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Survey of policies on "stopping the tenure clock" for child-rearing in atmospheric science departments

Susan Solomon, Margaret A Lemone, Chin-Hoh Moeng, Robert Roesch. *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society*. Boston: Jan 1998. Vol. 79, Iss. 1; pg. 91, 2 pgs

Abstract (Summary)

Solomon et al conducted a survey of University Corporation for Atmospheric Research (UCAR) universities aimed at describing typical policies employed nationwide for faculty involved in child-rearing. They briefly summarize the results of the survey.

Full Text (863 words)

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Among the challenges for women in attaining university tenure (or long-term employment at institutions such as the National Center for Atmospheric Research) is that of combining child-rearing with the rapid professional advancement often demanded of junior personnel. University teaching faculty must be confirmed for tenure or terminated after a period of about seven years (commonly referred to as the "tenure clock"). The period when successful scientific careers are established therefore often corresponds to the typical period of childbearing and child-rearing, so that the biological and tenure clocks tick at the same time for many young, female faculty. This is believed to account for some of the differences between men and women in the attainment of tenured faculty positions, particularly at major research universities (see, e.g., National Academy Press 1992). Many academic institutions have enacted policies to allow for some form of "stopping or slowing the tenure clock" for tenure-track female and male faculty who are involved in child-rearing. While a number of institutions also allow "stopping the clock" for other personal matters such as family illness, those are not addressed here.

We carried out a survey of UCAR (University Corporation for Atmospheric Research) universities aimed at describing typical policies employed nationwide for faculty involved in child-rearing. The survey was sent to UCAR member institutions in January 1997, and 36 responses were received as of 1 April 1997, indicating significant interest in this topic. We appreciate the time spent by those responding to the survey, and we briefly summarize the results here in the hope that they may be of interest to AMS members.

Policies. Of the 36 respondents, 31 (86%) have a formal policy on the issue of stopping the tenure clock for child-rearing, while one additional institution is planning to put one in place soon.

Length. Of the 31 respondents currently employing a policy, there were varying conditions on the length of time that the tenure clock can be stopped or slowed for child-rearing. Twelve institutions use maxima of one year, 10 use two years (with some of these being one year per child, up to two years), while 9 have a variety of policies employing no maximum of clock stoppage. Several institutions indicated that their policy was one year per child, with some suggesting that as many as three or four years would be possible. Therefore, the majority employ policies of at least two years.

Nature of arrangements. We asked the respondents to indicate whether or not the policy was based on a 1:1 relationship between special work arrangements and the length of time the clock is stopped (e.g., if an employee goes on half-time status for two years, is the clock stopped for one year)? Or are more flexible arrangements made? More than two-thirds of the respondents indicated that arrangements are not 1:1 but rather more flexible. Some respondents indicated that the clock could be stopped even if the faculty member did not change duties or take leave. This would allow for the continuation of routine activities while recognizing that personal issues may interfere with the demands of achieving tenure. One respondent also felt that it was important to allow staff to return to the tenure clock on the original time line if desired. Their policy states that "[stopping the clock] does not eliminate the possibility of being considered for promotion at any time."

Approval of requests. We asked the respondents to indicate who approved requests to stop the tenure clock. Only five institutions had approvals at the department chair level. The great majority required approval not within each department but rather at the dean, provost, or chancellor level, suggesting an emphasis on achieving a uniform policy throughout the college or university.

Impact. Few faculty members have used the option thus far. About 6% of faculty have "stopped the clock" based on the average of the survey respondents. While the number of total women faculty in atmospheric science is likely to be less than 10% [based upon the survey by Winkler et al. (1996)], some of those who used the policy were male. A complete breakdown as to use among male and female faculty is not available. Seventeen respondents (more than half) felt that their policy had a positive impact in retaining women faculty. One respondent noted that "although faculty rarely stop the clock, the possibility of being able to do so provides. . . a positive benefit by reducing `what if' anxieties." Another believes that their policy "may not impact retention of faculty but has increased faculty satisfaction."

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[Author Affiliation]

SUSAN SOLOMON
NATIONAL CENTER FOR ATMOSPHERIC RESEARCH
AND AERONOMY LABORATORY, NOAA
BOULDER, COLORADO

[Author Affiliation]

MARGARET A. LEMONE AND CHIN-HOH MOENG
NATIONAL CENTER FOR ATMOSPHERIC RESEARCH
BOULDER, COLORADO

[Author Affiliation]

ROBERT ROESCH
UNIVERSITY CORPORATION FOR ATMOSPHERIC RESEARCH
BOULDER, COLORADO

Indexing (document details)

Subjects: Polls & surveys, Employment policies, Colleges & universities, Meteorology, Parents & parenting, Tenure

Companies: University Corp for Atmospheric Research

Author(s): Susan Solomon, Margaret A Lemone, Chin-Hoh Moeng, Robert Roesch

Document types: Feature

Publication title: Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society. Boston: Jan 1998. Vol. 79, Iss. 1; pg. 91, 2 pgs

Source type: Periodical

ISSN: 00030007

ProQuest document ID: 26081184

Text Word Count 863

Document URL: <http://ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/login?url=http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?>

did=26081184&sid=2&Fmt=3&clientId=3751&RQT=309&VName=PQD

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