



***ISU ADVANCE  
Collaborative Transformation Project:  
First Round Focal Department  
Synthesis Report***

by Sharon R. Bird\* and Florence A. Hamrick

March 2008

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# Executive Summary

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\*Contact: [sbird@iastate.edu](mailto:sbird@iastate.edu) for more information about the ISU ADVANCE Collaborative Transformation Project.

Office Address: 118 Office & Lab  
Mailing Address: 1550 Beardshear Hall  
Ames, IA 50011  
Phone 515-294-6151  
FAX 515-294-6427  
[advance@iastate.edu](mailto:advance@iastate.edu)

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**IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY**  
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY



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This report summarizes research from the Iowa State University ADVANCE Collaborative Transformation (CT) Project. The results discussed here are based on intensive research conducted within three STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) departments at ISU during 2006-2007. The report also reviews some of the activities within the departments aimed at enhancing workplace climate and improving recruitment, retention and promotion of diverse faculty that have been inspired and informed by the CT Project. These activities are funded by a 5 year grant from the National Science Foundation's ADVANCE Institutional Transformation program, which is designed to create an infrastructure for transforming structures, cultures, and practices in ways that enable and support recruitment, retention and promotion of women faculty in STEM fields. This report represents one step in an overall multistage process. The CT Project will eventually include six additional focal ISU STEM departments, a further synthesis of findings from all departments over a 5-year period, and the development and refinement of assessment tools aimed at identifying and reducing barriers to faculty scholarly success—including issues that hinder the recruitment, retention and promotion of women faculty.

The three departments participating in the first round of the CT Project are Ecology, Evolution, and Organismal Biology (EEOB), Genetics, Development and Cell Biology (GDCB), and Materials Science Engineering (MSE). These departments represent three colleges: The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, and the College of Engineering. Department Chairs and faculty in each of these departments have been working together with expert consultants (social scientists in the fields of organizational studies, work and higher education) and members of the ISU ADVANCE Co-PI Leadership Team and its partners to help ISU better understand how to ensure positive departmental work environments and to achieve the overall goals of ADVANCE grant project.

The departmental work involved in the project was organized by ADVANCE Professors, Department Chairs and a departmental team or advisory group in each respective department. The methods for gathering the in-depth qualitative data were focus groups, individualized interviews with faculty and chairs, and existing documents (e.g., departmental governance documents) from each of the three STEM departments. The average participation rate among the faculty in the three departments was 71.5 percent. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and then transcribed. Transcriptions yielded more than 1000 double-spaced pages of raw data in addition to the respective governance documents and notes from focal departmental web sites. The data were first analyzed separately for each department. Separate reports (executive summary, findings, strategies for addressing salient issues, summary of research methods) were then written for each department so that individual departments could begin the process of addressing issues particular to their own department.

The CT Project is designed to “mirror back” to faculty within each department aspects of their own workplace climate that influence how positive their climate is and how effective the department’s recruitment, retention and promotion practices are. This requires using focus group and interview data to better understand departmental structures, practices, and cultures. Departmental *structures* include codified and or routine decision-making processes, including governance documents, resource allocation procedures, and committee configurations. Departmental *practices* refer to the systematic actions in which faculty members generally engage. And departmental *cultures* refer to prevailing values, norms, assumptions and symbols of departmental members and their activities.

After the three separate departmental reports were completed (as noted above), the data for all three departments were then analyzed collectively in order to identify those issues that were salient across all three departments. Thus, this synthesis report is not a simple merging of all findings from the separate departments, but rather represents only the issues that were common to all three departments.

The six major findings across all three departments are listed below, with assessment tools for identifying possible next steps below each finding. Note that while all of the issues presented as findings below have clear implications for women faculty and other underrepresented faculty groups, each also has implications for those groups that are not underrepresented in faculty roles.

1. **ISSUE:** Spatial proximity of departmental members affects the development of community and collegiality, mentoring, and sharing of information.

**ASSESSMENT TOOL:** *In departments where* faculty members are dispersed across multiple buildings (or floors in buildings), departmental leaders must take proactive steps to create spaces and time periods for junior faculty and tenured faculty to interact face-to-face with one another. Dispersion of faculty may also impact faculty productivity, mentoring relationships, and faculty members' awareness of their colleagues' contributions to research, teaching, and service activities (see p.22 of report).

2. **ISSUE:** Perceived gaps exist between stated or assumed departmental ideals and actual practices with regard to research, teaching, and service assignments. In some cases, there is a lack of information regarding how these assignments are distributed.

**ASSESSMENT TOOL:** *In departments where* differing assumptions between faculty members exist regarding the *relative value of* and *reward structures for* research, teaching, outreach and service, or when there is a lack of information about how research, teaching and service assignments are distributed, departments may benefit by sharing averages and ranges of work by rank among department members (see p.22 of report).

3. **ISSUE:** Regarding mentoring, department Chairs play an essential role in aiding Assistant and Associate professors' understanding of expectations for tenure and/or promotion and in lending support to faculty members during promotion and tenure processes. Faculty also noted the importance of mentoring relationships between Assistant Professors and senior faculty (Full and Associate), though the quality of these mentoring relationships was not the same for all Assistant professors. A significant proportion of Associate professors and department Chairs explained the need for mentoring beyond the Assistant professor level.

**ASSESSMENT TOOL:** *In departments where* Assistant and Associate professors are unable to develop effective mentoring relationships with senior colleagues, and/or if mentoring programs for Assistant professors are not consistent, and/or if mentoring programs for Associate professors do not exist, departments may benefit from (see also p.23 of report):

- sharing aggregated departmental information regarding faculty productivity by rank with regard to publications, grants, teaching and service;
- holding discussions for Associate Professors about promotion similar to the discussions that department Chairs and Assistant Professors often have (in the focal departments participating thus far in the CT project);
- a university-wide discussion about how to revamp the university's faculty mentoring program, including a discussion of mentoring for Associate professors, and a discussion of the relative value and rewards to be attached to teaching, research, and outreach (and/or "service").

4. **ISSUE:** Faculty across departments embrace the assumption that all tenure-track and tenured faculty are entitled to express their views freely and without repercussion in important faculty discussions (e.g., about self-governance, hiring, curriculum, departmental service

activities). Faculty of all ranks acknowledged that this ideal exists and that it *should* govern actual practices. Assistant professors were, however, less apt to believe that this ideal truly applied to them.

**ASSESSMENT TOOL:** *In departments where* members wish to ensure that all faculty feel free and safe to express individual opinions about self-governance, hiring decisions, and other departmental issues, but some faculty members perceive or experience negative repercussions for taking unpopular stances that differ from other faculty members in the department, departments may benefit from (see also p.24 of report):

- posting, explaining and reiterating best practices to ensure that less assertive faculty members' voices be included in faculty discussions;
- using secret ballots to help increase freedom of expression when topics are controversial.

5. **ISSUE:** Regarding the recruitment and retention of faculty, including women faculty and faculty of color, faculty identified four primary issues: developing candidate pools, evaluating candidate applications and evaluating on-campus interviewees, presenting a positive work environment during on-campus interviews, and developing proactive strategies for retaining faculty. Though considerable efforts are being made to ensure the recruitment, retention and promotion of highly qualified faculty, there remain in place practices that result unintentionally in lower levels of success in recruiting and retaining women faculty and underrepresented faculty of color.

**ASSESSMENT TOOL:** *In departments where* success levels in the areas of recruitment and retention outlined above are below acceptable or desired levels, departments may benefit from (see also p.25 of report):

- discussing diversity as a requisite part of a strategic plan for achieving and maintaining excellence;
- explicit use of agreed upon evaluation criteria, conscious monitoring of discussions about applicant files to ensure observations about faculty candidates are supportable by the evidence;
- inviting as seminar presenters women and persons of color who are post-docs and graduate students at universities known to graduate and attract (as post-docs) higher proportions of women and people of color;
- presentations that highlight studies about unintentional bias problems associated with the recruitment and evaluation of candidates;
- use of uniform candidate forms for evaluating candidates that include a list of the criteria in the position announcement/job description;
- discussing each candidate's (or short list of candidates') strengths as well as weaknesses to help minimize the potential effects of unintended biases;
- emphasizing to on-campus interviewees faculty awareness of issues faced by women faculty and faculty of color, partner accommodation efforts, and university "family friendly" policies, including part-time tenure;

- identifying and implementing department-level policy changes that might clarify the department's long-term commitment to its faculty and to a family-friendly workplace.

6. **ISSUE:** ISU's "family friendly" policies have gained recognition in recent years and are generally supported by faculty. Many faculty members, at the same time, are unaware of the extent of these policies and how they are operationalized. And among those faculty who are aware of the policies and how they operate (most of whom are women but also some men), a general consensus exists that parental leave provisions (including the tenure clock policy) are well-meant but impractical and that child care facilities are woefully lacking due to cost and limitations on enrollment.

**ASSESSMENT TOOL:** Because the issue of "family friendly" policies is university wide, the issues outlined above would appear to span all departments regardless of individual department's structures, cultures and practices. Thus, *in addition to further support at the university level*, departments may benefit from (see also p.27 of report):

- faculty discussions about possibilities for developing department-specific policies for providing release time and course coverage during periods of family leave;
- Chairs' and upper level administration's expressed support for faculty members who use these policies in order to help other faculty members in the department understand how to evaluate the faculty member who utilizes one or more of ISU's existing family friendly policies.

The goal of the ISU ADVANCE Collaborative Transformation project and the overall Institutional Transformation program is to increase recruitment and retention of a diverse faculty workforce in STEM fields. One of the most important take-home messages from this synthesis report is that creating these changes requires efforts at all levels of the university. The changes suggested will make ISU a better place to work and live. Chairs will need to work with faculty members at the department level to create positive and supportive working environment. Administrators above the department level will need to be thinking about policies that either help or hinder such efforts. Both a top-down and bottom-up approach to institutional transformation will be required to accomplish our goals. These efforts, in addition to helping diversify the faculty, will improve work climate and help ALL faculty members be more productive.

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