advisory committees that weigh in on the decision-making process may provide another helpful voice for faculty. Ideally, these advisory committees would solicit input from the full range of the departmental members (including the diversity of rank, research/teaching interests, and gender, race, and ethnicity present). Finally, transparency with regard to budgets is important, at both the departmental and college level, so that faculty can understand the limitations and options available.

Equity: Loss of resources (e.g., support staff, teaching assistant funding, or supplies) within a department or academic unit may require decisions regarding the redistribution of resources. Reorganization of departmental structure may also require redistribution of resources. Creative solutions may be achieved via open discussion of issues to make solutions as equitable as possible. In all cases, redistribution should be used as an opportunity to minimize any existing inequities among academic units or departmental members (keeping in mind the balance of resources, teaching, research, and extension responsibilities).

Isolation/Mentoring: If departmental mergers and/or reorganizations occur, they can 1) result in faculty being located in multiple buildings and 2) bring together groups that have very different cultures with respect to research, teaching, extension, and service. If faculty members are located in multiple buildings, extra efforts to enhance communication and foster a new sense of community may help to mitigate isolation issues. Bringing together groups with different cultures can have a significant impact on perceptions of equity, and hence workplace satisfaction. Mentoring assistant or associate professors, especially those nearing a promotion, will be particularly important in these cases. Inclusivity and respect for cultural differences among groups will assist in the process. This can also be an opportunity to combine best practices of the former home departments.

While many of these outcomes focus on departmental culture, the colleges and the university as a whole can benefit from these insights. It is hoped that administrators at the college and university levels will be supportive of academic units and leaders that choose to implement these recommendations.

Supporting Documents and Resources:

For resources about the issues raised above (transparency, equity and mentoring) and ways these are being addressed at ADVANCE programs nationwide see the ADVANCE Portal website: <http://www.portal.advance.vt.edu/index.html>

For initiatives and resources at Iowa State University, see the ISU ADVANCE Program website: <http://www.advance.iastate.edu/>

For a report on department-level climate studies by the ISU ADVANCE Program, see: Sharon R. Bird and Florence A. Hamrick. 2008. *ISU ADVANCE Collaborative Transformation Project: First Round Focal Department Synthesis Report (March 2008)*. Iowa State University ADVANCE Program. Report available online at <http://www.advance.iastate.edu/resources.shtml>.

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