How to Help New Faculty Settle In:
Common Problems and Alternative Solutions

Over the academic years 2005-2008, the director of the ADVANCE Program, Professor Abigail Stewart, has met with many (a total of 57) of the new women faculty (at all ranks) in science or engineering fields. Faculty were drawn from the College of Engineering, College of Literature, Science, and the Arts, Medical School, and 3 of the six smaller schools that have scientists on the faculty. Many positive experiences were recounted during these discussions. In addition, some issues arose that suggest that some new faculty have potentially avoidable difficulties during their first years that might contribute to difficulties in adjustment and even to attrition. Moreover, these difficulties are not always unique (though of course some are). The list below identifies some common difficulties; in italics that follow are alternative approaches that in most cases were actually reported by other new faculty, and therefore seem quite practical. Some of the issues (e.g., associated with setting up a lab) are specific to faculty with certain kinds of research needs; others (e.g., teaching issues, dependent care issues) are much more general. We offer this list in the hope that it will assist chairs, mentors, and new faculty themselves to address issues that arise early in their appointment at UM.

Establishing a Lab

Faculty experience significant delays in receiving necessary lab equipment and setting up a fully functioning lab. The following three scenarios appear to be most prevalent: they have insufficient information about procedures and university practices; they have difficulties with vendors who are unhelpful; their arrival has not been sufficiently anticipated. When they come to campus at their own expense in the summer before they are starting, often without their families, it is particularly distressing to be faced with serious delays in setting up a lab.

Alternative approach: Since most new assistant professors have no experience setting up a lab, it is important for this process to be as supported and transparent as possible both before they arrive and once they are on campus. Both key support staff and a knowledgeable and sympathetic senior faculty member assigned to be helpful can make this process go much more smoothly. When serious delays are unavoidable, seek ways to minimize the impact on the new faculty member's research program (e.g., by setting up arrangements for sharing, supporting them spending time in collaborators' labs elsewhere during this period, etc.).

Lack of System for Assigning or Identifying Students to Collaborate / Work in Lab

In several instances, new assistant professors have taken on students who were known in the department to be problematic. In some (but not all) instances, the junior faculty have been advised by senior faculty not to accept these students. The junior faculty members must balance this advice against their growing anxiety about identifying student help.

Alternative approach: It is important to develop a strategy for identifying students to work with new faculty that provides less risk to the new faculty member; if hired early enough they may participate in graduate recruitment and identify a new student; alternatively, they may take joint responsibility for a more advanced student along with a mentor who will provide advice and help with already-identified difficulties. Finally, temporary arrangements may be set up at the department's (not the new faculty member's) expense, and these arrangements can be explicitly identified as having no long-term implications. Conversations with more advanced faculty suggest that these poor initial decisions often end up wasting vast amounts of time during the tenure probationary period, when faculty have little time to waste.

Start-ups

Once on campus, some faculty members learn that they received a lesser start-up package than colleagues they view as quite comparable to them (that is, at the same rank, with similar research needs, etc.). (Most faculty fully understand that there is variation in start-ups due to different kinds of equipment, space, and renovation needs; these kinds of differences are not at issue.) This sense of disparate treatment becomes more critical and anxiety-provoking when they feel they have not received some element in their package (e.g., support for graduate students, summer salary, etc.) that others have and that they feel is necessary for their success.

Alternative approach: Avoid these disparities. Assume that the details of start-ups will be public knowledge and that, therefore, all new faculty at comparable career stages with comparable needs should be brought in on comparable terms.

Child Care and Education Needs for Dependents

Newly arrived faculty need to identify child care options without much, if any, knowledge of the Ann Arbor community. In some instances, this leads to unsatisfactory child care arrangements, requiring time, energy, and resources to correct. This situation contributes to great anxiety. Additional needs have surfaced for identifying education options for special needs children, which also requires time, energy, and resources to correct. This situation also contributes to great anxiety and to expenditure of substantial time.

Alternative approach: At a minimum it is important to be sure the faculty member is aware of on-campus resources like the child care resource office and the family-friendly policies. In addition, this set of concerns is often experienced as "extra," something quite outside the official life of the university and therefore off limits for discussion with senior colleagues. That perception is isolating. Moreover, senior colleagues (in and beyond the department) often have information or advice that would be helpful; in addition, the opportunity simply openly to discuss an important, distracting, and time-consuming issue may itself help make an individual feel more "at home." Facilitating open discussion of the issue with senior colleagues in any department is important.

Dual Career

Some faculty members arrive in the summer to get an early start on setting up their lab, and often face a situation in which they are waiting for equipment and/or renovation for much of the summer. This common situation quickly becomes very stressful if they have a partner who has not found local employment. They are covering the cost for two households, often before their UM salary has begun. In addition to the anxiety of this situation, there is also real financial hardship. When faculty with dual career needs arrive on campus with these needs unaddressed, the situation may persist. Ignoring the situation does not make it disappear. The

chronic situation can mean that a partner who has joined the faculty member is unemployed and unhappy, or has actually remained at the previous household. Both circumstances create significant complications. Maintaining two households on an assistant professor salary is difficult, especially when travel to partner and children is also needed. Lack of attention to these situations strands a new faculty member in a stressful situation with few supports.

Alternative approach: Make early and active use of the dual career program services. In addition, regular inquiry into the situation can surface problems that can be addressed. At a minimum, unavoidable protracted separations can be supported with some discretionary travel funds.

Course Assignments

New assistant professors have raised the issue of having been assigned to teach courses in areas they do not know well and do not feel equipped to teach. New assistant professors do not know what the norms are about resisting or refusing teaching assignments.

Alternative approach: Since the tenure probationary period is so short, it is potentially devastating to a faculty member's workload to manage extensive preparation for a course for which s/he is unprepared, quite apart from the added anxiety. In addition to the extra preparation time, there is an additional likelihood that the course will be less well-received and therefore become a barrier to demonstrating teaching competence. New faculty teaching assignments can and should be made in the best interest of the new faculty member, and it should be made clear that the new faculty member plays an important role in this decision-making process.

Classroom Authority and Teaching Evaluations

Many new faculty are not aware of the resources provided by the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT), and do not understand the need to address teaching issues as early as possible. For all new faculty, difficulties in the classroom can result in anxiety, lower teaching evaluations, over-preparing for class sessions, and little pleasure in teaching. Women and underrepresented minority faculty are challenged by students in the classroom more often than other faculty. Because new faculty have little and sometimes no teaching experience, they are not prepared to address the derailing effects of these persistent challenges.

Alternative approach: Chairs or their designates could meet with new faculty early in the first term of teaching, to discuss in an open-ended and non-evaluative way some of the difficulties many new faculty have, and the resources available to address them. New faculty can be provided access to a senior faculty member who takes more than a pro forma interest in understanding the teaching experiences of new faculty members and who might be able to provide advice and/or assistance.

Collaboration

Newly arrived faculty often struggle with making productive connections with collaborators. The new assistant professors are sometimes assigned to senior faculty who actually act as "gatekeepers," preventing connections, or who do not actively assist in creating connections. There is a pervasive sense among the junior faculty that their senior colleagues are too busy to assist with the interventions necessary for helping them launch successful collaborations.

Alternative approach: Choose faculty career advisors carefully; ensure that faculty career advisors understand that they are expected actually to take concrete steps to facilitate networks and collaborations. Seek feedback from new faculty within the first semester about whether this is happening and step in to create these connections other ways if it is not.

Environment for Women and/or Minorities

Some white women and minority faculty members had heard negative stories about the climate for women and/or minorities in their department. Once they arrived and began to experience negative situations, they felt that their new experiences fit into the pattern recounted in received stories. This may create serious anxiety about their future here and a rapid decision to go back on the job market.

Alternative approach: Ideally, the negative climate issues should be addressed. At the very least, it is important for chairs and other senior faculty to be aware of the situations that are occurring; this is more likely if they maintain frequent sympathetic contact with new faculty, overtly inquiring into their experience and taking direct steps to intervene with faculty members creating a negative climate.

On-line Resources

ADVANCE Program
http://sitemaker.umich.edu/advance

Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT)
http://www.crlt.umich.edu/

Office of the Provost: Dual Career Program
http://www.provost.umich.edu/programs/dual_career/index.html

Office of the Provost: Family Friendly Policies, Programs, Services, and Benefits
http://www.provost.umich.edu/faculty/family/index.html

Work/Life Resource Center: Child Care Resources
http://hr.umich.edu/worklife/childcare/index.php

Additional Resources

Barker, K. (2005). At the bench: A laboratory navigator. New York: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press.

Barker, K. (2002). At the helm: A laboratory navigator. New York: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press.