The Economics of Retaining Women

“Faculty members are the primary resource for meeting today’s escalating demands upon colleges and universities.”[1] Institutions of higher learning that address work-life concerns increase their ability to attract and retain the best faculty – men as well as women.

Attracting and retaining faculty is only possible if colleges and universities avoid the “chilly climate” that drives women out of their departments. A “chilly climate” often reflects gender bias, which imposes concrete costs on hard-pressed universities.

Eliminating gender bias is not just the right thing to do. It is the only cost-effective way to run an academic institution.

Retaining Talented Women Faculty is a Business Necessity in the Current Economic Environment

**Sharply Declining Resources**

Colleges and universities are in the midst of the perfect financial storm. Their financial resources are declining. Their endowments have been hit hard by the current economic crisis, which has decreased endowments by 23% or more.[2] Public institutions face further budget cuts as a result of declining tax revenue. Charitable contributions to public and private institutions alike are down. As a result, many colleges and universities are forced to freeze salaries and cut back on spending.

Simultaneously, families’ college savings plans have been gutted by the declining stock market. Parents of current and soon to be college students have lost their jobs. The number of requests for financial aid is rising.

At a time when resources are declining and the demand for financial aid is increasing, colleges and universities must identify opportunities for reducing costs without negatively affecting their competitive edge and reputation for academic excellence. Retention of high performing faculty, including women, is more important than ever. It is the key to staying competitive, attracting donors, grantors and students, and keeping costs down by minimizing attrition.

**The High Costs of Attrition**

**How to Steal the Best Talent**

**Half of the Current Tenured Faculty Will Consider Retirement within 10 Years**

**Increasing Legal Liability for Employment Discrimination Claims**
An Opportunity to Gain a Competitive Advantage

As a Talent Pool, Women Are an Undertapped Resource
Women are leaving academia at disproportionately high rates at every stage of their academic career [18] “It is essential to put in place programs to retain women in order to achieve a diverse faculty. If you don’t have a department that appeals to women, you will limit your talent pool and may end up with a lesser candidate,” according to Chancellor Blumenthal at the University of California, Santa Cruz [19] Women today earn nearly half of all doctorate degrees, yet they constitute only 31% of tenured faculty and 24% of senior faculty nationwide [20] In science and engineering, women earn 40% of doctorate degrees but comprise only 28% of tenured or tenure-track faculty and 19% of senior faculty [21] Moreover, the higher the prestige of the institution, the lower the percentage of women. Women held 19% of senior and 26% of tenure-track faculty positions at doctoral-granting universities—but 47% of both types of positions at community colleges [22] “At the top research institutions, only 15.4% of the full professors in the social and behavioral sciences and 14.8% in the life sciences are women—and these are the only fields in science and engineering where the proportion of women reaches into the double digits” [23]

Women Who Want Children and Marriage Face Particularly High Barriers
Mothers are only half as likely as other candidates to gain a faculty position. In addition, fully 59% of married women with children are thinking of leaving academia, according to a 2000 survey of 800 postdoctoral fellows at U.C. Berkeley. This category of faculty “were far more likely than others to cite children as one of the reasons they changed their career goals away from academia, and they were the most likely to indicate that balancing career and family was a source of high stress for them.” [24] Married women, particularly those with children, are significantly less likely to relocate to advance their careers, which makes it harder to take academic jobs or to move to higher-ranked institutions [25] Women without children also leave academia because they see the standard academic career track as incompatible with childrearing, given that only one in three women who begins the tenure track without children ever has them [26] Academic institutions will never retain proportionate numbers of women until women—like men—find they can have both careers and families.

Family-Unfriendly Institutions Will Fail to Retain Men As Well As Women
I received a sneering denial by my chair [to my request for reduced duties to care for a new child], who said that while another male colleague at Berkeley may have enjoyed that “vacation” our department couldn’t spare my teaching services [27] If academic institutions present a chilly climate for mothers, they often present a frigid climate for fathers. Male faculty members (like their female colleagues) often feel the need to avoid having children, or hide their family responsibilities, in order to succeed. In a national survey of faculty, 10% of men “remained single because they did not have time for a family and a successful academic career.” Among parents, 9% of men “had one child, but delayed considering another until after they received tenure.” [28] 19% of men did not ask for a reduced teaching load when they needed it for family reasons, “because it would lead to adverse career repercussions.” One-third of faculty who were parents—mothers and fathers—did not ask for parental leave, and roughly 20% did not ask to stop the tenure clock, even though they thought they would have benefited from doing so [29] Institutions that fail to address faculty demands for bias free family friendly polices will see a rise in attrition among both male and female faculty.

The above is adapted from Joan C. Williams and Donna L. Norton, “Building Academic Excellence through Gender Equity,” American Academic 4, no. 1 (March 2008) 185-208

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