

# Being a Female Faculty Member: What They Didn't Teach You in School

Deborah L. Swackhamer

Associate Professor, Environmental and Occupational Health  
School of Public Health  
University of Minnesota

Being a woman professional in a largely male field presents some special concerns, concerns that for the most part you become aware of only when they are first encountered. Unless a more senior colleague alerts you to special situations or considerations, by and large they remain hidden in the existing fabric of academic life until you stumble into them. But it's unlikely you were taught about them in school! What follows are my personal observations and reflections on the subject, after traversing the tenure trail. They have no firm statistical basis and are not meant to include the perceptions and experiences by all women professors in science.

Few graduate students, male or female, who aspire to an academic career are taught directly how to write grants, how to be effective in the classroom, or how to advise students. Much of this is learned once you are on the job by being observant, watching what works, picking out the things you liked or didn't like about your professors' styles and approaches. One of the biggest difficulties of being female in this situation is that you have precious few role models to observe and learn from. Imagine you are starting as a new junior assistant professor. Quickly the realization hits that you have only a vague idea of how to conduct your classes, or how to interact with your advisees. Slowly it dawns on you that as you look around at your colleagues for guidance, either directly or by observation, it becomes clear that most or all of the models they present don't fit your personal style. If you tried following an assertive style ("John" is well regarded for it), you might be labeled as strident or demanding. If you included too much humor in your lectures (it works well for "Tom"), you might not be taken seriously by the students. The same verbal approaches are perceived differently coming from a man than from a woman. You obviously must find a style that is comfortable for you, but it is harder with so few alternatives to help shape your choices. There are precious few women faculty in the sciences, particularly engineering, and therefore new, upcoming women faculty have few examples of roles that may feel comfortable with as they develop their own styles in the classroom or as an advisor.

Grantsmanship (or is it grantspersonship?) is not taught in graduate school; it seems to be learned by trial and error, by reading the pink sheets, and by serving on review panels. The latter can provide particular insight into what is

considered an acceptable "tone" of a grant in addition to the definition of good science; the communication style can differ significantly between women and men (Tannen, 1991) and thus male grant reviewers may not appreciate the tone presented by a female grant writer (and vice versa). This is part of the larger issue of communication differences between the genders. In our culture, women's style of communication is often focused on consensus building and clarifying issues. Men's style of communication generally involves challenging others and in debating disagreements. The latter style is more compatible with the nature of interaction in the academic structure. Two issues arise. First, it can be difficult for a woman to adapt to that communication style or to effectively interact using her own style, thus hampering communication. The result can span from not being heard, to hurt feelings as a casualty of the more combative style. Second, a woman may adapt to that style, but then be criticized for it ("she is too outspoken, a real troublemaker"). I have frequently seen women end up between the proverbial rock and a hard place on this issue.

The lack of appropriate mentors for women faculty can be a serious concern. Ideally, junior faculty are mentored by a senior, experienced faculty member, e.g. shown the ropes and advised as to how to obtain promotion and tenure. Due to the small number of senior women faculty in the sciences, the mentor is usually male. One frequent comment I hear is that this mentoring doesn't necessarily occur as "naturally" as with junior male faculty; when it does occur, a paternalistic approach rather than a collegial one is often used. The mentor may treat the woman more like a child or a daughter. The difficulty is that the woman is regarded favorably only when she complies with the mentor's advice and guidance (acting as the "good daughter"); often the mentor becomes hostile or threatened when the woman shows independence (acting as an adult) and the relationship deteriorates. For instance, a junior woman professor may have a mentor who is a senior male professor. He is supportive as long as she votes consistently with him at faculty meetings; when she begins to vote opposite to him, he withdraws his support as punishment. This dynamic does not appear to be as emphasized in male-male mentor relationships. I believe the mentor's intentions are true and good, and that most likely they are drawing on the familiar role of father-daughter. However, this approach is usually uncomfortable for the woman, as it is an inappropriate model

for the situation and does not allow the woman to develop proper peer relationships.

While it is difficult to generalize, women may not always be as successful as men in obtaining resources such as space, technical or clerical support, or salary increases. I have heard women discuss the fact that experience has taught them that they need to be more aggressive in their requests and follow-ups than would normally be their nature. Men and women can differ on their style of negotiating; women may be less comfortable with the appearance of a conflict in these situations than men. For instance, "Sally" and "Dave" may both ask their department head for space for student desks and both receive some but not all of their request. Sally may be glad to have any of her request granted and thinks she would appear ungrateful if she asked for more space; Dave on the other hand might go back to the department head a second time and successfully obtain more space. My point is not that the Daves of the world are too pushy, but that the Sallys may need to be more assertive to get their needs met.

Another pitfall for women faculty (and for male faculty, although unfortunately a small percentage of them) is knowing how to best juggle the demands of a tenure-track position and the demands of raising a family. The time most faculty are in the probationary phase of pre-tenure is also the time they may wish to begin a family. The tenure clock at most universities does not necessarily stop for pregnancies and child raising, and if it does allow for such things it still means the woman's progress is slowed. If our universities are truly committed to having a diverse faculty, one of the smartest things they could do would be to create flexible tenure and promotion policies regarding pregnancy and family leave for both female and male faculty, and provide for more flexible work schedules (part-time appointments, flexible class schedules). This would strengthen the faculty through diversity, and require women to feel they must not have families if they have tenure-track positions, or not have academic careers if they have young children. A flexible policy would promote an atmosphere of tolerance for different choices confronting young faculty trying to raise families.

Being in the minority on a faculty can be a double-edged sword. In an effort to balance the composition and perspective of committees, university administrations have been calling more and more on women to serve on faculty governance and search committees. Since there are relatively few women to choose from, women may serve on committees more frequently than their male colleagues. This is a disadvantage in terms of time commitments, but can be a great advantage in terms of learning about university policies and having an influence on them. Women have often complained about not being part of the "old boy's club" - this is one way that a sense of belonging can be met. It is critical for women to pick and choose among possible committee

assignments so as to not overcommit their time or distract them from other primary duties required for tenure such as publishing (they also didn't teach time management in school, to men or women!)

There are advantages as well to being a woman faculty member. One of the most rewarding moments of my early years in academia was when a group of women engineering graduate students stayed after class one day and asked me questions about how it felt to be a woman professor. They wanted to know if I ever had to deal with sexual harassment, how my husband felt about my time commitments, and did I have tips for job interviews. Later one of them thanked me for being there as a role model for them. I had been so busy looking for my own role models, I hadn't realized until then what a powerful role I might play in the students lives, and I now treasure the fact that I can offer at least one female academic model to both my women and men students.