Research Brief
Access and Definition: Exploring how STEM faculty, Department Head's and University Policy Administrators Navigate the Implementation of a Parental Leave Policy
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Background

Updating policies or offering new policies can be used to address the ongoing difficulties in attracting and retaining under-represented populations in many segments of STEM, including academic STEM fields. Paid parental leave policies, one such group of policies, offer faculty members some allotment of paid time to dedicate to birth or adoption of a child. However policies like parental leave policies often run into problems when executed by an institution—building on past research we aim to delve into some of these difficulties.

Purpose

Some of our past research revealed difficulties STEM faculty members encounter when attempting to use the policy. One point we discovered in past research was that faculty members had widely divergent results in accessing the policy; thus in this paper we look deeper into how and who faculty members learn about the policy from. Secondly, our respondents indicated there was some divergence in what form faculty members leave packages took. Our second goal was to explore this point further, and understand who contributed tot he final leave package faculty members received.

Methods

Our data are come from interviews with STEM faculty who were eligible for or who took advantage of the parental leave policy at the institution, as well as policy administrators and department head's who oversaw its usage. We interviewed university members about their experience with the policy, aspects that went well, aspects that went less well, why they chose to use it (or not), among other topics. We analyzed the data for (1) discussions on how faculty members learned about the policy and (2) who was involved with the final policy package, and how that was decided.

Results

We found that, in addition to formal access to the policy, such as through the policy website, many faculty members relied on informal information networks. These networks included other faculty members, staff, their department head and their business office. Preliminary results suggest those with more developed networks may be more likely to better evaluate the policy and its usefulness to the faculty member. The second theme concerned actual policy packages. Department Head's, the leave taker themselves, the business office and policy administrators all have an official role in implementing the policy in a given case. The views of these other members on the network can influence the final package a faculty members receive.

Conclusions

In examining how faculty members do or do not access the policy as well as what their final policy package looks like, we uncovered two models for talking about faculty members experience with the policy. One model is an information or access network and the other a power or definition network. Insight into how faculty members learn about the policy formally and informally and how their policy package is decided to can be used to study difficulties that often arise in the implementation of parental leave policies.

Implications for Practice
- Encourage informal discussion of the policy between relevant parties, so faculty members can increase their understanding and connect policy usage to their day to day concerns.

Citation

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Link

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