

**Worklife Issues at Virginia Tech:
A Report of Faculty Discussion Groups Held in April 2005**

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Introduction

Attention to work-life balance issues for faculty has exploded in the last few years. (See the references at the end of this report for just a few of the recent articles and reports addressing this topic.) This attention is fueled in part by evidence that an increasing number of new PhDs leave academia or opt for careers outside the traditional tenure-track path. This is particularly true for white women and scholars of color who make up an increasing share of the doctorates awarded. Members of these groups who pursue faculty appointments are less likely to achieve tenure or to be represented among senior faculty or administrative leadership positions. This faculty recruitment and retention achievement gap predicts a serious talent deficit for colleges and universities in general, and the scientific and engineering workforce in particular.

Work-life balance concerns affect men and women academics of every discipline and at every career stage. The recent report issued by the American Council on Education (2005) highlights the extent to which flexibility in faculty careers is a critical issue for research universities:

The critical work-life dilemmas detailed in An Agenda for Excellence: Creating Flexibility in Tenure-Track Faculty Careers indicate an urgent need for higher education leaders to examine and proactively address the institutional climate that governs the entire career cycle of faculty—from entry into tenure-track positions to retirement. As they shape long-term fiscal and strategic plans for their institutions, college and university leaders need to evaluate and act on all aspects of faculty career cycles. They need to do so to attract and retain those who are most talented in order to maintain excellence in teaching and cutting-edge, innovative research and to provide incentives for older faculty to retire with satisfaction and financial security, thereby accommodating the next generation of scholars and teachers. Central to meeting this challenge is

finding ways to create more flexible career paths for the tenure-track professoriate to enter, thrive in, and retire from academia.

A major focus of the NSF Advance institutional grants is addressing policies and practices that inhibit the entry and success of women academics in science and engineering. At Virginia Tech, work-life issues are central to Advance activities, including attention to dual career hiring, consistent implementation of policies to stop the tenure clock in the case of childbirth or family-related issues, child care, and other strategies that help faculty members balance the demands of their careers with their personal responsibilities and interests.

During April 2005, the Advance Policy Workgroup and the Commission on Faculty Affairs (CFA) joined together to explore worklife balances issues in greater depth through faculty discussion groups. This report summarizes the discussion group findings. These individual issues and anecdotes are well corroborated by the results of the campus-wide survey of faculty members conducted by Advance during spring 2005. Some of the most pertinent findings are included at the end of the report.

The facilitators found that the small group discussions mirrored the strong feelings revealed by the survey – commitment to Virginia Tech was very strong, yet the level of dissatisfaction with worklife issues and the current strategic initiatives of the university tested their commitment on a daily basis. This report identifies the nature of some of their concerns. The findings strongly support the need for more flexibility in faculty careers and some of the initiatives recently

launched or under consideration by the Advance project and the Commission on Faculty Affairs.

Faculty Discussion Groups as a Vehicle for Identifying Issues—

Composition of the Groups and Procedures

A list of potential participants was generated by asking the members of CFA and the Advance Policy Work group to identify faculty members from all eight colleges and all three professorial ranks who would bring varied perspectives to the table. A total of 138 faculty members were invited by letter from Provost McNamee to participate in one of the five focus groups held on five different days and times in April 2005. Of those invited, 62 faculty members elected to participate in one of the focus groups. Participants were relatively equally divided among the faculty ranks. Thirty-six participants (58%) were women; 26 (42%) were men. All groups included both men and women and faculty members from a variety of colleges. Four groups were also mixed rank; one group was set aside for assistant professors only given the importance of these issues for the pre-tenure period. While participation was not proportional by college given the method of identification, all colleges were represented.

Two members of the combined CFA/Advance Work group conducted each of the five, hour-and-a half long discussion groups. A note taker took detailed notes during the discussion.

The nominal group technique was used to elicit information from participants and generate discussion. Following a brief overview of the purpose of the discussion groups, each faculty member was given several index cards to

record their responses to the question: ***What are the issues of work-life balance that have been, or are currently, concerns for you or for close colleagues?*** Once participants completed the index cards, each participant in turn identified one issue. The round robin continued several times around the group as needed to capture salient issues. Issues were recorded on a flip chart in the front of the room and assigned a number. After recording all issues, participants sought clarification and understanding of the topics recorded on the flip chart.

Participants shared their personal stories during the discussion, providing additional detail for items listed on the flip chart. After roughly thirty minutes of discussion, group facilitators used a strategy to help participants prioritize the issues on the flip chart. Each individual was given eight dots and asked to write the number of the issues most important to them on the dots. Participants were free to allocate all of their dots to one or a few issues if they chose to do so. Participants then placed their numbered dots on the respective issues on the flip charts. Issue index cards were collected. The group discussed the identified priorities and clarified any other issues that were subsumed under the main topics.

Finally, participants were asked to record on another index card ideas for successful strategies/programs/policies that could address the highest priority issues they identified; these were collected since there was not adequate time to discuss them. Facilitators concluded the meeting by briefly describing current initiatives underway to address related faculty work-life balance issues.

Faculty participants appeared to be deeply engaged in the activity and appreciated the opportunity to discuss issues which are rarely addressed in such an open and public fashion.

Results

The list of issues each faculty member generated individually, the detailed notes from the group discussions, and the prioritization of issues done through the dot process served as the basis for this report. All individual issues from the index cards were typed into a file, identified by the participants' group number, rank, and gender (but not otherwise identifiable), and coded into 10 broad areas. These 10 areas are organized into three major themes including: the Changing University Culture and Inadequate Resources to Support the New Vision, Faculty Career Issues, and Family and Personal Health Issues. In order to illustrate and convey the concerns, direct quotes from individual faculty members are embedded in italics throughout this report.

The Changing University Culture and Inadequate Resources to Support the New Vision

For many of the faculty participants in the discussion groups, the rapidly changing culture at Virginia Tech was a significant source of work-life stress. That the “top-30 initiative” emerged as a powerful, overarching framework for worklife concerns was a surprise to the facilitators, given the trigger question the groups were asked to address. Yet this issue appeared to be seminal to all other discussion. Regardless of the rank, age or other characteristics of faculty, the

stresses identified by most participants were linked to the Top 30 initiative as they now understand it. The press to become a Top 30 university has come to symbolize heightened expectations in the face of diminished resources and a general perception that current accomplishments and level of effort are judged inadequate, or unworthy, despite the severe overload that many faculty experience.

Increasing expectations for research productivity are a major source of stress and anxiety for a number of faculty members. Many faculty members are convinced that research is the only one of the university's three traditional mission areas that is valued, and that a faculty member's worth is based solely on their research productivity and capacity to bring in large grants. These two comments are typical of a number of others.

I teach lots of classes, because teaching is what I love and I feel it frees my colleagues to do more research, but am I rewarded in the same way?

Zero respect is paid to teaching loads; no resources or recognition are provided for these activities.

Further, faculty members feel that the message about increasing research productivity translates wholly into bringing in large sponsored grants, even if the grant seeking distorts a worthy research agenda.

I enjoy doing research but the only message seems to be bringing in the money. That's all I hear about anymore. Not that you just get a grant, but a big one.

I came in under the understanding that the university focus was teaching, but came to realize that bringing in grant money was the most important thing.

The Top 30 initiative appears to some to subjugate academic values to a business model of operation for the university, a change some faculty members find personally uncomfortable and institutionally misguided, as it fails to tap into the key motivators for the faculty.

Inherent in some of their comments is a sense that the mission has changed and that what they do best, and care about the most, is no longer valued, or that the balance of mission activities that they found attractive is no longer possible. Some faculty members believe that goals associated with the Top 30 initiative are misaligned with the land-grant mission that provides meaningful context for their work.

When I was hired the idea to work at a land grant institution presented the opportunity to teach while still maintaining a research focus was attractive, now the focus is entirely on research.

In addition, some feel that the university's attempts to imitate more prestigious universities may unintentionally obscure or undermine Virginia Tech's traditional strengths. The lack of a distinct identity leaves faculty members unclear about what contribution they can make to achieving Top 30 status; nor do they understand the many different ways they can contribute to attainment of the University's goals.

Lack of Clear Direction from the Administration

Communication difficulties from the top and changes in department and college leadership have created inconsistent and mixed messages, deepening the stress, anxiety, and low morale among faculty.

Multiple and shifting priorities prevent faculty from designing a consistent work schedule and pursuing a coherent agenda over time. The inability to prioritize and set clear goals leads faculty to feel as though they are not doing anything well. Constantly re-adjusting and re-evaluating their efforts prevents faculty from accomplishing anything with a feeling of satisfaction.

Additional stress is created by changes in leadership due to turnover among department heads and deans. Untenured faculty were the most negatively affected by these changes as they are expected to continually adapt to re-prioritization of departmental goals and to meet unclear, but increased expectations for performance.

Frustration associated with unclear directives is compounded by the lack of recognition faculty feel they receive for their efforts and accomplishments. The lack of recognition undermines motivation and dampens the enjoyment faculty garner from their work, and calls into question the significant sacrifices of personal and family time.

Inadequate Resources to Support the New Vision

In order to fulfill job responsibilities, faculty members must juggle obtaining research support, maintaining sufficient resources to support completion of various projects, and finding adequate research space. Several faculty members described this process as “demoralizing.” No part of the resource acquisition process to support their research is easy.

There is a whole new mission with nothing to pick up or cover new responsibilities; there are insufficient resources for achieving Top 30 status yet the expectations are that we perform like one. Faculty must

work for everything (money, resources, research space); this leaves faculty feeling as though they cannot do any part of their job well.

Faculty who do not obtain grants find themselves paying for research out of pocket, especially in fields where sponsored funding is not available.

Furthermore, limited resources and a significant loss of faculty lines in most departments mean that faculty members have to take on additional responsibilities without adequate support or additional compensation-- larger class sizes, more course sections, recruitment of new faculty, departmental administration, and so on--all of which take away from the investment of time necessary for significant grant getting and increasing research productivity.

Recognition, Rewards, and Compensation

Compensation does not match the demands made on faculty time. Sacrifices made on the part of the faculty member and their family members are accepted by the university as simply the nature of the job.

There is an arrogant attitude that you work for 'us' [the university]. The university doesn't reward you for your time, especially not the overtime that we put in. This attitude is getting worse especially as it paired with poor salaries and no sign of improving. We continue to work because we like our job, the area, our kids are in school, but we are underpaid grossly.

While low salaries obviously generate faculty dissatisfaction, many faculty members do not feel they receive positive feedback or any appreciation appropriate to their level of effort and sacrifice, which cost nothing to give.

Salary issues also impact the resources faculty members have available to deal with child care, elder care, home and yard care, self-funding of professional travel, and other expenses. Faculty members in the humanities and social sciences, for example, often earn half of what faculty members in the

higher paid disciplines, and these are the same faculty members who have little access to grant funds to help manage the costs of their research and professional travel. Their ability to pay others to help with family and home responsibilities is very limited.

Faculty members in the arts and humanities feel their disciplines are not recognized or valued within the university's future. Regardless of discipline, faculty members feel the quality of research and work that is done is secondary to obtaining grant dollars.

Faculty Career Issues

While the rapidly changing *institutional* culture creates anxiety and stress for many faculty members, particularly in the context of inadequate resources to accomplish that vision, participants identified other issues that strongly affect worklife balance. Particularly important is the understanding of a faculty career as an all-consuming profession, ready to absorb every waking minute, and how this affects intensely personal decisions, such as when to have a child, and whether faculty members can speak openly about family priorities and still be viewed as a serious scholar. Insensitivity of some department heads and colleagues gives faculty members the sense that they must deal with worklife issues on their own.

All Time is University Time

The lack of time is a major issue for Virginia Tech faculty, receiving 84 dots and identified as part of 70 individually listed issues. Time pressures were expressed by most participants in the discussion groups with comments such as

“My life is out of control,” or “I feel like I am going under” getting nods of agreement from many others. Some described their lives as being on a collision course, with no time to think or be creative, and no time to clean the house or pick up the kids after activities.

A number of faculty members feel their personal lives are subsumed by the needs and demands of the university and that all of their time is owned by the university. Excessive and unpredictable work demands leave little free time or energy for family or personal concerns.

Schedules are unpredictable because they are constantly set by others. The university is insensitive to the demands on faculty time. There is not recognition for sacrifices made in personal time. The university accepts unaccounted for time and you are not recognized or paid for it. As an academic the university owns your time.

Faculty do not feel they have a choice as to how to structure their schedules. Rather, there is an unstated expectation faculty will give of their time freely and must do so if they wish to have a successful career. Grading papers, writing grants, addressing student concerns, advising student groups, and attending faculty or student recruitment events are often done after 5:00 p.m. and on weekends. Faculty members are expected to remain involved in departmental and committee assignments throughout the year and into the summer.

I am feeling more and more that you sign on as a faculty member to work 24/7. There is an attitude that this is a privileged position; that I am lucky to have this job and that faculty should not expect to work only 40 hours.

Right now I feel like everyone thinks they own my soul, I feel abused.

Multiple assignments and unpredictable work-related events interfere with family life. They create an environment that makes it hard for the faculty member

to balance job responsibilities and personal responsibilities. Faculty members find they frequently ask themselves, “How much is enough?” One faculty member explained, “Highly competent people are rewarded by being given more things to do.” Untenured faculty members are especially vulnerable as they feel they cannot refuse service requests.

Time demands are particularly acute for faculty members who feel they are forced them to make uncomfortable compromises.

All of these things leave faculty feeling they are not doing anything well. You cannot incorporate any alternative types of assessment. Faculty must rely on a TA to grade the exams. Some faculty do not even know the students in their classes. This leave faculty feeling like they are not doing their job. This is a difficult choice but one that must be made if faculty are going to be successful.

One area where this is evident is in the number of faculty who feel they cannot take earned vacation time or sabbatical leaves because it would disadvantage them in terms of productivity or unduly burden colleagues who must cope in their absence.

The sabbatical is perceived as another avenue for accelerating responsibilities rather than an opportunity for someone to step back and pursue enriching activities. A lot of faculty don't take sabbatical because it is such a struggle to manage all the other issues it creates.

Lack of Diversity and Collegiality

Faculty feel they are victims of a one-size-fits-all directive stemming from administrators and colleagues who themselves lack gender or ethnic diversity. Many administrators lack awareness about family and personal needs of faculty members. For instance, some administrators are not attuned to dual career couples. Many department heads, who are male and older, have benefited from

having a stay-at-home spouse who took care of family and household issues, leaving them unaware and often insensitive to the concern of trying to balance the needs of two working parents and a young family.

Expectations are built around men at this university who have stay at home wives who take care of things at home.

I requested family leave to stay home after the birth of our child and my department head laughed in my face; when my wife finished maternity leave I used vacation time so I could spend time with my child and I did some of the same again with our second child.

But it is not just department heads who seem insensitive to such issues.

A male faculty member reported that senior professors expect him to manage his family life as they did – “When I was your age, I’d drop the kids with the neighbors and work until 10 p.m.”

Female faculty members feel their roles as mothers are completely ignored, as if that aspect of their lives does not exist, and their department heads and colleagues are poorly prepared to advise them on issues related to managing pregnancy and childbirth in the context of a tenure-track appointment.

I have had 2 children under the age of five during the entire tenure process; my department head lacks perception, he asked three years after my child was born what the sex of the child was; this shows lack of understanding of that dimension of my life.

When I first came to VT I was looking around this campus to try to find someone I could talk to about pregnancy and the tenure process. I asked someone here and they referred me to a colleague in Oregon because they did know anyone on this campus in a similar position; I feel private industry does better job of addressing the issue of work and family.

The climate was mentioned by a number of participants – diversity does not seem to be welcomed, rhetoric not matching available resources, race

relations, sexual harassment, and related concerns. The lack of diversity also creates special service burdens for women and faculty of color.

The “minority tax” is high in my college. Committees are supposed to be diverse, but this results in the few active women to be called on again and again.

While the lack of diversity creates a feeling of lack of fit for those who are not the perceived norm, some expressed concern about an erosion of community and collegiality more generally.

The academy is evaporating, what makes a university is being eroded. Sigma Psi meetings used to be thriving, people visited and interacted. Now people are too busy. The only way to interact with others is on committee meetings.

Tenure and Promotion

The tenure and promotion process contributes to work-life balance concerns. For women, expectations for the probationary period can have life altering consequences as they delay, or even forego, family formation.

I waited until post tenure to start a family and now it is too late-my biological clock stopped before my tenure clock did.

Timing of pregnancy, this means often not having a child especially for women over 35. I have many friends struggling to have a child or adopt a child.

Male faculty also feel the tenure clock prevents work-life balance as they cannot participate in child rearing to the extent they would like due to increasing work demands.

A number of participants raised concern that the university appeared to be promoting a standardized and relatively inflexible model for achieving tenure and

promotion that does not accommodate the realities of ordinary lives or reflect varied definitions of success.

There are things going on in my life that are not included during the tenure process, there is no room for externalities; this idea of standardizing the promotion and tenure process makes it even more difficult, when there is one standard form you cannot include any externalities; the only way university handles this is adding one year to tenure clock – only one year – and I’ve had two children, that is not enough time.

Even though the university has had a stop-the-clock policy for many years, participants reported that widespread lack of awareness among women and department heads, inconsistent application, and stigmatization prevented its optimal use.

And a theme raised earlier is that shifting standards create uncertainty and appear arbitrary to those in the midst of the process.

There is a perception that there are shifting and arbitrary requirements for promotion and tenure at the university level.

Lack of Mentorship

A number of untenured faculty members feel they have little or no guidance from colleagues or mentors to help them learn how to successfully balance a successful career with family life, or to teach them the implicit and unstated rules about the way things are done. One faculty described this as a “sink or swim mentality within the department.”

Family Life and Personal Health Issues

Faculty participants identified many family and personal health consequences resulting from heavy work expectations and time commitments.

Some faculty spend too much time on work, work is their life, the Top 30 mentality makes matters worse. My daughter best summed it up to her kindergarten teacher when asked if she wanted to be a professor like her dad when she grew up, my daughter quickly replied “no, professors neglect their families.”

Excessive work demands keep faculty members from adequately addressing family and personal needs. Ultimately, the inability to find a balance in a work environment that places an excessive tax on faculty time leaves faculty feeling guilty and neglectful.

Work becomes the faculty member’s life. This means they neglect family. It is a choice of the individual faculty member but the university creates a culture that encourages this behavior by not allowing time for anything else if you want to be successful.

The constant feeling you are drowning in work leads to a bad mood at home.

A primary concern pertains to female faculty who were struggling with pregnancy and childbirth in relation to the tenure process. Specifically, the tenure time frame prevents female faculty from considering starting a family as they are consumed with meeting expectations for publication and research.

Male and female faculty feel maternity leave is too short. Many feel uncomfortable using stop-the-clock provisions due to poor departmental support.

A related issue includes department heads who grapple with supporting female faculty members who need to take leave. Department heads wish to accommodate such requests but at the same time must cover a faculty member’s duties. Situations created by faculty who take leave are difficult with restricted resources and are especially burdensome on small departments.

Other family issues that concern male and female faculty members include finding appropriate care for elderly parents and children of all ages. In regard to child care, faculty cannot find affordable, licensed care facilities; others struggle to find activities for older children during the summer, after school, on school holidays or on snow days so they will be appropriately supervised. Faculty members perceive little or no support for working from home in circumstances such as these.

Issues also include caring for children while balancing a work schedule that includes early morning and late afternoon meeting times as well as evening recruitment events.

Another major faculty concern is care for elderly and aging parents. Elder care facilities are limited. Furthermore, faculty do not feel they have the flexibility in their schedule to take elderly parents to doctor appointments or oversee issues related to extended hospital stays.

Dual career issues comprise another concern in this area. For instance, spouses/partners who are not employed at the university often have different work and vacation schedules. There are also issues related to spouse/partner hiring. For instance, when both the spouse/partner are employed at the university several faculty members mentioned that one does not feel valued because the view of their hiring unit is that their spouse/partner is employed at the university so nothing needs to be done to keep them satisfied. Finding quality and satisfying employment for the spouse or partner in the area was identified by several participants.

Other related concerns included the need to define “family” in more non-traditional ways so that it includes those who are single parents, those in relationships with partners, those in extended families, and so on. Finally, single faculty feel they are too often asked to take on additional work or evening schedules and special assignments to accommodate the colleagues with a family.

Faculty cited the difficulty managing time for their own health and well being. Many described their own needs as coming last and having no time or energy left to exercise, have “down time” to recuperate, or to keep their stress in balance so as not to affect their health.

Several items present additional frustrations for faculty who must consider the safety and welfare of family members such as inclement weather policies that are misaligned with K12 schools in the area creating child-care issues. Furthermore, faculty must drive to work from outlying counties in poor and often dangerous weather conditions. One participant elaborated by explaining, “faculty are spending the night in their offices because driving into work in inclement weather creates a safety hazard.”

A few faculty members nearer the end of their career cited concerns about not having adequate resources to retire and/or being unsure as to what to do with themselves once they have retired. They perceived limited options for faculty who wish to consider phased retirement.

Survey Highlights Related to Family-Worklife Issues

The comments gathered as part of the faculty discussion groups provide individual voice and personal context for results from the survey of all tenure-track faculty also conducted in spring 2005. The survey received a 60% response rate and all colleges were well represented. Although a separate report will provide a more detailed analysis of family and worklife questions from the survey, it is useful to cite just a few responses from the questionnaire to demonstrate the extent to which the above issues are broadly shared across the university faculty.

Here are several relevant items to which a significant portion of the tenured or tenure-track faculty respondents strongly or somewhat agreed:

41.4% of men and 51.2% of women agreed that: *“I have seriously considered leaving my current job in order to achieve a better balance between my personal and professional life.”*

43.8% of men and 55.1% of women agreed that: *“Professional/job demands force me to make unreasonable compromises about personal or family responsibilities and interests.”*

55.2% of men and 75.5% of women agreed: *“It is difficult to have a personal life and be promoted or earn tenure at Virginia Tech.”*

42.7% of men and 59.5% of women agreed that: *“Personal or family responsibilities have slowed my advancement at Virginia Tech.”*

Faculty respondents do not feel the university acknowledges these struggles or provides them reasonable assistance in coping with them. For example, 52.7% **disagreed** with the statement “Virginia Tech cares about the family/home life of its faculty.”

That 56.8% of tenured and tenure-track respondents somewhat or strongly *disagreed* with the statement “Overall, it seems the morale among faculty members at Virginia Tech is good” suggests that the dissatisfactions identified in the discussion groups is relatively widespread and worthy of concerted attention.

Discussion

The intensity of interest in participating in the faculty discussion groups and the level of engagement of those who came to the sessions were somewhat surprising to the committee sponsors and indicative of how much faculty want to talk about the stress of change, the direction the university is heading, and the intersection of ever-escalating work expectations and their personal lives. Some took the invitation from the Provost as a positive signal that institutional leaders were finally asking the faculty about these critically important questions and about their role in future of the university. The fact that many voiced discomfort, lack of fit, devaluation of their contributions, and low morale within the context of the espoused institutional goals suggests that there is much work to be done if those goals are to be embraced by the very people whose contributions are needed to achieve increased stature as a research university.

It is also clear that there are many large and small things that can and should be done to reduce the conflicts between work and family or personal life, not the least of which is trying to create a more flexible and varied definition of a faculty career, one which does not require a faculty member to deny, hide, or

minimize personal and family aspects of their lives, and that can evolve over time as an individual faculty member's interests and energy change.

Finally, it is worth reiterating that family and worklife issues affected both male and female participants, and faculty members at all stages of their careers. While these issues often have a stronger impact and greater consequence for women than men, male faculty members also voiced a concern about the personal or family-related sacrifices they were asked to make in order to fulfill real or perceived obligations to their career, department, and the university. While every case is individual, there is a shared commonality of interest across gender, career stages, and disciplines that may provide an opportunity to address worklife issues more constructively within the university community.

The update of the strategic plan, underway in fall 2005, provides an important opportunity to put these issues on the collective agenda at all levels of the institution and to identify specific goals and benchmarks to achieve for the coming years.

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