



**The New Norm of Faculty Flexibility:
Transforming the Culture in Science & Engineering
October 10-11, 2008
Friday World Café Conversations**

Following lunch, many of us attended the first World Café discussion session.

1. What policies and practices will allow women and men in STEM to have children and academic careers simultaneously?

The discussants concluded that Part Time Tenure Track (PTTT) policies would help, including tenure clock stoppage. It was seen as important that department culture allowed accessibility to flexibility policies, and that department chairs and deans were held accountable for knowing that the policies exist and that they exist to be used. "Children are important."

2. What kinds of on- and off-campus partnerships will facilitate the needs of dual career couples?

The participants discussing this problem divided it into two parts: recruitment and retention. They felt that having a firm policy for hiring and retaining the trailing spouse was vital. Another useful tool would be the establishment of a college office for this purpose. The discussants felt that there were many barriers to partnership with off-campus agencies. As for the second part of question 2, retention, the groups felt that some sort of help with childcare would help keep faculty and trailing spouses in their jobs.

3. How do issues of race, ethnicity, and culture factor into our discussions of women's career paths in STEM? How can we enhance the racial and ethnic diversity of women in STEM faculty ranks?

These groups felt that faculty at US institutions are becoming increasingly internationalized, yet the differences between US and non-US academic cultures don't seem to translate well. They noted that while diversity is valued in academic and corporate cultures, there is a seeming lack of understanding as to what diversity is. It must include both racial and gender factors, but must also avoid the promulgation of stereotypes. How do we as academics accept people of diverse backgrounds? "A simple welcome is not sufficient." The solution was agreed to be education on understanding and appreciating cultural (and by implication gender) differences.

4. Policies enabling part-time appointments for tenure-track faculty are increasingly available. Are they helping STEM faculty manage work/life responsibilities? What are the gender, racial, and ethnic dimensions of policy use?

A conclusion reached was that part-time status is often not economically viable for young faculty. This led to questions about how to define the responsibilities expected from part-time faculty, and, if necessary, how to scale down administrators' expectations.

5. What do we mean by 'flexibility' in faculty careers? Is flexibility the right goal? Is this concept the best way to attract a more diverse workforce to the STEM faculty?

Flexibility was defined as policies that enable workers to take time off and then to re-enter the workforce and teams (teaching, research and service) successfully. These policies should allow people to embrace opportunities when they arise. Some suggestions of how to make flexibility the right goal were to envision

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multiple routes to tenure, and to reduce the uncertainty about defining excellence that seems endemic in the tenure process. The groups felt that the culture and opportunities needed to change, as well as the implementation and interpretation of appropriate policies.

6. How can we address unconscious gender bias when gender discrimination is subtle, often unintentional, and difficult to identify?

The groups discussing this felt that all people were biased; what was important was to become aware of the bias and work to overcome it. Some ways of making people aware of their gender bias would be to use theatrical methods (such as role playing), and also to take advantage of online educational resources. They felt it was important to hold people accountable by ensuring that education was a continual process; one class on bias was not going to do it. They also argued that it would be important to start confronting this issue early, by the eighth grade, if not earlier. Finally, the groups argued that transparency would lead to accountability.

7. Is ‘balance’ an appropriate goal? Is ‘balance’ the right goal?

The discussion started by positing that “balance” was not the right word: it excluded “life” from “work” and vice versa, and seemed more prone to quantitative evaluations than qualitative. The groups suggested the term “integration” might be better. Further, what people view as “quality” or desirable life-circumstances is idiosyncratic and changes even among the different stages of a person’s life. What would be “enough” balance or integration, the groups wanted to know. They saw work and family as “two greedy institutions.” They found that setting personal internal standards of satisfaction was difficult when a person also has to deal with external expectations, from work or from “helpful or unhelpful” spouses and other family members.

8. What kinds of data do universities need to enable productive conversations on flexibility? What particular challenges do ‘career data’ pose (childbearing, family situations, time to degree, nontraditional career paths, etc.)?

They thought that most data on faculty was actually about departmental norms, and that we needed to get beyond this to deeper levels, presumably to questions of personal motivation and satisfaction. They thought that data on accountability for implementing policies and consequences for failure to do so were important. The groups also felt that transparency of the data was extremely important. They further thought that, besides data on faculty, different types of data needed to be defined and determined for each level of administration, always guided by the question, “Why do we need to know this?”

9. If we were starting over, would we have a ‘tenure clock’? How does the ‘tenure clock’ help and hinder men and women in STEM disciplines?

The discussants felt that our current tenure process is the product of history, and that there are other models possible. As for the clock specifically, they felt it was not productive, but the benefits that might be derived from it could be. They felt that having a solid deadline was a good thing as it provided a definite sign that the evaluation process was over. The groups then questioned how long it took to effectively measure the quality



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of work in academia? They noted that when tenure was granted, some people ceased to do research while others became more innovative and productive. This calls into question the importance of tenure as a measure of quality of an academic worker.

10. How can we ensure that data related to ‘flexible faculty careers’ and the conversations that occur at this conference will engender productive conversations on our own campuses as well as other campuses?

Ensure the education of chairs and deans, the groups answered, especially concerning cost-benefit analyses. Make sure the data continues to accrue and is accessible in a centralized location. There needs to be more collaboration on policies between faculty and departments. Accountability needs to be ensured, and mentoring programs would be extremely helpful.