

UNIVERSITY COMMITTEE ON WOMEN FACULTY AND STUDENTS
UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME
MEETING OF DECEMBER 11, 2009
9:00-10:30 a.m. Room 500, Main Building

Members present: Susan Ohmer, Sr. Susan Dunn, Maura Ryan, Amy Barrett, Laura Carlson, Angie Chamblee, Tracy Bergstrom, Kathie Newman, Allison Regier, Amber Handy, Robyn Grant

Members absent and excused: Don Pope-Davis, Susan Sheridan, Diane Wagner, Ken Milani, Nella McOsker

Permanent Invited Guests present: Jannifer Crittendon, Catherine Pieronek, Ava Preacher, Heather Rakoczy

Other invited guests: Jessica Collett

1. Introductions and Welcome: Prof. Susan Ohmer, chair, greeted members and invited all to introduce themselves. She reviewed the agenda, noting that invited guest Prof. Jessica Collett will present her research on Notre Dame graduate student life.

2. Approval of minutes of October meeting: Prof. Amy Barrett made a motion to approve the October minutes; Sue Dunn seconded the motion. The minutes were unanimously approved.

3. Presentation: Dr. Jessica Collett, Assistant Professor, Sociology and Fellow, Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies: Prof. Ohmer introduced the topic by noting that she first became familiar with Prof. Collett's work while at a meeting in the Graduate School where Professor Collett's survey of Notre Dame graduate students was discussed. Prof. Ohmer invited Prof. Collett to present her findings to this committee.

Prof. Collett gave a brief history of the project. She has long had interest in the choices and satisfactions of graduate students. As part of the funding process, she asked permission of Dean Sterling, Graduate School, to survey Notre Dame graduate students, to serve as a pilot project for her larger study. She noted that graduate students are difficult to study, and that they face a unique set of circumstances, combining study with a series of life course events; this is especially true for women. Currently, women are getting more divorces than men in graduate school, perhaps because they are feeling pressure to choose between career and family. online survey of Notre Dame graduate students' satisfaction and success looked to find some of the reasons behind these statistics.

The survey garnered a 50% response rate. Prof. Collett has broken down the data by gender and department. Students volunteered and were randomly selected for interviews; she has conducted 50 interviews. The results reported today are derived primarily from the survey. Prof. Collett noted that some departments are overrepresented in the interviews; she has theorized that in these departments, graduate students are 'pretty unhappy.' The data needs further analysis to confirm this first impression.

Prof. Collett presented general results. Women are significantly more satisfied with their personal progress toward a degree and personal goals. This is expressed by the statement “I am doing the best I can.” However, women are significantly less satisfied with departmental support for a career/life balance. Their satisfaction is embedded in the context of ‘the toxic environment’ of the departments. Humanities students are significantly more satisfied than are students in the other three colleges. Women get more psychological support from family and friends, in part because they seek support. Men tend to see themselves as going ‘solo.’

Women experience more conflict between their personal and work responsibilities, which causes them more stress than it causes men. Men see the career/life stress as a part of life, whereas women view it as ‘inflicted’ upon them. Students in the College of Engineering have much more traditional gender ideologies than in other Colleges, and have more traditional gender ideologies than women do. Students who are married are more satisfied than single students; single women students are having a difficult time. This is in part a question of time/work management. In a career in which one can work without stop, single people do not have the cultural cues for taking breaks, such as family time. Married people, but not those who are cohabitating, have developed strategies for balance.

Those whose funding comes from external sources are less satisfied with their graduate student experience. In part, funding separates students from the departmental work, as these students are generally not TAs or RAs or involved in research and so may not hang out with other graduate students in the department. More than half the students want to work at research institutions; these tend to be the students who are more satisfied. Which factor influences the other is not yet clear.

Some students suffer from ‘imposter syndrome.’ This refers to the sense that one does not really belong and will be revealed as a fraud. Students in Humanities are particularly prone to this condition. High achieving women are more likely to suffer. These students tend to get less sleep and exercise, which can compound the problem. In fact, many who suffer from this syndrome are actually really talented, as previous research supports.

Women in Humanities list ‘graduate student’ as their most salient identity, while men list some other role, such as spouse. Women are more likely than men to change career goals in graduate school, downscaling the goal. One reason for this might be their propensity to feel like imposters, but also they may also be affected by cultural ideals regarding femininity, motherhood, and appropriate priorities for women. Women are more likely than men to return to work more quickly after a birth or adoption.

Prof. Collett invited questions and comments. Prof. Maura Ryan said this set of data about Notre Dame graduate students is enormously useful. She asked if the perception of women that they ‘are doing the best they can’ is related to the imposter syndrome and wondered whether faculty communications contribute to this perception. Prof. Ryan noted that in her department men receive much more positive feedback than do women. Members discussed the established culture for male faculty and students to interact—jogging or playing basketball, banter in and out of the classroom. Prof. Collett said that she hopes to further explore student perceptions of self worth with the data from the interviews. She has

asked questions about relationships and about contact with faculty. Women students talk about the lack of communication with female faculty about the career/life balance. Prof. Collett emphasized that both male and female students are looking for specific suggestions about how to be a good faculty member as well as a good family member. This type of mentoring appears to be very uncommon at Notre Dame.

Prof. Carlson asked about the link between students who appear to be making appropriate progress toward goals and their level of anxiety about success. Prof. Collett said the interviews have identified students whose paper trail demonstrates strong success at the tasks of the graduate student, and yet they are driven by a desire to 'get out of here.' Carlson said this suggests interventions that tend to be targeted to the struggling student may well be overlooking a significant population. Prof. Collett said women are motivated in one of two directions: either they reduce their goals and leave graduate study or they are driven to work extraordinarily hard. She said the imposter syndrome is a complex driver.

In response to comments, Prof. Collett said that women have the perception that a successful career/life balance is not possible. They occasionally identify a faculty member as 'superwoman,' but they do not think they can achieve that themselves, and they are acutely aware that they do not know how the superwoman does it. Faculty members are indeed leading the life the graduate student women think they want, but the students do not 'have the manual' for how to achieve this. Prof. Collett described the outcome of a Kaneb Center workshop that featured successful women faculty. Attending students reported that the solution is either a househusband or a husband with a very flexible job. Tips for achieving a successful balance were not provided, and they are anxious for practical feedback and tips. Ms. Preacher asked if the difference could be accounted to the age of the responders. Prof. Collett said she has not asked age in her interviews, although she has taken notes on personal characteristics in the interview process. She has noted that those students who were parents when they commenced graduate school seem more settled in their chosen path. Younger students are more apt to question their choices.

Ms. Crittendon commented that the imposter syndrome is one that sometimes affects minority students, shown by similar studies conducted with regard to minorities in school or the workplace. She asked about the traditional gender ideologies expressed by some male graduate students. Prof. Collett noted that the gender-focused questions on the survey were drawn from established gender studies research. At Notre Dame a large number of male graduate students have stay-at-home wives, so they are already self-selecting into traditional gender patterns. The male graduate students consistently expressed a strong drive to 'get a job.' Women graduate students, on the other hand, appear to be in less traditional living situations here. And, she said, there was little racial imposter syndrome data collected in part because the level of diversity is low.

Prof. Pieronek asked for more details about the Engineering students' ideological attitudes, which had been statistically noticeable in the survey data. Prof. Collett said she would be glad to share the engineering data with Prof. Pieronek, since half of the Engineering graduate students participated in the survey.

Prof. Newman asked about the impact of environment on the data reported: is Notre Dame unique, because of its religious, private and/or internal climate? Prof. Collett said that the sample is not fully representative yet, in this pilot project. In the interviews, she noted, the graduate students often used Notre Dame's culture as a target, either making the excuse that Notre Dame is known to be more conservative or accusing the University of not living up to its reputation as a family friendly, Catholic university which is concerned with social justice and equal rights. Yet, drawing on her own experience at a large, public university, Prof. Collett said that women appear to be facing similar issues all over the country.

Members discussed the complexities of cohabitation for graduate students at Notre Dame. One member reported that the campus community tends to be blind and deaf on this subject, never alluding to a cohabitation situation. This can present stress, especially for the woman. Prof. Collett mentioned that women who cohabit here are usually in a relationship with another graduate student, which can be supportive. However, generally it is the woman who assumes the 'second shift' tasks of meals, laundry and housekeeping, which is experienced as an inequality without the security of marriage.

Prof. Barrett observed that the issues that have been identified are issues that these students will continue to face in the professional world. Prof. Collett agreed that research clearly establishes that women experience career/life conflict in industry; however, her survey did not include Law or MBA students. She noted that this stage is a pivotal one for the graduate students, when decisions are getting made, so it would be an opportune time to address these issues. Engineering has devised a program which the students really value: they offer more tailored advising which helps students overcome reluctance to state more honestly their long term goals, particularly when those goals deviate from the standard research professorship. Members discussed the lack of an 'old girls network' that could provide more open communication and mentoring for women graduate students. They noted the sensitivity felt even by women faculty in alluding to familial topics. Sometimes this can result in a backlash reaction when women graduate students ask for advice. Prof. Collett noted that male graduate students, who increasingly are looking for ways to balance career without sacrificing children and spouse, also experience the sense of isolation inherent in the model presented by senior faculty.

Prof. Newman said that as Director of Graduate Studies, she has noticed an increase in the percentage of graduate students who go onto jobs at Research-1 universities; the culture is about producing "R-1" researchers. Some graduate students thought that Notre Dame would be more family friendly that it has proved to be, which has surprised and sometime troubled them.

Prof. Collett briefly summarized a list of ten potential changes she has compiled from the data. These changes include more organized GSU social events, a designated lactation station, a playgroup for the academic mothers, counseling for graduate student concerns, a graduate student advocate who is independent of departmental ties, more religious opportunities tailored specifically for graduate student (and family) needs, more focused and practical mentoring, assistance with daycare—paying for it, finding it, emergency care, and a family friendly policy for conference funding

Prof. Ohmer summarized members' response to Prof. Collett's presentation: this information is a revelation. She asked Prof. Collett what she would suggest as the next step in making use of this data for the benefit of graduate students. Prof. Collett's final report will be ready in Spring 2010; she is interested in presenting it to a campus-wide audience, and would also welcome the opportunity to present the formal findings to the committee. She noted that graduate students need to know they have been heard. Prof. Ohmer spoke for members in saying that both types of presentation would be valuable, and that the committee could begin to address some of the issues highlighted by Prof. Collett's research. Prof. Collett asked members to contact her with questions and/or recommendations. In response to a question, she said that the data could be shared with other campus groups if presented as preliminary, raw data; she has not yet run a final statistical model.

Prof. Ohmer thanked Prof. Collett for her detailed and informative presentation.

4. Update on Mapother Lunches and nominations: Prof. Ohmer introduced the topic of the Mapother lunches by reviewing their history. William Mapother is a 1987 alumnus of Notre Dame who has funded a regular series of lunches to improve contacts between administration officials and women faculty and 'to help female faculty thrive and advance at Notre Dame.' The criteria are that of the four women faculty chosen each semester, two be tenured and two untenured; the faculty are invited to speak on behalf of the Committee. The lunches have been notably successful, as the small size invites breakthrough conversation. At a recent lunch, for instance, one faculty member asked if the university could create a clear and explicit one-page pregnancy policy.

Prof. Ohmer said the list of fifteen nominees compiled by the committee two years ago has been nearly exhausted; she asked members for more nominees. Several names were offered and noted by Prof. Ohmer who will continue to extend to faculty an invitation to lunch and conversation with administration. Prof. Ohmer welcomed further nominees, including committee members, via email.

5. Updates:

ECDC Committee—additional member from UCWFS: Prof. Ohmer reminded members that UCWFS in 2007-08 and 2008-09 partnered with the ECDC committee. She said that a Spring 2010 venue is being planned where Linda Kroll can report to a campus audience the report she presented to this committee last spring. The ECDC committee has established an internal standing committee to discuss childcare. John Affleck-Graves is a member of that committee. UCWFS has been offered another representative for the committee; Prof. Ohmer suggested a graduate student might be a useful presence. Amber Handy volunteered to fill that spot.

This standing committee represents an ongoing forum for the discussion of childcare needs, such as the need for infant care of children up to two years in age. The website offers an information source for campus parents who need babysitters or structured forms of childcare. Members wondered about liability issues in seeming to recommend childcare; that issue is being studied

Moreau Postdoctoral Fellowship program: Prof. Ohmer said the deadline for applications to the Moreau Postdoctoral Fellowship program was yesterday. 304 applications were received for the two positions for which the University has allocated funding and the Provost's office anticipates that funding will be available for additional fellowships. The number of applications is truly phenomenal and represents a quite diverse group from a wide range of fields. A number of the proposed projects have a gender studies focus; the Gender Studies Steering Committee has asked to weigh in during the decision-making process. The applications come from many great institutions and the projects amply represent both Catholic interests and research topics. The Fellowship has been the focus of many in administration, including Prof. Ohmer, Prof. Don Pope-Davis, and Jannifer Crittendon, and this level of response is pleasing to all.

The process for choosing begins with the Provost Office as the initial clearing house, from where the applications will be sent out to departments which will rank them in consultation with the Dean. The narrowed pile will come to the Selection committee, which is looking for a mix of Fellows representing a variety of colleges and interests. Prof. Ohmer said the University is interested in keeping the Fellows for Teaching and Research Positions. She reported that the program had received much praise from academia because the positions—which include benefits—are a boon in these difficult economic times.

Diversity website: The Diversity website is still in development, as OIT irons out technology issues.

Human resources website update: The Human Resources website is going to be updated to include information such as family friendly policies. Here, too, one can find regular updates on the ongoing installation of lactation rooms. A new HR staff member has been hired; Prof. Ohmer noted that a future agenda item would be to invite her to attend the meeting for an exchange of ideas. Ms. Regier asked why no lactation rooms appear in the plans for the renovation of the first two floors of Hesburgh Library. Ms. Bergstrom said that a lactation room has been created on the 5th floor of the Library; she will confirm to the committee that it is fully operational. Prof. Ohmer welcomed this concrete result of a long campaign to equip the campus with such facilities. It was noted that two lactation rooms have recently opened in the basement of Grace Hall as well.

Spring ECDC and Dual Career Services town halls: Prof. Ohmer briefly stated that the ECDC and Dual Career Services town hall meetings would take place in spring, 2010.

As time had expired, Prof. Ohmer thanked members and especially thanked Prof. Collett for her informative report on the concerns of Notre Dame graduate students.