



Cornell University
Faculty Work Life Survey

Faculty Voices

Faculty Speak on Integration and Quality of Work Life at Cornell

In November of 2004, Provost Biddy Martin charged an Advisory Committee on Faculty Work Life “to examine the tenured and tenure-track faculty work life and working climate, with a special emphasis on the experiences of women faculty.”

One effort of this committee involved a series of seven faculty focus groups addressing “quality of work life” conducted in the spring of 2005. These focus groups were sometimes mixed-gender and sometimes same gender; sometimes mixed-rank and sometimes homogeneous with respect to tenure status. All groups were tape recorded and all tapes were transcribed.

The material that follows over subsequent pages is drawn from the transcripts of those focus groups and represents faculty speaking in their own voices *on themes relating to their sense of integration* with their colleagues or with the university more broadly. This material – presented as twelve “voices” – may be useful in increasing our understanding of what it means to “belong” as a faculty member at Cornell.

To maintain the confidentiality of participants, the “voices” herein are most often composites of narratives drawn from more than one focus group participant. As such, even while the material in this document draws from actual accounts, each voice may be best considered fictionalized.

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Dawn

Important and Valued

To me, a quality work life implies that I am important and valued; that I am a full member of my department; and that I am encouraged to be productive. The environment that is meaningful is not one that is primarily defined by the physical facilities, but one that is created by people. My environment is one defined by people and their attitudes. As a faculty person, this includes everything from departmental colleagues to the students who work with me. A quality work life means being able to work with my colleagues, and valuing their work, and wanting to collaborate. It means wanting to come to work to see my colleagues and say, "Good morning."

I've found Cornell to be more of a family than the other places I have worked. I think that this has to do with the fact that Ithaca itself is a smaller place. I don't know if it's just the geographic location, but I felt a warmer atmosphere overall at Cornell. And that has made me quite happy.

Overall, I feel like have been given the equipment and resources, and to some extent the time, to do what I need to do for my research program and for teaching. I haven't felt like I haven't been able to do something because I don't have the money to do it, or that I don't have a piece of equipment to do it. There has always been a strong level of support: if you need to do something, then we will find a way to make it work. I don't find it a struggle. People aren't fighting me. It seems that is just the general atmosphere in my department: that people want to help each other out; that everybody wants to create a good thing.

Ruth

Member of an Orphan Discipline

I've been here for more than twenty years. To me, "quality of work life" reflects the ways in which we're treated, the ways in which we're valued, the ways in which our work is appreciated, and the autonomy we're given. Over these two decades at Cornell there has been a great deal of variation in my experience regarding all of those things, from being wonderful... from my saying, "This is the best job I could have," "The best place I could ever work," to saying, "I can't stand going to work, it is impossible."

In the early days when I was here, there was an enormous amount of sharing and mutual appreciation and maybe somewhat more homogeneity about particular values. By "values," I mean a fundamental agreement on why we were here. But this is certainly not the case with the particular crew who's here now.

As it happened, there has been a theoretical shift in my field — an approach divide. Things have happened in our field that have changed it, and consequently the people who are the most senior are theoretically and methodologically different from the people who are more junior.

Our chair is on one side of this divide. He ensures that in all important committees where decisions are made, his camp is well-represented. I do not share the methodological approach of my chair. So even though I'm a full professor, I serve on no department committees of any consequence. I serve on committees in the University and the College, but none of us who are in this "orphan discipline" are valued or represented within the department in any way. It is so frustrating to not have any decision-making power, any say, because of this disciplinary divide. I would like to be a contributing member of the department, and I cannot be, because our current chair will not allow anybody who doesn't share his basic approach to be in a position of any kind of power.

Deans have to be extremely careful in the chairs they choose, because the way a chair is set up, they have a lot of power. It has to be a person who's not only very good at pushing paper, but also kind and humane at managing people... and especially people with very disparate interests.

Lewis

A Loss of Community

One of the things that was influential in my deciding to accept an offer from Cornell many years ago was the fact that Cornell had this reputation for being a relatively humane place. At least in my field, Cornell was very special in that way, and quite unusual compared to its Ivy peers. There was a sense that when you arrive here that you were a member of the community and not just an employee. One was integrated very quickly into the life of the community. There are disadvantages to this approach—such as in terms of doing extra administrative work or mentoring—but it is something that I think is distinctive about Cornell at least in terms of the sort of the departments in my field more generally.

But the Cornell that I began with was different. I think it had to do with this isolation in many ways. It produced amazing things. There was kind of a monastic dimension to this place and a kind of intensity resulting from that kind of monastic quality. There has been a sort of unspoken form of contact between those who have been members of the community for 20 or 25 years, which I've seen changing. The model, I think, is changing. I think Cornell is really looking, at least in our area, at different kinds of models. I think that the model of the employee—the sense of being a cog in a kind of mechanism, of being a player in the organization—is starting to surface a little bit. The result may be a loss in that community.

Libby

Bad Guys in a Department

If you like the way your department makes decisions and gets along, then day-to-day you're probably reasonably happy.

But there are two kinds of bad guys in a department. The lesser of the two evils is the person that doesn't do enough. But I am willing to do more than the average share when I know there are other people who are also willing to more than the average share to make up for the people who won't do anything for anybody else. And as long as there is a group of people like that with whom I can identify, then I'm okay.

The other kind of bad guy is the person who wants to do everything. And, they want to control you. This kind of person proposes ideas that are completely preposterous in general – but are definitely personally valid for them as individuals – without any shame whatsoever.

Many of these people thrive on conflict. Our system seems to select for those individuals. If you get a couple of those within a department...! Maybe a department can handle one, but if you get a couple, it changes the whole sense of the department, the whole climate of the department.

I find that very stressful and it seems so unfair. We have this sense of fairness that everything should be done in a nice reasonable way. And you see these jerks sort of getting their way just by force of effort and the fact that most of us say, well, I don't want to deal with that.

People I know in government and industry – and whether this is good or bad, I'm not sure having spent almost my entire career in a university – they often have HR people who deal with some of these conflicts. You just go to the HR person and they're supposed to deal with a lot of these things. You don't have to figure all this stuff on your own, spending all your time and energy.

In my department, it's clear that if there's a problem with a person, they come to me. I am the HR person.

Joseph

How Can Two People Get Together Given Their Careers?

There are various sorts of complications that enter in when it's no longer the case that one spouse is willing to sort of do something that doesn't quite match their professional expectations. Certainly it was the case with my wife, who clearly found herself doing something other than what she wanted to do.

That creates all kinds of other problems. I've known this to be case with other academics of my generation as well, you know, people commuting for 10, 15 years. Couples with two apartments on opposite sides of the country, living in airports, or arranging rendezvous at conference destinations. Sometimes that can be romantic, but it doesn't work for everyone and it doesn't work with kids.

These arrangements are symptomatic of the kinds of pressures on academic couples today who are not necessarily willing to set one or the other career aside. It creates all sorts of morale problems among the faculty. It gets very complicated. It affects productivity. It affects everything.

One of the things that I've noticed with the younger faculty is that they don't have families. I think this is the result of the pressures that they face, both intra-personally, somehow trying to resolve this question of how can two people get together given their careers, and also the increased pressures that they face relative to promotion and so on. I believe it is increasingly harder for them to contemplate having families.

When partners do manage to arrange for two positions at Cornell, there are consequences for the organization in terms of the autonomy of departments. Sometimes when there is somebody suitable, but doesn't quite seem to be a truly top-notch person... a sort of "also-ran" kind of feeling comes in and pervades everything. The pair would really do well, actually, both being employed, but one of those departments is going to feel a little bit short-changed.

The result, I think, is that the arrangements sometimes fail despite good intentions of the University. Eight or ten years as a senior lecturer... after a certain point, there's this history to the relationship that cannot be surmounted when it comes time to deal with competing offers from another institution.

Heddie

There's No Mentoring Here

I feel like I have to say yes to everything, because I don't know that I can say no.

It truly never ever occurred to me that one could be mentored until recently when our department had an external review. Our external reviewers said, "Wow! There's no mentoring here!" And then it occurred to me: I'm just floating around, sort of making up how I fit in the University.

I think mentoring goes beyond academics. Ideally, your mentor should be someone you can feel comfortable with, because half of the time, the academic stuff is affected by personal stuff. And honestly... I just almost feel like... well, who can I trust? You really don't want something to be used against you.

Perhaps if you establish a personal bond with your mentor, then it works well. At this point, I have a so-called "official mentor," and I'm using quote, unquote because that's what the department chair tells me: quote, unquote.

I think Cornell hopes to rely a lot on mentors, but it's kind of spotty. If you've got a great mentor who thinks to tell you, "Oh there's this resource," then you're lucky. Otherwise, you have to wait till you stumble on it. It's so hard to ask questions that are trivial. Like, is this problem really serious enough for me to go bother this person and ask them about it? Everyone's so busy, and after a while you feel really bad. That could be a gender thing, by the way.

We need some sort of proactive mentoring where the senior person who has been through it can say: let me give you this piece of advice about how to do this because you don't even know what the question is. If the mentoring is about just waiting for you to ask a question, it's a problem. First, you might not ask questions because you're shy or embarrassed that you don't know the answer. Second and more importantly: you might not know what question to ask.

As a very concrete example: consider that I have never really known how to use the administrative assistants in the department. That is one of those mysterious things to me. Occasionally, I have given an admin. assistant some things to do and she kind of looked at me funny. And once she actually told me, "Well, I'm not going to do *that*." And so I had to go do it myself. I was never really sure what I could ask them to do, and the result is that I do too much myself.

Anna

A Special Connection

When I was a graduate student, I was very impressed by the work of a professor at another institution. I just loved her work. I felt some sort of special connection to it.

I told one of my own professors, "I would love to work with this woman. I mean, she is superb!" For whatever reason, I think he didn't want me to go on about her. He didn't want to hear any more about it. Dismissively he said, "Well, why don't you call her?" And I did. I called her. Well that turned out to be the best move I ever made.

I called her at her home. I talked to her, and we had many interests in common. Eventually, this woman became my mentor. Not only that, but now she is a dear friend... one of my best friends. During our early phone calls, she also gave me the name of another scholar, and she said, "Okay, you need help. And we're going to help you. Both of us." Both women. One was a specialist in my field, and the other was retired. My mentor actually read my work. She advised me. In due time, I finally went to visit her. She really mentored me and then we became true friends.

When I came to Cornell, I didn't have a mentor here, but I had these two women helping me from afar. This was very important to me, and I think this may be very important for other women as well. We don't tend have many mentors. I don't know whether men do or not. Sometimes, they do.

Sammi

Not Technical Enough

For me, the quality of my work life is shaped by the extent to which there is an acceptance of different kinds of methodologies. I almost didn't take the job here because there were members of the faculty who were really quite opposed to my overall approach. I knew that coming in, and that immediately set me up for a sense of being "different than" and being defensive.

I'm interested in things that I would consider less traditional in my field. They're not totally technical and they're sort of what people call softer issues. They're often not considered as difficult or as important by some people. My experience has been that that also has a gender component. Sometimes, I don't participate in things as fully I might because I'm still very hesitant about appearing not technical enough.

I would like to feel part of a broader intellectual community here. I haven't found the opportunity to talk to others in different kinds of fields. If we had some way to create more of a faculty community... for everyone, but particularly for singles.

Charles

There Has to be Access to Information

I'm not sure that everyone knows how this place works. In fact, I am not sure that *anyone* knows how this place works. Maybe it has to do with complexity of being part-state and part-private. But add to that: I didn't grow up in the American system, so I find it absolutely un-transparent. Even the basic stuff: What is a dean? What is a provost? Who is doing what? What are these committees and what do they do? Perhaps the information is out there, but in the little bit of time I had to put into getting it, I couldn't find anything organized well enough for me to digest quickly.

I believe that in order for there to be equity, there has to be access to information.

My research is a delight and challenges me intellectually. It is the practical aspects of being successful that stump me. Things like hiring staff and managing grant monies.

At a low point for me, a colleague in my department recommended a very practical book about how to recruit and lead a research team. This small handbook has been extremely useful to me, in terms of truly *practical* advice. I wish I had gotten such practical information during my orientation experience! Instead, I was told in so many ways all day long that one must get tenure. I didn't know where to look for answers about these practical questions. And as a new faculty member, I certainly didn't know the answers, as I'd never been a professor before.

More recently, I spent a semester studying in an on-campus center and relieved from teaching. Apparently, no one in my department knew that faculty weren't supposed to be given new freshman advisees when they are in the center, as they are on leave. I got ten new advisees.

So at the center, there's this little trail of people in and out of my door. The director of the center asked, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm having my advisees' meetings." He was alarmed, and this all made for a really awkward situation.

A lot of times I feel like I don't know what I'm supposed to do. I just don't know the rules! Information across the board would help a lot of these quality-of-life issues.

Mia

It's Hurting

My Career

I wonder who came up with the idea that you can combine motherhood with a career! It seems to be a feminist ideal to do that. But to me, a feminist ideal would be to create an environment where you can be parents and other things. Women have had to do both things and indeed this is what I think should be done. But clearly it's hurting my career. I'm trying! But I don't want my child in daycare until 6 when he goes to bed at 7. I have six hours a day of day care right now. For my job, I would need a lot more. But for the sake of my child, I don't want it. Frankly, I just don't want any more day care.

My child has special needs, and went through a period in the hospital. While this was going on, I had the support of one of my colleagues, who actually took over one of my classes. The rest of my colleagues really made it very difficult for me. They sent me email messages that I was going to lose my job. I actually paid another of my colleagues, paid him out of my own pocket, to replace me in my other class. I could not come back, it was impossible. My colleagues kept sending me messages, and emailing friends in other departments: I was going to lose my job. I was terribly pressured by my colleagues. I had to request a leave of absence.

I have never had any gender issues my whole career until I became a mother. This has been the only time where I have felt, "Oh my gosh! It's *hard* to be a woman and do this." Parenting a young child is a really short period – six years. Anything the University can do to facilitate faculty parenting would help.

Wilma

The Incredible Invisible Woman

Is there an effective way to communicate or to educate both the graduate students and the faculty on differences in communication styles? Our faculty meetings are great because we follow our Robert's Rules of Order and everybody has a chance to speak and everybody's respectful. But if I get together with the four guys in my area, I cannot get a word in edgewise.

There have been multiple incidents in my life where I've been the incredible, invisible woman and the guys will have a conversation and not even look at me even when I'm trying to participate in it. I mean, I'm just not considered on the same level. I don't know how to respond to that without being rude, which I don't think is going to help me.

A former faculty member almost hit me in the face twice when I first met him. There were four of us standing in a square and he was talking to the colleague next to me. He was very excited, and is taller than I am. I am petite and he was waving his hands and he kept stepping forward, and towards me. His hand came so close to my face! The other people moved over because he was infringing on their personal space. Then he did it again: he just about hit me in the face.

Recently, we had a meeting to discuss funding for prospective graduate students. As I was listening to other people talk, it suddenly struck me that the way they were evaluating the students who had visited was different from the way that I was. When I was a perspective student, I think I was sort of looking towards making a personal connection with the people there and seeing: do I feel comfortable in this environment and do the people seem nice and is this a place that I could live? I wasn't trying to impress people with how much I know about technical things and in fact I think I would've avoided doing so for fear of looking like I was showing off. But at this meeting, it occurred to me the faculty were basing their decisions on funding students on how well they demonstrated their technical knowledge during the campus visit. This seemed to work against at least one young woman. I sort of stuck up for her because I really related to her and I saw myself in her.

I resist talking about women's issues in my department, partly because it's never one egregious thing, but usually a lot of little things that just wear you out.

Beth

The Look and Feel of Authority

When I think about the culture of the work place, I don't think of the written work rules, but rather the norms, accepted practices, and rituals that are enacted in departmental events and that sort of thing. The senior faculty and the deans can tinker with the culture a little bit, but it also comes up from students, administrative assistants, and everyone else.

There's something about a man between 50 and 70: he just has the look and feel of authority. In contrast, women at all levels are viewed differently. Different problems come their way because they are women and they are dealt with differently because they are women. It may not be intentional and often it's not overt, but it's there. It's mostly little things—a female colleague appears in the newspaper, and it doesn't get put on the bulletin board, for example—that individually seem insignificant. But over time they add up.

Several years ago, I was promoted. The title on my door has never been changed. For every other faculty member in the department who has been similarly promoted, the plate on the door is changed immediately. Why is that? I believe it is because I don't have an administrative assistant who mothers me.

It's funny: when I'm most aware of my gender, at work, is with the administrative assistants. They call some of my colleagues "professor." They don't call me professor. I also feel like I have a hard time negotiating with them. I've had instances where I feel as though they speak to me or complain about me in a way that they wouldn't had I been a man. I feel that if my colleague had sent the same email, or said the same thing, it would have just been taken as, "Here is a professor telling me to do something. And he doesn't have to be particularly nice about it, because he's busy. He just is telling me to do my job." But with me, it seems that a certain amount of cattiness goes on.

Another side to it is that I've got more and more students. It's not unusual that there is a knock on my door and somebody just pops in and says, "I know I'm not your advisee, but I heard that you are somebody nice and can I bother you for two minutes?" They say that the reason they didn't talk to Professor A is because he's always busy. Is it because I look more like a student that I look less busy?