Supporting Faculty, Staff, and Student Parents Through Cognitive, Emotional, and Behavioral Engagement

This ACC workshop provided an overview of our purpose, a definition of engagement theory, an activity to reinforce the differences among the engagement facets in the theory, and discussions about the challenges parenting poses to non-cognitive types of engagement. In this paper, as with the presentation, we focus mostly on faculty parents, but these arguments extend to all caregivers on campuses, whether they are students, staff, faculty, or administrators, and whether those receiving care are offspring, family members, or themselves. This paper amplifies some of the points in the presentation and elaborates more on how engagement theory can motivate much-needed research into the status of parents on our campuses.

The personnel management role of academic department chairs is complex, variable, and dynamic (Weaver et al., 2019), and the COVID-19 pandemic brought into sharp relief some of the invisible challenges for faculty parents (Lantsoght et al., 2021). Our personal experience as parents and academic leaders led us to identify tangible methods to accommodate faculty parents, as we articulate the importance of family-friendly institutional policies and practices to retain faculty.

In the post-pandemic era, the role of the chair is becoming increasingly important to bridge the gap between what faculty parents need to succeed and what institutional cultures currently accommodate. Increased accommodation would not only lead to higher faculty retention, but may also address leaky STEM pipeline issues (Seymour and Hewitt, 1997; Webber, 2018) that negatively affect institutions like ours.

Research data confirm our local observations and lived experience regarding faculty productivity by gender, age, and parent or caregiver status. Collectively, women may produce less scholarship than men during peak childbearing years, but they compensate for that productivity in later career (Morgan et al., 2021). Women and men allocate work time unequally, with women spending fewer hours on research compared to men, who protect their research time (Misra et al., 2012). During the pandemic, the trend of women's reduced productivity was magnified, with mothers reporting working fewer hours than fathers (Lantsoght et al., 2021). Also during the time frame from March 2020 through 2021, it is no surprise that 82% of parents experienced stress related to childcare (Lantsoght et al., 2021). With faculty holding the most privileged position among campus parents (compared to staff and student parents), these findings are cause for grave concern, and should motivate department chairs to consider allotting more attention to parents in the future.

The data are compelling, increasingly accessible on our campuses, and sometimes overwhelming. As we seek to process the long lists of barriers to faculty engagement and retention--perceived and systemic, cultural and institutional (Blair-Loy & Cech, 2022), various theories and models attempt to provide explanatory value. Among these are perceived organizational support, job satisfaction frameworks, and theories of involvement and engagement rooted in psychology (e.g. Tinto, 1997). We have found one particular model of engagement theory appears to offer elegant, robust explanatory power for many of the challenges facing higher education, and here we offer it both as a heuristic for organizing challenges to faculty and strategies for chairs to address those challenges. Although our personal efforts are anecdotal and observed, engagement theory is testable. Thus, it can be empirically validated as to its usefulness in the faculty-parent support scenario, as it has been in other contexts (Bond et al., 2020; Fredricks et al., 2004); Pilotti et al., 2017; Quaye et al., 2009).

Engagement Theory Provides a Testable Model for Campus Culture

Engagement theory research often employs a 3-part model that moves our focus from a primary focus on **cognitive** knowledge, skills, and abilities to a focus on the "whole person." We train, recruit, and hire academic faculty based mostly on their education and scholarship, and can assume the likelihood of cognitive engagement. But being intellectually ready for an academic career is only necessary, not sufficient, for success and satisfaction among faculty. Therefore a strength of this model is the **emotional** facet to address feelings, sense of belonging, and mental health. Knowing that highly educated, competent faculty who are emotionally regulated can still face challenges in figuring out how to do what they need to do, the **behavioral** element accounts for those types of tasks. Behavioral engagement includes work we might associate with executive functioning, like managing a schedule, to navigating the complex bureaucracies of academic institutions, insurance providers, multi-factor authentication, and off-campus tasks like securing high-quality child care.

In the case of faculty parents, this tripartite model of engagement moves us beyond a primary concern for credentials and pedigree to broader interest in the challenges of their faculty role that are complicated by their status as parents, prospective parents, women experiencing personal issues related to reproduction, and people of all gender identities anticipating or juggling caregiving responsibilities. In some cases, interest by the chair in faculty members' personal lives will not be welcomed; some faculty thrive by keeping "work at work," and do not want assistance navigating university bureaucracy or understanding what campus resources exist. Unfortunately, those faculty may assume the same compartmentalization of their students - whom, we know from years of NSSE results and research, make decisions based on how they feel about

where they are, and how effective they become at navigating the myriad obstacles of academic life. Similarly, faculty may correctly believe that their emotional engagement is no one's business, given that one's mental health status is literally protected, private information. However, chairs still need to manage faculty as "whole people" and faculty still need to watch for warning signs in their students and refer appropriately to campus or outside resources.

How Can Chairs Better Engage Parents?

We assert that department chairs should leverage the power of their position to enable faculty to engage behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively. This is a departure from alternative and traditional conceptions of the chair position, which likely focused more on academic credentials and the ability to impart knowledge or motivate students (depending on the theory of education underlying departmental culture). In the past, the chair has been variously identified as a leader among peers, and/or as a conduit between administration and employees. Faculty engagement is important not only for the sake of faculty, but also because a culture of care that encourages attention to emotional and behavioral aspects of academic life is a desirable trait to diffuse from faculty to students as well. The regular, direct contact between faculty and students enables faculty to assist students who may engage not cognitively, but also behaviorally and emotionally.

Department chairs can leverage the power of the position to help faculty engage **behaviorally** (to know what to do and how to do it):

- Navigate the institutional bureaucracy, including annual reporting of workload related activity
- Find assistance for resources that outside the department, including child care, benefits, Human Resources, networking/IT, parking, and library and, when possible, modeling the use of these to reduce stigma
- How, where, and when to report various types of reportable incidents

Emotionally (to know that they are valued and feel a sense of belonging):

- Contribute to the department in a way that will enable them to be high performers and receive exemplary annual reviews and references
- Access mental well-being supports, including counseling, fitness, and medical care, and creating a culture where all types of care are valued
- Network with colleagues in and outside the department professionally and socially

Cognitively (to recognize, validate, or obtain the knowledge, skills, and abilities required for effective performance as a faculty member):

- Access national networks in the faculty member's discipline, including memberships, conferences, and subscriptions to publications
- Identify their research area(s) and build collaborations
- Recognize and select those activities that yield greater impact for purposes of annual reviews and promotions
- Continue to learn in their discipline and maintain currency with trends in the field
- Share their research with students in courses and through research opportunities

One of the most difficult jobs of a department chair is building or maintaining a healthy culture. Shorter, regular, interactive meetings throughout the semester help build community and address issues earlier than the week of finals. If the chair is requesting feedback on proposals, they should always provide an opportunity outside of the meeting for faculty to give their opinions. Not everyone is comfortable speaking up in a meeting, and not everyone is able to process a proposal in the moment. Regular, shorter meetings give time for discussion and then voting at a follow up meeting. When the only time faculty meet are at all day "retreats" at the beginning or end of the semester, there is pressure for everyone to come to a consensus within the constraints of the meeting time. In addition, providing opportunity for review of proposals and feedback outside of the meeting helps everyone feel valued, even if they miss the meeting. The chair can model prioritizing doctor appointments (including therapy), sleep, and work-life balance. An out-of-office reply during breaks by the chair can model this balance, or a clear expectation that an email does not require an immediate response, especially if sent after working hours. This is particularly pertinent for staff who may be hourly; supervision of staff is often overlooked in the literature on department chairs.

Clear and collaboratively developed expectations for promotion and tenure, service, and annual evaluations can help faculty and staff engage more fully in all areas. These areas are related to items the chair directly controls, such as meeting schedules, course schedules, and teaching assignments. Course schedules need to balance the target student population demand with faculty capacity. For example, if the course schedule requires an evening section to serve students who work, the day of the week could be consistent from semester to semester. This helps not only professors who may need to arrange care but also students who now know what to expect. Ideally, the course schedule should carve out a time slot for department committee meetings, so no one misses because they are teaching class. If on campus childcare is available, evening care might support not only the faculty member with children but also any students enrolled in the course. If faculty are given a course or service schedule that is challenging to manage with their personal constraints, they will struggle to engage. For the department to function well as a team, they need to recognize that each person's ability

to meet expectations is dependent on more than just their individual effort; for instance, a class time might need to be swapped so the elected faculty senator can attend the monthly meetings. If the faculty has conflicts, the chair can support them by brainstorming ideas, such as an asynchronous assignment in the course for the monthly meeting or a guest speaker.

Chairs set the tone and timing for meetings, invited speakers, and many of the activities and events at which faculty are expected to appear. Simple acts, such as arranging for childcare during an evening speaker event or explicitly inviting children to social gatherings can contribute to 'normalizing' faculty parenthood. Chairs can also adjust their language when communicating policy; for example, recognizing that parents need to stay home not only when they are ill, but also when their children are. This policy language should extend to students as well. However, language is only the first step toward a better sense of belonging, as the perception of parenting as "taking away" from job responsibilities needs to shift. This requires a larger shift than more inclusive policy language and offers of childcare for after-hours events.

One of the most effective questions a chair can ask is, "what support do you need to fulfill your obligations, both professional and personal, this semester?" This does not mean the chair personally provides the support, but they may be able to direct the faculty member to campus or community services, connect them with others who have the same barriers, or offer flexibility. The chair can also address any stigma surrounding supports offered to faculty, possibly by individually addressing faculty who make comments. Also, simply the act of acknowledging that barriers exist may be valuable and help the faculty member feel a sense of belonging to the department and campus. For a robust engagement-focused approach to be successful, the barriers must not be held against faculty during annual evaluations or promotion and tenure processes. Along with shorter, regular faculty meetings, the chair needs to meet regularly with faculty and staff to establish a relationship and develop a healthy department culture of collaboration and support.

Campuses can support behavioral and emotional engagement of parents

The chairperson should of course be supported by the highest levels of administration, including during an effort to expand the notion of engagement, and to attempt to measure changes in engagement as various programs or processes are adjusted. With retention being one of the priorities on most of our campuses, engagement theory can not only help us identify barriers faced but also to prioritize engagement-building projects. In one notable example, the authors in 2020 contributed to securing funding for a $2.7M child care center on our campus. The center opened in 2021, and now addresses the local child-care challenge of which faculty had long complained. The child

care center further signals to our current and prospective students and employees that we are a family-friendly institution. Finally, the child care center offers opportunities for students on our campus to study early childhood education in a laboratory setting.

As an example of research opportunities afforded by the existence of the child care center, through the lens of engagement theory, we offer these examples of potential research questions:

- Does job satisfaction differ between faculty parents whose children are in on-campus child care vs. off-campus facilities, in-home, and at-home contexts?
- Does the enrollment of their children in on-campus child care predict greater retention of faculty members?
- Do faculty members with children in on-campus childcare feel more valued by the institution than other groups?
- Does the presence of on-campus childcare impact the perception of campus culture among non-university employees in the local community?

Research specific to engagement theory among students is more widely available (e.g. Bond et al., 2020) than inquiries relating even peripherally to engagement theory and faculty parents.

Conclusion: The Call for Research on Engagement and Faculty Caregivers

Knowing that the role of the chair is changing, and may never be standardized, our focus here is on the chair-faculty relationship, based on the premise that if we treat faculty the way we want them to treat students, then chairs may be more effective in meeting what is today an almost universal exigency — recruiting and retaining larger numbers of students. Especially when chairs are explicit with faculty about what they are advising and why, chairs shape department and campus culture in positive directions. Parenting on campus is a critical area for research both at the global and local levels, and engagement theory provides a testable heuristic for improving campus life for those who face caregiving obligations not always supported by campus culture and policy.

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