

Life Course Events: The Chair's Role

Jay Meehan | November 22, 2016

We always hear people say “it’s the little things that can make a big difference.” For the most part, chairs and program directors are not structurally in a position to make “big things” happen during their tenure. So, paying attention to the little things and opportunities that can help those around you—students, administrative/clerical staff, faculty colleagues and administration—is one of the few ways of using what little power you may have to soften this bureaucratic structure called Oakland University.

I learned this lesson very young in life, having grown up in a juvenile detention home—a three-story structure in Bridgeport, CT where the juvenile inmates were locked in their rooms (cells with bars/security screen) 22 hours a day, with our family as the jailers living on the bottom floor. Softening the bureaucracy was necessary for both the inmates and their keepers to retain any semblance of humanity and dignity—stick with me here.

Life Course Events: Family and the Chair's Role

Several weeks ago, I was sitting in my office and could hear sounds of a very young baby on the fifth floor of Varner. I sought out where this delightful sound was coming from—one of our advisers was meeting with a male student, a very proud father who had to bring his daughter to his advising session. At first, the student was apologetic, thinking he had disturbed the floor. Nonsense! My first boss at the Center for Criminal Justice at Boston University supported me bringing my infant son to work, replete with a bassinet in my office so my wife could take her graduate seminars two afternoons a week. I spent time talking to the student about his career—and of course fawning over the child (as grandpas like me love to do). But I was not alone, several other colleagues also emerged from their offices to say hello—yep—you can tell “family friendly” when you see it.

Coincidentally, down the hall, another colleague had her four-year-old son in her office—quietly playing with some toys while Mom was cranking away on a report. Dad (also an OU employee) was in a big meeting on campus and a daycare “swap” for 2-3 hours was needed as Dad’s unit was not, shall we say, “family-friendly” like our department.

Preparing for Baby Arrivals During my time as chair, we had 12 births among our faculty and staff (a little more than one a year). In this count, I include a male colleague whose class schedule and service load was rearranged to accommodate his family’s needs. When you think about pregnancy and birth in terms of the chair role, it requires some important and strategic bureaucratic work: faculty leaves are different from staff leaves—with the former the AAUP contract and Academic HR need to be consulted, whereas the latter is handled by HR (*note here too, the CT contract should be consulted*).

Discussions with your faculty member need to center around such matters as tenure clock decisions, how to structure an administrative assignment for the faculty member to reduce the teaching load during the semester of birth, and how you can assist with arranging collegial coverage when your unit’s new baby arrives (did you catch that?—your unit’s) or if necessary, securing funding to hire a part-time person or arrange for faculty overload to cover classes. Strategize and advocate with your dean’s office and HR. Plan with your faculty who will be supporting this effort with their collegial coverage. We found too that students are very responsive and supportive of the faculty member when there is a clear plan for how the class will proceed after birth. Imagine that!

Also, don’t forget about the scheduling of future classes. Eight AM classes or night classes may be out of the picture for this colleague upon their return. **How can you encourage and support faculty colleagues who may have to re-adjust their “preferred” time slots or courses to support the unit’s new addition?**

I emphasize this idea that it is the “unit’s” responsibility because it is precisely at these times that the nebulous term “collegiality” should and can be translated into a series of practices that communicates to your faculty member and to ALL that we are, indeed “family-friendly.”

Setting the Tone for Support Again, this starts with the little things that can make a big difference. I recall the first time a faculty member sheepishly told me they were pregnant. I was elated for the couple and after all the hugs and congratulations they confided that they had been fearful of my reaction. WOW! Consider when you get news like this how you will react, because it will happen to you at some point and your colleague should not feel or be made to feel “apologetic.” Another colleague, who came to Oakland from “Big-Time U” immediately commented on the fact that faculty had pictures of children in their offices and their child’s art work on their walls and doors—all of which was informally sanctioned by their male colleagues at “Big-Time U” a.k.a. “Small-Mind U” in my view. As a faculty member and especially as chair, if a child was brought to an advising session or student meeting, I provided paper and coloring markers for them to draw AND had them hang their pictures on my wall and door—I still have a couple hanging on my door to this day.

Being a Strategist and Advocate Chairs play an important role as both strategists and advocates for their faculty. And these efforts are critical to recruitment and retention of faculty. The many issues impacting our female colleagues are outlined in 2013 Women in Science and Engineering (WISE) faculty climate survey: “Family-related concerns ...included the difficulties in combining motherhood and a career, issues of timing and pregnancy, and the lack of adequate day care available to faculty members.” The WISE report (link provided [here](#)) contains an in-depth analysis and some important recommendations that I would encourage you to read. Better yet, **come to Kathy Moore’s Chairs’ Forum on Monday, December 5 from 12-1:30 p.m.** to learn more about “**Mentoring Faculty**” which is based upon her team’s excellent work on the WISE NSF grant.

Beyond the Little Things: Structural Changes that Can Make a Difference

My two grandchildren are breast-fed by their working mother. Their local office (70+ employees) has a lactation room which provides a comfortable, clean and private place to pump breast milk. The research is clear that not having such spaces results in lower percentages of breast-feeding and sticking to it (which has clear health advantages for children). Most large corporations have lactation rooms and many (e.g., Citibank) provide industrial-grade medical pumps for mothers to use.

Search OU’s website for lactation rooms and what do you get? Zero results. Search the University of Michigan website and what do you get? Just over 50 lactation room sites across campus, with 1-4 star ratings of each site using national standards. As I understand the situation at Oakland, lactations rooms are in the women's bathrooms--which are not recommended by national standards--one in the Oakland Center and one in North Foundation Hall. Can we do better than this for the well-being of the women of OU and their young infants?

Daycare and the Lowry Center I also found as chair that faculty and staff who availed themselves of the Lowry Center were very happy to have this resource on campus. However, what has always surprised me is that the Lowry Center is NOT a faculty staff-benefit, i.e., cost of care supported in some significant way by the university for their employees. And what about the needs of our students? Over the course of this semester, two (very conscientious) student-moms in one of my classes had their daycare plans unexpectedly disrupted and they needed to miss class because there was no daycare option that could accommodate such emergency. Their dilemma was the need for occasional care for their children. Again, as I understand it that is not possible with Lowry in part because they have to be self-supporting (which likely precludes such models) as opposed to having university support that allows them to better serve the variety of needs in our Oakland “family.”

When we think about retention and graduation rates and about that population of non-traditional students who are going to school and raising children—are we effectively serving the needs of this group? One wonders too how staff and faculty could benefit from an emergency Lowry option—think of my colleague (and her Oakland husband) above with their child in the office for two hours. What if our unit did not have a “family-friendly” culture where a colleague felt comfortable having their child in the office for an extended period of time? What choices would they have? One or the other would have had to give up “work” that afternoon, and the research indicates there is little doubt who the likely “choice” would have been.

So, we need not restrict ourselves to doing the little things that can make a big difference. There are some big things we can and should advocate for on behalf of our faculty colleagues, staff and students.