

Benchmarking What Women on Campus Need

It sneaked in, like many important things do, when I was preoccupied with yet another road trip.

Charity Hirsch called to ask me a question. She is a co-founder of the WAGE group (We Advocate Gender Equity) supporting female faculty at the University of California, the mother of former WIHE writer Jennifer Hirsch.

"What would help women at _____ university?" she asked me, naming "one of the most prestigious universities in the world." A faculty woman who was negotiating a settlement with this university had asked for help in creating a shopping list of improvements that would make a difference for those women who came behind her.

Great idea, I thought. Promising to get back to her on my return, I flew off and let the question simmer in my head. By then the woman had made her own list, but I shared my ideas with Charity, and now with you.

Adapted from business, the idea of benchmarking is to determine how your group stacks up against others. In this case, what are the ideal components of a culture that truly values its women, as administrators, faculty, staff or students, and how does your campus rate?

(It is not coincidental that I may attend the annual meeting of SWAAC, the Senior Women Academic Administrators of Canada in Ottawa on April 24-26, and have been asked to make a presentation on benchmarking.)

Call it utopia, call it impossible, call it incomplete, here are my suggestions of what women on campus want.

1. Continual climate and salary surveys

It's easy for a unit or a campus to dismiss women's claims of bias due to a so-called unique situation, but aggregate numbers are hard to ignore, as the women at MIT knew.

Every 3-5 years a campus-wide survey of all female faculty, staff and students should record perceptions of how women feel about where they spend the majority of their waking hours. Do they perceive fairness or discrimination based on their gender, race, or whatever? Research shows it's the perception of inequity that counts, which a well-designed climate survey can uncover.

Likewise, it's crucial to document salary inequities for employees on both a campus-wide and unit basis. Many administrators need to see the figures in black and white.

Fortunately a new monograph may help with this research. "Conducting Salary-Equity Studies: Alternative Approaches to Research" presents insights and advances made by several influential researchers in salary studies. It is part of the Jossey-Bass New Directions for Institutional Research series.

"When facing the ongoing challenge of achieving salary equity or even responding to claims that

their institutions have engaged in pay discrimination against women faculty, institutional researchers find that there are no universally accepted guidelines to use among existing salary-equity studies," according to a release. "The first of a two-volume set on the subject, it also bridges the gap between academic research and the more pragmatic statistical and political considerations in real-life institutional salary studies."

2. A committee on the status of women

This committee would include faculty, staff, students and key administrators at a school, as well as informal female leaders, and report directly to the president. Its challenge would be to educate and monitor levels of inclusiveness of women on campus. Many an enlightened male president has used such a committee to keep a finger on the pulse of his best constituents.

3. A policy on sexual harassment

Many an employee and student has been the subject of unwanted harassment, and a school having such a policy is at least peripherally aware of its need. With one, women have a better chance to lodge and resolve complaints.

4. A Women's Center on campus

Not only can it establish a focal point for programming and service, it offers a safe sanctuary for promoting the full and active participation for women who work and learn on campus. Schools that have Women's Centers make a visible, financial commitment to valuing their women on campus.

5. A Women's Studies department or program

The academic equivalent of the activist Women's Center, this entity offers gender-related scholarship so students and faculty alike can use research, theory and historical evidence to understand and change prevailing gender stereotypes. It also can model inclusive teaching, academic collaboration and interdisciplinary cooperation.

6. Family-friendly policies for staff/students

As the College and University Work/Family Association points out, a campus should embrace the integration of work and life. When things get out of whack, it's usually the family that suffers. Since higher education was designed by and for upper-class males, changes must be made to welcome women as full partners. Enlightened policies include parental leave, flextime, tenure clock flexibility, health insurance coverage for partners and dependents, and a host of other initiatives that grows continually.

7. A formal mentoring/network program

Research shows that nothing works better to help faculty and staff succeed than establishing a system to mentor and support women on campus. Grad students can also benefit.

8. An ombudsperson on campus

An ombudsperson can be a safety net to serve those whose rights may have been trampled by an unfair system. People in this job must dance a fine line between administration and its cogs, but they can be the difference between a woman's success or failure.

How do you fare?

Readers can assess how their campus rates by this benchmark. Now comes the real work: improvement. With any luck at all, we can all get top grades and establish a flat curve, so we all share the last laugh.

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