Assessing conditions of women faculty

by CARMEN E. MacDOUGALL

When Amherst College announced its decision in favor of coeducation in 1975, the College realized that changes would occur not only in the content of the student population but also in the make-up of the faculty. Jane Robinson, Affirmative Action Officer and Assistant to the President, noted that "more substantive numbers of women were not hired until about ten years ago." The question concerning the quality of life for faculty women is now being asked by the College with its Ad Hoc Committee to Study the Conditions of Work for Faculty Women. Its report has been released to President Pouncey. According to his office, it will be discussed by the Committee of Six after this year's tenure decisions are made and will be released to the public following discussion.

Statistics about faculty women at Amherst indicate that women are not finding Amherst a comfortable place. Women have refused to stand for tenure or have resigned from positions of tenure in eleven departments. Until this year, no woman has stood for tenure in all the Physical Sciences, including Math. No woman has stood for or been granted tenure in "the second largest department in the Social Sciences or in the third largest department in the Humanities."

Using statistics from August 1983, a study by three Amherst students reveals that Amherst has a lower percentage of women on its faculty than any other school in the Twelve College exchange, i.e. schools of its kind.

Although many of these statistics can be explained in terms other than specific gender problems, they indicate that Amherst is not especially accommodating to women. Robinson said, "I don't think Amherst has had serious problems in attracting women in the candidate pool. The problem has been keeping them through the tenure stage."

Hiring women faculty

The goals set by the school in conjunction with the Affirmative Action Officer in hiring women and minorities are determined by the national pool of Ph.D.'s. This number, however, is unrealistically high, due to the fact that the pool gives the number of Ph.D.'s in an area of study, not the number who choose to teach.

The Affirmative Action Officer's role is to ensure that the search process for positions in the administration and faculty is non-discriminatory and provides equal opportunities for women and minorities. (She does this by insuring that ads are placed in a variety of journals).

One problem in hiring that the previously mentioned notes is the lack of communication between women faculty and female candidates. It tells of "a first-choice female candidate, (who) when being interviewed for a position that included teaching feminist theory, had a disturbing experience which caused her to refuse the job: a discussion regarding feminist theory...was treated as a digression from the interview by the male interviewers."

Statistics for women and tenure

In the last fifteen years 57.7% of the women who have come up for tenure have received it. The percentage of men is slightly higher at 59%. In the past six years, however, 58.8% of the eligible women have gained tenure, while 67.6% of eligible men have gained it. Again, these statistics were used in last year's study, and because their numbers are so small, a few women who have been awarded tenure cause the percentage to rise considerably. For example, of one woman and seven men coming up for tenure in 1972, four men and the one woman received tenure; the percentage of men to women awarded tenure is 57.1% to 100%.

Women have particular problems when the tenure question is explored. Tenure is determined by three factors: "excellence in (professors') teaching," demonstrating "quality of mind, that is, original, creative and productive scholarship," as Richard Fink, Dean of Faculty, described it, as well as contributions to the Amherst community.

Particular problems for women and tenure come under a variety of categories: the fact that tenure decisions occur during childbearing years, the fact that a disproportionate number of women serve on a variety of committees (because of the need to have at least one woman represented), and the greater popularity of women as formal and informal advisors. All of these activities draw from the time women are willing to commit to creative, independent work.

Professor Laura Wexler suggested possible solutions to these problems, such as greater flexibility of the time frame in which people come up for tenure and the creation of "legitimate, prestigious, half-time employment." She noted that men would profit from these changes as well.

Fink said that the timing of tenure is recommended by the American Association of University Professors. He stated however, that "increased flexibility was a possibility. "Because of the variety of life patterns that men and women take part in...we can and ought to explore other possibilities which do not lend themselves to any kind of victimization of faculty." He noted that the upcoming report may address these issues.

Once at Amherst, many female faculty confront less tangible problems. According to the study, the women interviewed "agreed that they have felt that they have been treated differently than their male counterparts." They noted "a lack of concern, interest, and sensitivity" in the attitudes of men toward issues concerning women and women's studies.

The report continues to note that "the women reported a definite uneasy and sometimes hostile feeling directed toward them from men who see women in groups...In fact, female faculty members were severely criticized for having caused one to get a woman elected to the Committee of Six several years ago." In the classroom there are general differences in the ways men and women faculty teach. Women's teaching styles tend to be more communal than men's. Because of this, Wexler noted, "authority can be a problem in the relationships between female faculty and students. "Sometimes the most ambitious students don't think to cast their star with women professors." She added, however, that this trend is changing.

In discussion with faculty women, it was noted that support groups are needed, including ones in which women faculty and students can participate on a social and, especially, academic level. A recent seminar was held for female students and faculty concerning issues on Women and Academia where women can share common concerns, as well as research. Alex Juhasz, coordinator, said "The approximately 20 female students attending constituted a large percentage of the total female faculty. This is an evident acknowledgement that they recognize the need for communication and interaction between generations of women."

Fink stated, "I think any support system that helps people to get on with their work is something to be encouraged." He added that the support system would best be "originated within the department," emphasizing the junior faculty/senior faculty relationship within the department over a gender differentiation. Other systems in which Amherst women faculty participate is on the Five-College level.

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