Joint Meeting of Commission on Faculty Affairs
and ADVANCE Policy Work Group
March 4, 2005

Members attending: Hyer, Zajac, Easterling, Geyer, Rinehart, Welch, McNabb, Ball, Haas, Barker, Kelly

The joint meeting of the CFA and ADVANCE policy work group was initiated to think through how to engage more faculty members in discussions about faculty work-life and proposals for making faculty careers more flexible. Hyer shared four major issues driving the conversation at the national level. These points, explicated at greater length, might be an opening presentation for a faculty forum to answer the question “Why is it important to deal with these issues?” The points are as follows:

1. The labor pool for faculty positions is changing. More women and minorities are receiving doctorates; their participation challenges the existing and often unquestioned norms concerning a faculty career.
2. There are differential opportunities and outcomes for women with doctorates in the academic labor market. Leaks in the pipeline exist at every stage, resulting in a diminished pool of talent for faculty positions. Some of reasons for this have to do with preferences about how to live one’s life; others reflect climate issues.
3. There is a growing dissatisfaction among many faculty members, both entering and experienced, male and female, with what has been defined as the typical faculty career, particularly in science and engineering, where expectations for long hours in the lab are the norm.
4. Issues are acute for junior level faculty, but are also problematic for senior-level faculty. A 40-year career comprised of 55 hour weeks, week-in and week-out, presumes a healthy adult unencumbered by personal or family care issues. This is not realistic; many cannot manage a faculty career as it is currently defined.

Members asked whether the academic environment differs from that of business. They questioned whether industry is doing more than academe to create a work life balance. Hyer explained that the work-life movement started within corporate culture and in that regard, many businesses are ahead academe in terms of addressing the issues.

Members suggested that in addition to the points presented there may be value in explaining that businesses that have implemented such policies have lower turnover and higher “return on investment” ratios. It would also be useful to include data from Virginia Tech that identifies the replacement costs associated with faculty we lose who opt out of the faculty career, or who change institutions to find one more supportive of their needs and interests. Members felt it would also be useful to highlight non-gender specific issues so that tenured male faculty would relate to the conversation and become engaged. In the conversations this group is planning for, we need to make it clear that work and family are not separate institutions – they are highly interdependent. The
conversations need to focus on how policy changes will produce a stronger, more satisfied and productive faculty workforce – thereby enhancing faculty quality rather than compromising it.

Real change will require a cultural shift. There are some faculty members who feel the university needs to be more stringent in the promotion and tenure process. Many may feel that by making faculty work life more flexible, extending time to tenure, etc., we are lowering the bar. However, if we are to remain competitive in the recruitment and retention of the very best faculty, we need to address these issues.

Members agreed the tenure process as it relates to faculty work-life issues needs to be examined. For instance, having a range of time that allows faculty to obtain tenure rather than the six year period is one option. However, members concluded it might be too soon in the conversation to propose such an examination. Doing so may polarize too many people.

Zajac prompted the group to begin thinking about an action plan. The group considered using the matrix of ACE recommendations as a starting point for discussion. Along with the recommendations, specific examples of possible actions and current policies could be incorporated. Ultimately, the examples would target faculty at different stages in their career: changes in recruitment, improving the climate for all, and phased retirement.

Zajac presented two major questions that the work group needed to address. First, members need to consider how best to go about soliciting participation in the conversations. Second, the group needs to set priorities. As a group it would be best to decide what talking points we are going to provide to facilitators of the conversations. It might be useful to think of issues that have particular importance for Virginia Tech due to either geographic location or the Top 30 commitment.

Rinehart suggested that the issues related to faculty work-life are not easy to talk about. Many faculty may view issues associated with faculty work-life as a private matter. Furthermore, these may be issues that are unknown to faculty who are in the midst of experiencing stress associated with the very problems this group is seeking to address. It might be useful to publicly address issues of faculty work-life and use the proposed conversations to allow faculty to think about how the issues affect them on a daily basis. Members reflected on ways that personal and family issues had a serious impact on their own careers at various points in their lives.

If the group takes this approach, a useful conversation starter might be to highlight a common theme. One common theme might be that all jobs have increased in size over the past 10 years. Once the data has been presented it would be useful to highlight things already happening at the university to address faculty work-life issues in this regard. One new policy could be presented. For instance, the Modified Duties Policy might be introduced since it appeals to a broad range of faculty. Then facilitators could point to what other universities are doing. Faculty could be shown a spectrum of models so they
understand that we are talking about implementing incremental changes to address faculty work-life issues.

The group discussed whether having the conversations within colleges was better, or if it would be better to have a university wide conversation. Since remaining time in the semester is short, it may be best to do a few focus groups. This would allow facilitators to get a feel for what issues might arise and would help the work group set priorities.

Members concluded the best way to go about doing this would be to invite a cross section of people to create dialogue. One way to do this is by creating focus groups that would represent a range of faculty by rank and discipline. This would bring in differences across discipline and also highlight generational issues. One way to make sure junior faculty feel comfortable sharing their views would be to have two additional focus groups and invite just junior faculty. Doing the 4 or 5 focus groups this spring semester will allow momentum to build for the next academic year.

By the next meeting, March 18th, work group members will identify three to five faculty from their college (or other colleges) who should be invited to participate in the focus groups. Collectively we would look for a mix based on gender, rank, race, and receptiveness to the ideas will be provided. (The College of Architecture is not represented among the joint work group members or CFA, so nominations should be made for them too.). Focus groups will be held in April and facilitated by a team of CFA/ADVANCE work group members. An invitation to attend the focus group will come through the Provost’s Office. Invitees will be asked to respond by acknowledging the times they are available from the dates and times listed. Hyer will then select 15-20 faculty members based on their response and ask them to show up for the focus group on a particular date and time. Ideally, 10-15 will actually attend with a goal of three focus groups and at least one that is just junior faculty. Refreshments will be provided during the focus group sessions. Facilitators will be provided with a mini-lesson on how to conduct focus groups. Note takers will be provided at each session.

Zajac will draft a purpose statement and two to three questions that can be used during sessions. She will also provide data that will be used to set the context for the conversation.

The next meeting will be March 18th from 3-5pm. Handouts will be sent to those who were not able to attend.

Recorder,
Catherine Amelink, Graduate Assistant, Provost’s Office