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## **Affective Stories: Understanding the Lack of Progress of Women Faculty**

PATRICIA A. STOUT, JANET STAIGER, and NANCY A. JENNINGS

*Previous research has found that the problem of sex inequity in higher faculty ranks may result from women taking longer to advance past associate professor. While statistical reports can isolate trends, they cannot identify reasons why women advance more slowly or suggest solutions for the situation. In this study, we conducted focus groups to learn how women tenured associate professors perceive their status as faculty women and their progress toward advancement to full professor. Questions explored career-related beliefs and practices, feelings about career progress, issues encountered while in the academy, and strategies used to manage these issues. Qualitative analysis of recurring themes and self-narratives of participants suggests that women associate professors are an overlooked or “forgotten” group. Evidence refutes the common wisdom that the number of senior women faculty will grow if more women are hired at the junior levels. Women in the study expressed lack of agency and resignation to their status and felt demoralized based on their experiences in the academy. Recommendations to address the “accumulation of disadvantages” are proposed including consistent application of promotion policies, development of workshops educating women about issues regarding their advancement, and equitable support for the activities of women faculty.*

**Keywords:** women faculty / promotion / associate professors / self-narrative

Having just gone through this [promotion to full professor]—I’m going to cry—reading those outside reviews was one of the most “up” experiences I’ve had in many years. And you just think, ‘Damn, this place really deserves any kind of crap they get for keeping me at associate professor because look who I am,’ and I didn’t know that before, and it was incredible. And this was after last spring [when] my chair had said to me, ‘The E[xecutive] C[ommittee] is of two minds about whether we should do this [put me up for promotion] or not, and it will depend entirely on the outside letters.’ And those letters came in, and I went to the chair, and I said, ‘Now what?’ and he said, ‘I’m with you entirely.’ You bastard.

This story from a female professor is exemplary of the emotional ambivalence common among tenured faculty working at one institution of higher education. That women have historically faced sex inequities within the workplace is an understatement. And while one might expect a more

equitable environment within academe, research has highlighted the contrary, particularly in regard to women's career advancement. Studies have indicated sex inequities among academics based on salaries, rank and tenure, and productivity levels (Kite et al. 2001; McElrath 1992; Tinsley 1985; Valian 1998). A 1999 study conducted at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) indicated that inequities between men and women faculty had not changed significantly for at least ten years and that women often faced an inhospitable work environment where they had been underpaid, did not have equal access to resources at the university, felt increasingly marginalized, and were excluded from any substantive power within the university ("A Study on the Status of Women" 1999; Smallwood 2002). Research at the University of Texas at Austin affirmed a similar pattern, and using sophisticated graphic tools, a group of women faculty established trend lines that indicated to administrators the urgency of the problem (Fowler et al. 2004).

The statistics, however, created several hypotheses as to the cause of the situation that could not be answered by numerical data. This study is a followup to that one. It examines the academic environment for women associate professors at a large research institution and explores their perceptions of their ability to progress to full professor. Moreover, it uses multiple qualitative methods to consider causes for the numerical data, providing a richer representation of the difficulties facing women faculty. Through this analysis, we are able to identify several action steps that can be taken to improve the situation including endeavors related to education, policy-making, and standardization of policies.

## Considering the Current Situation

In 1999, the faculty at MIT announced the results of an extended survey of faculty women—their numbers, their salaries, and the resources available to them. This national event prompted other universities to conduct similar studies. Analyses of faculty in six academic units ranging from liberal arts to engineering were conducted at the University of Texas at Austin (UT–Austin).

Many of the findings of that initial study at UT–Austin were significant enough to change the climate for women faculty in the academy. However, one key issue was that women faculty were not progressing from the rank of associate professor to full professor at a rate that might be expected given the common notion of the "pipeline." "Pipeline" wisdom suggests that if more women are hired at the junior levels, the number of senior women faculty will grow. Members of the academy have assumed that time would resolve the inequities between male and female faculty at senior levels after the push by second-wave feminism in the 1970s and

accompanying federal legislation. Such a proposition would be a classical liberal feminist position (van Zoonen 1991).

A look at the data resulting from the initial study suggested that this was clearly not the case at UT–Austin and that it would take a minimum of two decades to achieve numerical parity in the academic unit revealing the “best” performance on the campus. In half of the academic units, the numbers of women faculty were too small to predict when numerical parity might occur. While large-scale economic, social, and cultural dynamics obviously affected women’s choices to pursue certain disciplines, a “stall-out” problem for all fields was evident. Moreover, the UT–Austin administration supported these analyses and is in many ways progressive in its attempts to improve sex equity among the faculty. UT–Austin has a typical family-leave policy, and its tenure and promotion procedures appear to be unusually transparent. Therefore, we were concerned about why progress is so slow, even in a moderately supportive environment. Thus, from a feminist point of view, these findings have significance in terms of trying to account both for social structures hindering equity and for potential policymaking. As a result of the initial statistical study, campus administrators and others suggested in spring 2001 that using the method of focus groups to study the perceptions of women associate professors in the six academic units might help determine the causes for the slow rate of progress toward sex equity among full professors.

## Tackling the Questions

While numerous studies have examined issues that may affect women’s progress toward achieving tenure and promotion from assistant professor to associate professor (Mason 2002; Mason and Goulden 2004; McElrath 1992; Perna 2005; Young and Wright 2001), research is lacking on the advancement of women from associate professor to full professor. Advancement to senior ranks enables women to hold leadership positions in higher education as well as appointments to named chairs and named professorships (Tinsley 1985).

Since little research has been conducted on the career progress of associate professors, in spring 2002, we conducted semi-structured focus groups to allow relevant discussion to emerge about issues related to respondents’ academic careers. We avoided specific questions about accomplishments, productivity, and rewards so that biases would not be introduced. Participants also completed a short close-ended survey that included basic demographic questions. We believed that a method allowing women to express themselves in their own words could go more deeply into the complications facing associate professors, thereby providing richer information than other methods.

## Research Questions

While the present study was not concerned specifically with the issue of promotion to associate professor and tenure, it did seek to examine the notion of the “accumulation of disadvantages” (Moore 1987), that is, small differences between the sexes that accumulate over time and have a larger impact on women faculty than men in terms of their career advancement, quality of life, and self esteem. Research identifies these disadvantages as institutional, professional, and societal factors including career disruption and motherhood as well as personal/psychological/ social factors such as poor sense of self-efficacy, lack of respect for women-centered scholarship, and sex discrimination in areas such as student evaluations of teaching (Bain and Cummings 2000; Kite et al. 2001; Mason 2002; McElrath 1992; Vasil 1996; Young and Wright 2001). Therefore, the research questions guiding this study included:

- What reasons do women faculty articulate for the rate at which they may advance in their academic career to full professor and to senior levels of leadership in the academy?
- How do these reasons compare with previous studies of the careers of women faculty?
- Do women faculty perceive differences between male and female faculty in academic career progress within their department?
- Do women faculty feel marginalized or supported within their department?
- What changes and opportunities do women faculty suggest to strengthen their ability to advance in their academic careers?

## Participants

Because the goal of the study was to explore some of the reasons that accounted for the rates of progress of women associate professors toward full professorship, we only included women faculty in their fourth and fifth years in the rank of associate professor (identified here as “junior” associate professors) and those who had held this title for more than ten years (considered “senior” associate professors). We then grouped these women into two overarching categories according to their academic unit. These categories were the humanities and social sciences (HuSoc—the colleges of Communication, Fine Arts, and Liberal Arts) and the “hard” sciences (HSci—the colleges of Pharmacy, Natural Sciences, and Engineering). This segmentation produced a total of 58 potential focus group participants in four separate pools as shown in Table 1.

After accounting for schedule conflicts and lack of interest in participating, 23 (or 40 percent) of the possible 58 women attended one of four different focus group sessions with women in the same junior or senior

**Table 1**  
 Characteristics of Focus Group Participation.

|  | Original Pool | Volunteered | Attended  |
|--|---------------|-------------|-----------|
| Humanities and Social Science<br>Junior Associate Professors | 14            | 5           | 5         |
| Hard Science Junior<br>Associate Professors                  | 12            | 9           | 9         |
| Humanities and Social Science<br>Senior Associate Professors | 23            | 9           | 7         |
| Hard Science Senior<br>Associate Professors                  | 9             | 3           | 2         |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>58</b>     | <b>26</b>   | <b>23</b> |

[Participation rate = 40%]

status and in their broad area of research (see Table 1).<sup>1</sup> Studies of similar issues facing women professors at other institutions achieved response rates of 58 percent and 66 percent (McElrath 1992; Vasil 1996), but these studies involved individuals completing questionnaires—a much easier task than attending a scheduled 90-minute lunch meeting as was the case in this study.

Although the majority of the women indicated they were Anglo (78% of the individuals), just over 20 percent of the individuals described themselves by a variety of different ethnicities: two individuals indicated they were African American; one, Asian American; and two, Jewish. Regarding marital status, 17 women were married (74%); one was single (4%); five were separated or divorced (22%). The majority of the women had children, with 17 individuals (74%) reporting having from one to three children; among those, four indicated they were “single parents” as a result of divorce, separation, or a commuting marriage.

## Fieldwork

In each group, the same “core” questions were addressed (see Appendix A for focus group protocol). Sessions began with general questions about having an academic career, allowing each participant a chance to talk and adjust to the group. Subsequent questions explored career-related beliefs and practices, perceptions about academic career progress, issues encountered while in the academy, and strategies used to manage these issues. Questions also explored relevant issues associated with university policy, perceived sex and gender differences related to academic career, and suggestions for facilitating respondents’ academic career progress. We asked additional questions as necessary to expand on an issue or probe into an area being discussed.

## Data Analysis

We created and analyzed transcripts from each focus group to see what themes and issues converged and diverged within a group and across the groups. Analysis involved consideration of specific word choice, the context of comments, the specificity of responses, and the internal consistency of a respondent's comments.

Additionally, we analyzed the discussions for the sorts of narratives these women told about life at the university. Studies of the functions of narratives in individual memories and the construction of self-identity indicate the personal and cultural significance of such storytelling, not only for the narrator but also for those empathizing with the raconteur. Researchers of this "life narrative" storytelling emphasize that whether or not the stories are literally factual is not relevant: that the narrator and the audience take the stories to have emotional credibility and practical validity for the purpose of their telling is what counts (Barclay 1994; Neisser 1994). Because context drives the self-narrative, Ulric Neisser argues that most of such memories are developed on "implicit theories of stability and transformation" (Neisser 1994, 14) with "turning points," the individual's sense of agency (or lack of it, thus becoming a victim), and the resolution with a moral point (Neisser 1994, 9–11). Jerome Bruner emphasizes that these stories are often "drenched in affect" (Bruner 1994, 50; Gergen 1994). Given the significance of narratives in creating "selves" and in making arguments about experiences in the workplace, we examined the women's remarks for storytelling—either about their own lives or about others at the university.<sup>2</sup>

## Assessing the Thematic Results

### *Most and Least Liked about Academic Career*

Prior to beginning discussion of the "core" questions of the study, participants introduced themselves and were asked to talk about things they liked best about having an academic career at the university. The most popular response to the question by all women associate professors was enjoyment gained from working with bright and interesting students. Participants also mentioned the resources available at the institution, being affiliated with a respected department, having freedom to pursue personally interesting research and scholarly inquiry, and having the lifestyle associated with living in the community where the university was located. No discernible differences in responses occurred across the four groups.

In talking about what they liked least about having an academic career at the university, the most frequent responses overall related to university

policy and procedure, including respondents' perceptions of the lack of regular sabbatical leaves<sup>3</sup> or family maternity leave for faculty and their overall inability to secure promised support for their research and teaching. Junior associate professors were more likely to mention having unpleasant experiences with the tenure-and-promotion process. This may be expected since promotion had occurred more recently for them than the senior associate professors. Junior associate faculty also mentioned a problem of sexism either in terms of evaluation of their work or in the day-to-day departmental environment. These participants also mentioned a lack of senior mentors.

### ***Reasons for Rate of Advancement***

We then guided participants into discussion of the core areas of focus in the study. For the most part, responses from all groups mirrored issues identified elsewhere in the literature on studies of advancement from assistant professor to associate professor. One predominant theme that emerged was career disruption due to personal relationships such as attempting to accommodate a two-career relationship or due to motherhood or parent care. Interestingly, many of the junior faculty had strategically planned to start their families following receipt of tenure and promotion to associate professor but now faced negotiating these increased and sometimes overwhelming demands. Another theme emerging for both junior and senior associate professors was participants' perceptions of the lack of support for scholarship, including insufficient time to do the work, inadequate facilities (e.g., space, equipment), and monetary support. Senior associate professors more frequently mentioned a lack of time for research, especially after a heavy administrative load. Both junior and senior HuSoc faculty more often said they felt support and respect were lacking because of the kind of scholarship they did, which was either atypical or gender- or race-centered.

Participants expressed the theme of sex discrimination in several ways. Both junior and senior associate professors in all four groups believed that they had experienced discrimination from students (via student evaluations). Similarly, members of all four groups believed they had been discriminated against by colleagues and their departments (by being asked to "wait" to go up for promotion until after a colleague had been promoted or as a result of apparently differing standards for males and females as to what qualifies as worthwhile work for promotion to full professor). Senior associate professors were more concerned that people would think they had been promoted for the wrong reasons (without a quality record), so they elected to wait. Members of all groups believed that administrators had reneged on agreements they had made with them to wait to go up for promotion and on agreements to resolve experiences of racial discrimination on campus.

In general, women in all groups expressed concern about unclear and variable standards for merit recognition and promotion. Some found it difficult to determine when it would be appropriate for them to pursue promotion to full professor. If there were guidelines, they were hard to locate; if there were no guidelines, it was difficult to determine the standards for promotion. Subtle differences in this theme were noted, however. Junior associate faculty in HuSoc and HSci expressed caution and hesitation, often commenting on the embittering experience of the process of promotion to associate professor. Again, these memories and the feelings of bitterness are nearer to the surface for these women. The comments of senior associate professors on a lack of clear standards grow from heavy administrative or service responsibilities that turn out to be undervalued for promotion to full professor. While a minority of the junior associate faculty in HSci thought they had good female mentors either in their department or outside of it, the majority of women in the four groups had not had the benefit of a mentor to help them traverse the path to promotion to full professor.

What is most significant about our findings is that a clear theme of feeling resignation emerged across every one of the groups. Several of the women had found the process of tenure and promotion to associate professor as well as the apparent inequities of department life to be humiliating and devaluing, and they had consciously withdrawn from the fray. Junior associate faculty more frequently questioned whether it was worth the effort to "fight the fight" to promotion to full professor and mentioned instances of what they perceived as unfair differential treatment of men and women. These women felt burned out and deflated, no longer wishing to be engaged actively in the academy. Both junior and senior associate faculty raised the question of whether any obvious gain would be accrued by being promoted to full professor in comparison to a desire to live a balanced life.

## Analyzing the Narrative Self-representations

In our four hours of conversations, a total of 57 stories were told (or about one every four minutes). Everyone but one of the women told at least one story, with the range of number of stories told per person spanning from one to seven. Of the 57 stories told, 49 were about the women themselves and eight were about other people.

More importantly, of the 49 "self" stories, the narrator characterized her "self" as a hero in fourteen of the stories but as a victim in 35 (61% of all the stories). For stories of other people, the "other" person was a heroine in seven of the eight stories. Table 2 presents the frequency of references to heroine or victim in the narratives told among the four groups. Some

**Table 2**  
Occurrence of Heroine and Victim Roles  
in Narratives among the Four Groups

| <b>Role in "self" stories</b>  | <b>Number of stories (n=49)</b> | <b>Percent of total stories (n=57)</b> |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Self as Heroine                | 14                              |  |
| Senior HuSoc                   | 2                               |  |
| Senior HSci                    | 2                               | 25%                                    |
| Junior HuSoc                   | 8                               |  |
| Junior HSci                    | 2                               |  |
| Self as Victim                 | 35                              |  |
| Senior HuSoc                   | 12                              |  |
| Senior HSci                    | 5                               | 61%                                    |
| Junior HuSoc                   | 10                              |  |
| Junior HSci                    | 8                               |  |
| <b>Role in "other" stories</b> | <b>Number of stories (n=8)</b>  | <b>Percent of total stories (n=57)</b> |
| Other as Heroine               | 7                               |  |
| Senior HuSoc                   | 2                               |  |
| Senior HSci                    | 0                               | 12%                                    |
| Junior HuSoc                   | 3                               |  |
| Junior HSci                    | 2                               |  |
| Other as Victim                | 1                               |  |
| Senior HuSoc                   | 0                               |  |
| Senior HSci                    | 0                               | 2%                                     |
| Junior HuSoc                   | 1                               |  |
| Junior HSci                    | 0                               |  |

[HuSoc—Humanities and Social Science Faculty (7 senior and 5 junior attended). HSci—Hard Science Faculty (2 senior and 9 junior attended)]

differences occurred between the senior and junior associate professors in the stories they told. Senior associate professors told significantly more victim stories (17 or 81% of their stories) than junior associate professors (18 or 64% of their stories) (see Table 2). Although the purpose of the focus groups may have encouraged the predominance of victim narratives, the content of those stories nonetheless revealed much about the image junior and senior women associate professors have of their situation at the university.

Overall, the women were more likely to tell stories about themselves. However, when telling a story about someone else, these women told "success" or "support" stories. They told of—in all cases—women who had done some specific act to be successful at the university (four stories) or to make the situation more bearable for the storyteller (three stories).

These stories are significant because they appear to serve for the narrators either as a model for how to act in order to have agency in what these women see as difficult circumstances (the other-person-as-positive model) or as nostalgia for a past good deed when the narrator deeply needed help (self-as-victim). Moreover, the representations of agency typically involve women speaking up or acting assertively or, as told, *out of character* for female behavior. For instance, one story was of a pregnant colleague securing a course reduction because “she was *very* in your face and didn’t give up.” In another tale, a senior HuSoc professor reported, “a senior woman friend of mine who left a few years ago once marched into the Chairman’s office and said, ‘why do you keep tapping women to do administrative duties?’” However, one of the “other-as-heroine” stories was a rather ambivalent success story and was told with irony: A colleague explained to the junior HSci narrator that the reason the colleague was admitted into a prestigious national professional organization was “because she knew to stand by the door and to wait for it to be opened for her because she knew it was not going to play well if she was an outspoken woman.”

In this study, self-stories of success are more numerous than the stories told of others-as-heroines. The nature of the stories is similar; the woman was faced with a career obstacle, and usually she acted to overcome it. The specific obstacles and actions, including degradation by colleagues: need for pregnancy leave, personal time, or promotion; or need for mentors or resources, are shown in Table 3.

From our perspective, despite the stories about the self-as-heroine, these stories are not very encouraging tales about life as a female associate professor. In the three cases of stories about dealing with pregnancies, either the women had to threaten legal action or they were left to their own devices. In the four “degradation” stories, agency came from the woman faculty members leaving the university, ignoring the individual inflicting the degradation, finding satisfaction in realizing that the objectionable person must have been irritated by her presence, and/or her enjoying a “just ends” twist to university life. In none of the “female-revenge” cases had the collegial relationship improved; in all cases, the women had just found ways to “live with it.” That’s the extent of their heroism. Some positive modeling did come from the women who took action to resolve an obstacle such as wanting to go up for promotion or seeking needed resources, but the narrational language often indicates the need to complain or push a department chair into action. Such acts are “heroic” in the university, but they do not necessarily improve the overall departmental environment or relations between the women and their administration.

The disheartening nature of the university was even more marked in the “self-as-victim” stories. Similar to the success stories, themes about obstacles to the career trajectory are highlighted. However, the formula of the stories follows several permutations, as shown in Table 4. Women felt

**Table 3**  
Plots of "Self-as-Heroine" Tales in Focus Group Narratives (n=14).

| Obstacle                               | Action   |
|--|--|
| Degraded by colleagues                 | Took a leave<br>Ignored colleague and stayed here to punish him<br>Stayed here and parades in front of him<br>He hurt himself in attempt to attack her |
| Need for pregnancy leave               | Threatened lawsuit<br>Juggled grant funds to do-it-herself<br>Told chair would take one year off without pay   |
| Need for personal time                 | Has stopped doing some professional service  |
| Need for promotion                     | Has talked with chair and dean<br>Has pushed chair to permit consideration   |
| Unequal treatment by Executive Council | She and another woman complained   |
| Need for mentors                       | Asked for help   |
| Need for resources                     | Complained   |
| Hire a couple                          | Did not point out to search committees the job candidates were married; that silence allowed both people to be interviewed and hired                   |

**Table 4**  
Plots of "Self-as-Victim" Tales in Focus Group Narratives (n=35)

| Obstacle                            | Number of stories |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Lack of Agency                      |                   |
| a) Unable to solve problems         | 8                 |
| b) Fear of degradation              | 1                 |
| c) Required to sacrifice for others | 2                 |
| d) Unequal treatment                | 3                 |
| Degradation by colleagues           | 17                |
| Overworked                          | 3                 |
| Discouraged by watching others      | 1                 |

an overall lack of agency or control, degraded by colleagues, overworked, and discouraged by watching others in their department progress in their career ahead of them.

These are tales of inability to resolve problems, usually followed by resignation at ever being able to do anything. If something positive occurs, the narrative asserts that any final resolution will always be tainted by past events. On at least two occasions, the women used the metaphor of

events leaving a “bad taste” in the mouth; they also expressed a permanent bitterness toward the university. These stories often end with the women’s resignation toward their status as associate professors or how they turned to other parts of their lives to compensate for their disappointments. The self-narratives were “drenched in affect”: Several women cried telling their self-narrative; others spoke with intense anger.

Here are some examples of their shame and rage:

- *From a senior HuSoc woman:* So that [prior judgment] means I’ll never get to be a full professor. So I felt extremely burned, and now I’ve—in the last two years—I have published another book with an excellent national reception and I have this editorship that is very visible and the department is all cheerful. So I’m going to go up, but I don’t want to be sucked into feeling optimistic again. Because the worm can turn at any time.
- *From a junior HuSoc woman:* I’ve decided sexism is part of the cost of doing business here. It’s how it is. How men put you down implicitly. I’ve decided that my salary . . . has not been solved; because my direct colleague who came in at the same time and went away and got job offers; because that’s the way you play the game. I don’t want to play that game that way because I think it takes advantage of other universities. He got this big salary jump and got promoted early to full professor when I have more publications on my resume and a lot more things on there but he’s promoted to full professor, and I’ll get put up this year, but it’s a year after him, and it really, really bothers me, because I think it’s blatant sexism. . . . I went to my dean and I told [her/him] that I really didn’t like this, and they were playing games. I asked [him/her] to do something about it. So [he/she] said [he/she] would, but it hasn’t happened yet.
- *From a junior HuSoc woman:* That is my neighbor. I’m next door to the guy who said, “You’ll never get tenure because I’m not voting for you.” And I walked up and down the hall happily knowing it just pisses him off. I’m here forever. I think there might be some personality thing that helps, but support helps. If you know, OK, my neighbor doesn’t like me, but I can certainly gloat with this other woman who does. You know, if you have some support somewhere; if everybody was like that I would be miserable, but they’re not.
- *From a junior HuSoc woman:* I went to graduation and, in front of the 2000 graduates in [the university] and all of their parents, the speaker says who he really admires, and his example is Winston Churchill, who at 86 years of age, told the story about a woman who had been sexually assaulted in the park in London . . . and that the defendant was 76 years old, and Winston Churchill said, “Man, I respect a guy who can catch a woman at that age” [groans from group]. At graduation! That’s the moment I go, “Why am I here?” I can hardly stand this. That kind of stuff the institution should take steps to stop instead of saying the burden is on you women to make a nice place so you can feel happy. It’s time to stop that crap.
- *From a junior HSci woman:* I was put up for promotion and not promoted, but a male colleague was promoted with what I can demonstrate even to a legal outfit was [sic] less credentials. And the kind of criticisms that were

allowed to occur for me were, I considered, just completely unprofessional. . . . There was a senior colleague complaining that I was not respectful enough of him. He was discrediting all of my work. I publish more papers than he has. . . . He was allowed to just go on and on and on. Nobody shot him down. Nobody said this is out of line. Again, it has left a bad taste in my mouth because what it has left me with is that this place doesn't deserve my good hard effort. I am doing really great work and I don't have to give it to this place. There are a lot of good places that want me to come there too. Why should I put up with this crap?

From an institutional point of view, perhaps of most concern is the sort of fatalism that sets in as well as the reinforcing nature of these stories. These focus groups are not the first (or last) place for the telling of these stories. When such feelings of helplessness and devaluation permeate an institution, we believe a climate of disengagement with the university is promoted.

The self-as-victim story also should be analyzed for what stories are not told. While women did discuss the difficulties of child rearing or parental-care responsibilities, the focus of the narratives does not point to these features as the obstacle. Rather, the obstacle is the lack of help provided by departments to balance these demands through an extended commitment to the faculty woman. At least in these renditions, it isn't "having the child" but the apparent insensitivity of the department chair to the situation in which the women are working.

As discussed above, women associate professors do find positive aspects within their careers at the university. But when they narrate the self, it is overwhelmingly of themselves as victims and with seemingly few or no resources to help themselves. As the literature suggests, some women have different ideas than their male colleagues about competing (see the example above of the woman who does not want to play the game of securing an outside job offer to raise her salary or fast-track herself to promotion). Women view speaking forthrightly as difficult to do for fear of negative labeling (the woman is "aggressive") or results (the administrator will not like her or her request). Several of the women stated explicitly that they did not want to be promoted to full professor because they could never again go through what they experienced during the tenure process.

While it could be claimed that the stories related here may be exaggerated or biased by the research method, these stories are still real to the teller and could impact the perceptions and behaviors of the narrator as well as others to whom the stories are told. In this way, these stories reflect and can create negative effects throughout the institution.

## Suggestions for Improvement of Ability to Advance

Participants had many ideas about changes or opportunities that could strengthen their ability to advance to full professor. The clearest theme to emerge was the desire for a set of standards that would be made known and applied equally. To achieve this, women requested clear procedures and open processes regarding promotion and obtaining leaves. Clarity and transparency are means for sharing and discussing one another's work to understand better the different types of research done in the department. These women also felt that the individual's entire career of teaching, research, and service should be taken into consideration for promotion to full professor. Another clear theme among senior associate professors was the need for resources and infrastructure (including administrative and clerical assistance) to support both scholarly and routine work as well as the preparation of promotion packets. This theme resonates with comments by senior associate professors about the burden of administrative service and that service should be acknowledged more in the promotion process. Other themes that emerged involved opportunities to find colleagues and mentors with similar interests.

## Discussion

While a significant body of literature exists on issues facing the promotion of women academics from assistant professor to associate professor, research is lacking on issues women associate professors face that may influence the rate at which they progress to full professor. For this reason, we find that women associate professors are an overlooked or "forgotten" group. Perhaps the most critical charge and frightening insight emerging from these discussions is that women associate professors are so often "shell shocked" and demoralized from the experience of their promotion to assistant professor with tenure. This, in combination with the "accumulation of disadvantages" throughout their academic careers, leads them to question seriously whether it is worth their effort to continue as proactive members of the faculty. They perceive the rewards for their hard work to be minimal and unsatisfying. This is a most serious charge in light of the working hypothesis (and a key recommendation in most previous studies) that if more women are hired at the junior levels, there will be eventual growth in numbers of senior women faculty over time. Apparently, some women associate professors in this study are unwilling to continue to trade their time and energy for what they deem as minimal rewards and are satisfied to remain at this rank.

Women associate professors also harbor distrust for the system. On the one hand, based on the assurance that their time would come, many of

the participants complied with requests to take on additional administrative duties or to wait for their own promotion while another promising colleague was promoted. Many of these women "thought we'd had a deal" only to find that their sacrifice of time was overlooked later. On the other hand, they observed other situations where male colleagues seemingly benefited from opportunities that appeared not to be open to all members of the department.

And, while women associate professors want to shout, "hey, you've changed the rules," they are also unlikely to call a "foul." The participants clearly voice the lack of clarity of standards applied even-handedly.<sup>4</sup> While women associate professors desire clear procedures and open processes, issues of agency or control limit their ability to stand up for what is right or to promote their own accomplishments.

Yet, another clear message to emerge from these discussions is a continued resistance to the situation. "I'm here and I'm not going away." One may be able to interpret this positively or negatively, however. While these women are determined not to leave the academy, they also are demoralized and believe that their work is not valued. They think that the institution does not appreciate the diversity it supposedly embraces. Two participants even referred to themselves as part of a "demoralized class."

Previous research has attributed women's underrepresentation in the profession at higher ranks as being due to structural factors, gender differences in performance, differing values, and greater role conflict and overload. However, another explanation warranting examination in future research may be women's poor sense of self-efficacy—i.e., an individual's perceptions of whether she can perform successfully in a given behavior. Weak perceptions of self-efficacy may serve as internal barriers to women's career choice advancement (Vasil 1996).

Our study raises a number of unanswered questions for future research. Why do these women associate professors continue to stay in such an unsatisfying situation? Why don't they leave the university? Are these issues gender-related? How much of the problem is universal? How much is due to styles of management and work? How much relates to differences in styles of teaching or scholarship? Most importantly, how can these issues be resolved—for these women associate professors and for other women in the academy who are assistant professors and graduate students? We need to address the problem of a demoralized class that may have negative effects throughout the institution. The stories that are told in the institution mark the "corporate culture" of the university and guide how people get along. The culture and climate should contribute to career satisfaction and can have an impact on faculty retention (August and Waltman 2004).

## Recommendations

Based on our findings, we believe a program of education and mentoring, policymaking, and the standard enforcement of policies is necessary to break through the accumulation of disadvantages and alter the stories of lack of self-efficacy. We propose the following recommendations:

**1. Ensure consistency, transparency, and access to rules and processes for advancement.**

A very strong theme in the responses was the experience of watching male colleagues secure advantages of salary and position through special, individual negotiations rather than following stated activities such as turning in annual reports or making equipment or space requests in routine ways. Additionally, women were unaware of when their department would deem them ready to go up for full professor. Some of these matters can be resolved through workshops (see below) but others may require actual policymaking (see below regarding new policies).

**2. Provide skills sessions and workshops for associate professors.**

We do not encourage women learning how to act in ways they dislike—using special privileges or violating the explicitly stated procedures for improving salaries or securing space. Rather, we suggest that successful colleagues share and mentor those advancing to take advantage of the strategies that will work for them. Examples of such sessions are: (a) learning norms and traditions of the institution and its various units; (b) understanding student biases in evaluations of women teachers and how to counteract these; (c) coping with increased demands after tenure to accommodate both the delayed family and the ongoing career; (d) learning signs of sex and race discrimination and methods to contest this safely in the workplace; (e) finding mentors at this point in one's career for the next stages of advancement; (f) learning effective strategies for professional development; and (g) using colleagues and students to sustain intellectual excitement.

**3. Improve daily support systems for faculty.**

Part of the burnout for some of these women comes from being burdened with routine clerical and administrative jobs. The university needs to find methods to support the scholarly and teaching activities of faculty.

**4. Improve administrators' knowledge about family-leave policies.**

Women expressed significant frustration about the lack of administrators' understanding of family-leave policies and the consequent sense of lack of support for family obligations.

**5. Undertake reviews of associate professors in their third year after promotion.**

Third-year reviews of assistant professors are common as a way to assess their progress to promotion to associate professor. A similar

review could be done of associate professors during their third year in rank, to assess their progress and provide them guidance regarding when they would be ready for promotion to full professor. They should also be encouraged to pursue leave programs to enhance their preparation for promotion.

**6. Query department heads about how to help anyone in rank six years or longer.**

This is not a recommendation about post-tenure review but a proposal that department heads work with associate professors in rank six years or longer to create a plan to help them move to the next level of advancement.

**7. Re-examine hiring practices with a goal to setting policy that will achieve sex parity in faculty in each discipline.**

Hiring senior women professors should be a top priority of the institution to overcome the lack of mentors and role models and to permit women to lead an overall change in the institutional culture.

**8. Build awareness among administrators, faculty, and staff that a demoralized class has negative effects throughout the institution and is a waste of resources. Moreover, equity creates a stronger and more viable institution in terms of a national reputation for fairness as well as building loyalty among the faculty.**

We acknowledge that understanding of these results would be improved with a comparative study of male associate professors. The literature suggests that social constructions of men and women into gendered beings disadvantage women; gender schemas also produce the initial disadvantages that accumulate. If this is the case, a study of men might help us determine how they negotiate the institutional difficulties of post-tenure and provide insights valuable for remedying the situation for women. Additionally, a set of matched narratives from department chairs also might provide an account of how they select associate professors for consideration, why some stall out, and what might work in securing the promotion of these associate professors.

This study has examined the academic environment at a large research institution in an effort to identify reasons why women advance slowly from associate professor to a higher faculty rank. Listening to what women have to say in their own words can provide valuable information about beliefs, behaviors, and actions and can inform policy and program development to reduce the gender gap at the associate and full professor levels. Future research should explore the ways in which institutional programs and social networks enable women to gain information and support for advancing to senior faculty ranks in the academy.

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## Notes

1. To facilitate attendance, the two "hard" science senior associate professors met with three of the seven humanities and social science senior associate professors. Otherwise, the focus groups were homogeneous.
2. We defined a story as an extended narration of a specific event that included individual characters and a conclusion or "moral to the fable." We did not include "generic events" such as statements that described repeated routine events (such as "every time my case has come up").
3. The University of Texas at Austin does not have sabbaticals. It does have a university-wide competitive leave program for which faculty need to apply and a leave program administered by the deans of the academic units upon the recommendation of the department chair.
4. While the University of Texas at Austin has clear statements of policies easily accessible to all members of the institution regarding applying for modified duties during childbirth or illnesses of immediate members of a family and for

promotion and tenure, faculty report that not all administrators understand these policies or apply them equally.

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## Appendix A: Focus Group Protocol

Welcome and thank you for your willingness to be here today to participate in this focus group session. We know you are busy and appreciate you taking the time to meet and discuss issues of import to faculty women.

We are here to learn how women associate professors perceive their status as faculty women and their progress toward academic advancement towards full professorship.

1. First, so we can get to know one another a little better, could each of you please introduce yourself? Please say which department you work in, how long you've been at the U[niversity] of T[exas] at Austin, where you were before you came to UT, and a bit about your personal situation (for example, do you have a partner; are you in a two-career relationship; do you have children, and if so, how many and how old are they?)
2. What would you say are some of the things you like best about having an academic career at the University of Texas at Austin?
3. What would you say are some of the things you like least about having an academic career at the University of Texas at Austin?
4. What are your academic career goals? For example, the goal of some women is to be a scholar and to teach; or, do you have an interest in moving into administration, like being a graduate advisor? As we continue our discussion, we'd like to focus on your move toward full professorship in your academic career.
5. In your move toward full professorship, how do you feel about your progress in your academic career? PROBE: Are you satisfied with where you are on your career track?

6. What do you think are the reasons for your situation in terms of your career progress? PROBES: Do you feel you've had to negotiate your career in response to career disruptions (for example, marital, parental, or child care responsibilities)? How confident do you feel about your ability to negotiate within your department for courses, work space, the opportunity to work with graduate students or solicit grants, assistance, and so forth? Do you feel you have a mentor? How do you feel your level of scholarly productivity or teaching evaluations may affect your career progress? How confident do you feel about your ability to "self promote," that is, to get your self and your work recognized? Or to negotiate and apply for promotion?
7. How have you found you've been able to manage these situations?
8. What university policies and opportunities have been especially helpful to you? (For example, an opportunity to stop the tenure clock for family leave as you progressed toward promotion to associate professor or the grant proposal workshops on campus or the Faculty Women's Organization and programs it sponsors).
9. Do you feel you've been treated equitably within your department? Why or why not? Compared to your male colleagues in your department, would you say you've been treated equitably? Why or why not?
10. Do you feel you've encountered any type of discrimination in your department?  
  
If so, what kind and by whom? (For example, do you feel you haven't received equitable salary or work space or been asked to serve on important committees in the department or the university compared to other faculty in your department?)
11. And when you think about yourself as a member of the university as a whole, do you feel you've been treated equitably compared to other faculty across the university?  
Why or why not?
12. What changes would you initiate if you could that would strengthen your ability to progress toward full professorship?
13. Are there any other issues or feelings that you would like to raise with the group before we close?