Addressing Workload Equity: Seven Strategies for Chairs

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Faculty workload within a department is often unequally distributed. Some faculty members do more research while others do more teaching, mentoring/advising, and service. Workload becomes unequal in a variety of ways: some faculty members are asked to do more service or advising while some are asked less frequently or are more likely to say no (O'Meara et al. 2017). Some faculty members volunteer more and are conscientious committee members while others do not contribute their share. Although these discrepancies may seem small, over time, workload inequalities accrue and contribute to longer times to advancement and promotion, lower satisfaction, and increased departure (Misra et al. 2021). Moreover, these discrepancies are not felt equally by all faculty members: women tend to do more teaching and service (O'Meara et al. 2017), and BIPOC faculty tend to engage in more mentoring/advising and diversity, equity, and inclusion-related service, with BIPOC women particularly burdened by inequitable workloads (Jimenez et al. 2019; Pittman 2010). Because many workload decisions are made at the department level, chairs play a critical role in strategically addressing faculty workload to maintain the health and productivity of the department.

In this article, we describe the work of the Faculty Workload and Rewards Project (FWRP), a National Science Foundation–funded research project aimed at enhancing fairness in the way faculty workloads are taken up, assigned, and rewarded. Our project worked with fifty-three departments in twenty different universities to analyze unit-level workload data, identify equity issues, and develop policies and practices to address them (O'Meara et al. 2021). We engaged directly with department members and department chairs to self-identify workload equity issues and develop new workload practices that succeeded within their local context(s) and cultures. Based on these experiences, we offer advice to chairs about ways to engage their departments in the process of strategic, equity-minded reform. We identify seven strategies chairs should consider as they address workload reform.

1. Don't bury your head in the sand. Faculty workloads have expanded in recent years, and they exploded during the pandemic. Our project reaffirmed the vast social science research that workload inequalities are real and also that they are gendered and racialized. Importantly, our project also showed that faculty are *keenly aware* that workload inequality exists. For example, women of color were more likely to report that they did not receive credit for the work they did while white women were more likely to report that the distribution of workload in their department was unfair (Misra et al. 2021). Given the implications of workload inequality for advancement, retention, and satisfaction, department chairs cannot afford to pretend that workload inequality does not exist. Not responding to workload inequality *is* a response, and it is likely to lead to a less diverse and less happy department.

2. Gather and use data. Lack of transparency is one of the major reasons workload inequalities emerge and persist. Chairs often do not know which department members are doing what and/or how much effort some faculty members expend as compared to others. Sometimes faculty activity reporting systems or annual/merit review processes will capture these data, but they still are not shared in a way that allows faculty members and chairs to benchmark individual workload against others. Creating easy-to-use, department-level work activity dashboards, or basic counts and averages of different kinds of work activities in table or graphic form, can therefore help chairs understand who is doing what, how much they are doing, and if some faculty members are over- (or under-) performing. We have previously laid out how to create these dashboards (O'Meara et al. 2020), including recommendations for how committee roles can be assigned different point values so that high-intensity work is not treated the same as low-intensity work.

3. Identify concrete issues to address. Using a work activity dashboard, chairs can better understand what the equity issues are and the groups they most affect. For instance, in our project, many departments analyzed their workload data and discovered that women associate professors did the bulk of department service work. Other departments realized that some faculty were assigned the vast majority of undergraduate advisees while others had few or none. Using a dashboard allows chairs to investigate what is going on in their department and to pinpoint the concrete places where more attention is needed.

4. Go for small wins, not total overhaul. Of course, it may be the case that a work activity dashboard reveals several different kinds of workload issues with multiple potential strategies that could be used to address them, and indeed, we report on several of these different policies and practices from our project (O'Meara et al. 2021). Rather than attempting a total overhaul of the department's entire workload, we recommend that chairs use a more incremental approach by addressing a specific workload issue, identifying a specific workload policy to attend to it, and ensuring that that policy is adapted and codified within the academic year. For example, in the case of the department where women associate professors were doing the bulk of committee service, creating faculty work expectation guidelines that outline

minimum service requirements by rank and appointment type can help better distribute the service load among department members. Likewise, creating a new advisee assignment system can help reduce the burden on faculty who are consistently sought after as advisers. Many chairs may feel that addressing service imbalances—for example, through giving teaching releases to overperformers—is not feasible. But we show that there are a wide range of policies that can be adopted (O'Meara et al. 2021). The point here is that no single policy will address all issues, but tying specific policies to specific issues and making changes over time helps ensure that progress is made in an ongoing way and helps department members feel that the process is worthwhile.

5. Engage department members. Throughout our project, it was evident that most department members and leaders care deeply about their departments and want to be engaged in making the department workload more equitable and fairer; they just do not know how to make change happen. Department members who prefer the status quo are not in the majority. Engaging the full department in the process, from presenting aggregate work activity dashboard data to getting feedback on the workload policies to be adopted, is critical for ensuring that policies are not viewed as a unilateral reform. Engagement can also enhance the extent to which faculty members feel agentic in their ability to make change within their departments and help to norm equitable workloads within shared decision-making. At the same time, chairs need to remain involved in these efforts and not pass off the "work" of workload reform to a department committee. Engagement from the chair emphasizes workload reform as a priority and ensures that it remains on the department's agenda.

6. Anticipate resistances and develop rationales. Chairs will always encounter resistances to change, no matter how well intentioned. We encourage chairs to anticipate resistances and to develop rationales for addressing them. For instance, we sometimes heard that departments were fearful that college or university administrators would use dashboards as a form of surveillance. In these cases, departments took precautions to clarify that the dashboard would only be used internally and would not be shared outside of the department. Alternatively, sometimes chairs worried that workload reform was possible only in departments with many resources to create tangible rewards like course releases. However, we worked with departments that found other ways to reward work, such as by giving back time, providing recognition and the ability to bank contributions, and/or having service commitments rotated. Anticipating resistances and clarifying the goals of workload reform will help chairs garner long-term buy-in to their efforts.

7. Consider equity issues on an ongoing basis. Our project engaged departments over a twelve- or eighteen-month period, during which departments identified, diagnosed, and implemented workload equity policies. We subsequently heard from these departments that their initial efforts had sparked ongoing department conversations about workload equity. Many departments continued to update their work activity dashboards and modify their workload policies, and these departments were more likely to see the work as successful. A short-term engagement with workload reform is less likely to have long-term effects. We encourage departments and department chairs to continually monitor and evaluate workload equity, particularly as new faculty members come into the department and/or there are departures, retirements, or promotions. As in other societal domains, equity in faculty workload will not be "achieved" but rather addressed, bit by bit, in an ongoing matter, with the involvement of all department members.

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Our Faculty Workload and Rewards Project revealed that there are more tools in a department chair's toolkit for addressing workload equity, including aggregating and examining workload data, developing and adopting a wide range of strategic and equity-minded policies and practices, and engaging the department in the process. We encourage chairs to be proactive and hope the strategies we outline here will help them successfully address workload inequities. ▲

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