

Avoidable Harm: The High Cost of Institutional Intransigence and Betrayal

Sharon E. R. Franks

University of California San Diego (Retired)



Author Note

Author:  <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-3434-4579>

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sharon Franks

Email: sfranks@ucsd.edu

*This is a personal scholarly narrative based on the author's firsthand experiences in an institution, program, or other higher education setting. The views expressed in the publication are solely that of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the ADVANCE Journal.

Abstract

In this personal narrative, I share my experience with institutional betrayal: stagnancy and intransigence that obstructed long-overdue revision of university policy that harmed a group of majority-women, non-faculty academic employees. Although a policy-encoded “concrete ceiling” had been known to institutional leadership for decades, and other campuses in the same university system had dismantled this barrier to advancement, six years after proposed policy changes were submitted to the campus administration, the harmful policy remained unchanged. The impacts of the institutional betrayal include but extend far beyond pragmatic and psychological harm to individuals; they harm the institution itself. In reflecting on my experience successfully fighting for institutional transformation, I offer recommendations to other change-champions, and to institutional leaders who may be able to spare their people betrayal and trauma, and their organizations avoidable losses.

Institutional betrayal occurs when “...trusted and powerful institutions ... [act] in ways that visit harm upon those dependent on them for safety and well-being” (Smith and Freyd, 2014, p. 575). In this personal narrative, I share my experience with institutional betrayal: stagnancy and intransigence that hindered implementation of a relatively minor amendment of a policy that for decades harmed a group of majority-women, non-faculty academic employees.

Implementation of the policy update should have been easy and straightforward; there were numerous policy-reform precedents at sister campuses within the same, large, public university system. Yet for more than six years after proposed changes were drafted and submitted to the campus administration, the policy remained unchanged and continued to inflict harm.

I am among those who have been—and continue to be—profoundly affected by the unconscionably slow pace of change. For those directly affected, the trauma resulting from the betrayal has been both pragmatic and psychological (Freyd, n.d.). The true cost of these impacts, however, may be even greater to the institution than to the individuals directly affected: these people play vital roles in the sustained excellence of the institution. Both the betrayal and resultant damage were avoidable. People in positions of authority could have taken responsibility and appropriate action many years before they ultimately began to pursue change.

Reflecting on how I challenged institutional betrayal and inertia—institutional resistance to change (Munck af Rosenschöld, Rozema, and Frye-Levine, 2014), here I discuss factors that impeded or aided my efforts. And I offer recommendations that may help (a) those who are fighting—or considering fighting—their own such battles, and (b) institutions, in avoiding costly impacts of betraying those who trust and depend on them, and who dedicate their careers to supporting their missions.

Harmful Policy Persists, Despite Precedents of Institutional Transformation Elsewhere

In the 10-campus University of California (UC) system, formal, published policies at both the system (University of California, n.d., a) and individual-campus levels (e.g., UC San Diego, 2020) regulate the periodic performance evaluations of academic appointees. This includes determination of merit-based salary increases that follow UC-wide academic salary scales (University of California, n.d., b). Academic appointees include professors, researchers, lecturers, and those holding hundreds of additional UC academic titles (University of California, n.d., c). An appointee's academic title indicates the series and rank or level of the position to which they are appointed. Published salary scales indicate levels or steps of salary within each rank (University of California, n.d., d). Clear statement of policies and procedures is intended to promote fairness and equity in academic-personnel actions across and within all UC campuses.

Once they reach the top steps in their appointment series, UC-system-level policies enable some—but not all—academics, including professors and researchers, to continue to earn merit-based “above-scale” salary increases, assessed by regular academic review. In contrast, UC-system policy does not explicitly provide for above-scale salary increases of appointees in two academic-appointment series: Academic Coordinator (AC) and Academic Administrator (AA). In the absence of campus-level policies and/or practices that enable the equivalent of professorial above-scale advancement for ACs and AAs, once an AC or AA reaches the top step in their series, their merit-based salary increases stops permanently, regardless of the quantity or quality of their achievements during a review period. This institutionally imposed cap is made of much firmer stuff than a glass ceiling—an invisible barrier that tends to be shaped by societal/cultural factors; these policies were, until 2024, formally written into the campuswide procedure manual. I'll refer to them as a “concrete ceiling”.

At most UC campuses, solutions to this UC-system-imposed concrete ceiling were implemented many years ago through changes to local campus policies or practices, as partially documented in Senate Administration Committee to Review Proposed Policy Revisions—Academic Coordinators (PPM 230-375) and Academic Administrators (PPM 230-370) (2023). Sadly, such changes were not made at my own campus, UC San Diego, until early 2024. Until retiring in July 2024, I was one of approximately 70 UC San Diego ACs, two-thirds of whom are women. At the time this manuscript was submitted, all UC San Diego ACs and AAs were facing or had already collided with this concrete ceiling that obstructed salary increases.

For some two decades, the UC San Diego administration was aware of yet failed to reform harmful campus policy. UC San Diego's institutional stagnancy, intransigence, and non-transformation is particularly distressing because solutions had long ago been implemented on other UC campuses. In the meantime, ACs and AAs were deprived of salary increases they should have earned—and *would have earned* on other UC campuses, incurred significant losses to their retirement benefits, left the university for other positions, or retired, at least in part because there was no prospect of fair salary increases. The impacts have been far-reaching. UC San Diego's failure to keep pace with reforms on sister UC campuses was an institutional betrayal of its marginalized ACs and AAs. Institutional salary capping, compensation stagnation, and resultant attenuated pensions unjustly and inequitably penalized this underclass of academic employees who contribute so much to the institution through sustained, outstanding work.

Who is Harmed, How, and How Much

The policy-capping of salary advancement at UC San Diego directly harmed ACs and AAs. Most of us non-faculty appointees hold PhDs. Across the entire UC system there are more than 500 ACs; the number of AAs is an order of magnitude smaller. At UC San Diego, ACs and

AAs serve in diverse roles that advance the institution's core research, education, and public-service missions. These roles include directing the campus's centralized Research Development team (my former, research-enabling position), leading complex educational and outreach programs, and serving as crucial links between the university and local, regional, and statewide communities. For example, ACs and AAs direct the following UC San Diego centers and programs: Center for Research on Educational Equity, Assessment & Teaching Excellence; Digital Learning Hub; Teaching + Learning Commons; master's programs in the schools of management and oceanography; Scripps [Institution of Oceanography] Educational Alliances; program that supports California mathematics educators in preparing pre-college students; and numerous extension programs within California Sea Grant, among others. Collectively, these professionals directly and indirectly support the success—e.g., learning, degree attainment, fundraising, scholarship, career advancement, scientific discovery, publication, natural resource stewardship, and more—of hundreds of thousands of students, faculty members, researchers, administrators, and community members.

ACs and AAs undergo a rigorous, multi-step, periodic, merit-review process very similar to the process for professors and researchers. However, ACs and AAs are not eligible for tenure, nor are they represented in the University's academic senate. Lacking a voice in campus governance, holding an appointment type unfamiliar to most faculty, and far fewer in number than faculty and staff employees, ACs and AAs are a marginalized underclass of academic employees.

At face value the policy itself is neither gender-biased nor ageist. However, the fact is that the majority of those most harmed by UC San Diego's outmoded policy have been women. Furthermore, there is an age-disproportionate impact because the salary cap hit only after one

reached the top step in their series—typically after decades of biennial or triennial academic-review cycles. Disturbingly, those penalized soonest and most severely have been the highest performers—individuals whose exceptional productivity resulted in more rapid progression through the salary steps than normal—a process referred to in the UC system as *acceleration*.

The salary trajectories of ACs and AAs who reached the concrete ceiling fell behind those of other academics at UC San Diego and, importantly, of peer ACs and AAs at other UC campuses that allowed above-scale advancement for these appointees. As a case in point, I was at the top step of my series (the top level in the AC series) for six years, working at an exceptionally productive rate, with no increase in step nor performance-commensurate salary based on my formal, triennial academic review. I would have received such salary increases on other UC campuses, as did my counterpart at another UC campus. Following my penultimate review, I did not receive a \$17,000 annual salary increase I had earned, according to a campuswide committee that reviews the files of ACs and AAs (UC San Diego, 2024, a). The policy that was in effect at UC San Diego blocked the increase: I was an AC at the top of her series. And the compensation loss compounded each year. Further, because UC retirement pensions are based on one's three-highest-salary-earning years, the financial damage to ACs who hit this barrier extends beyond their working years: it grows throughout retirement. Projecting the impact over a three-decade anticipated retirement period, my loss in pension will accrue to more than \$500,000—a conservative estimate that does not factor in reasonable estimates of potential investment interest or cost-of-living increases.

I am not alone, and I may not be the most severely financially harmed UC San Diego employee. I know of at least six ACs and one AA whose salary trajectories were unjustly curtailed by campus policy. Four of us have served on the campuswide standing committee that

reviews the academic files of our peers and makes recommendations for merit-based advancement to the campus administration (UC San Diego, 2024, a). Ironically, for diligently investing years of significant effort in voluntary, peer-review university service, above and beyond our regular academic responsibilities, we have been harmed by our own institution through the concrete compensation ceiling. One individual, now retired, served on the committee for more than a decade. Throughout the last two decades of their AA employment, they did not receive a single performance-based salary increase.

A proposed campus-policy change that was under review at the time of manuscript submission, and later, in February 2024, went into effect in revised form with a retroactive effective date of July 1, 2023 (see newly added section PPM 230-375-18.a in: UC San Diego, 2024, b), removes the barrier to continued merit advancement for UC San Diego ACs and AAs. However, those whose salary advancement was curtailed have not and will not be retroactively compensated. Betrayed by our institution, we will not be made whole for the significant losses we incurred.

Far-reaching Impacts of Institutional Betrayal

The true cost of UC San Diego's sluggishness to update policy is borne not only by ACs and AAs, and the harm is not limited to individuals' financial loss—the pragmatic harm. Inequitable treatment—inequitable with other academics at UC San Diego and with academic peers on other UC campuses—is demoralizing and experienced as institutional betrayal by those affected. The psychological ramifications of institutional betrayal are difficult to quantify, but may be even more detrimental than the pragmatic harm, because they can propagate throughout the institution, and persist over time.

An institution that fails to fairly, tangibly, monetarily reward excellence, sends a strong

message: *Your contributions to this organization are not valued.* In the absence of fair, merit-based salary increases, well-intended verbal assertions of value, and expressions of appreciation by supervisors, and their supervisors, ring hollow. Over time goodwill erodes. Morale is depressed. Motivation to forge onward with the sustained energy, intensity, and enthusiasm that brought a person to the top step in their series may understandably wane. These effects are impact-multipliers: the ultimate beneficiaries of ACs' and AAs' labors—and, by extension, those who stand to indirectly suffer from the mistreatment of ACs and AAs—are the institution's faculty, research, students, programs, administrators, and its financial bottom line.

The psychological impact of institutional betrayal is heightened by awareness that those at the highest administrative levels who did not take responsibility to accomplish timely, necessary, institutional transformation include top-level campus administrators—faculty who themselves have benefited personally and financially from policy-enabled above-scale salary advancement. Moreover, these same individuals are among those who most strongly and publicly tout the campus's efforts and accomplishments in the domains of equity, diversity, and inclusion. Such pronouncements made, while turning a blind eye to the plight of ACs and AAs for so long, ring hollow at best, and hypocritical at worst.

The consequent disenchantment or diminished engagement of ACs and AAs, particularly top performers, accelerates the loss of expertise and talent that are so vital to the university's research, education, and public-service mission. Institutional betrayal drives external job searches, resignations, retention cases, and premature retirements, all of which further drain the energy, expertise, and talent so vital to the institution's continued success.

Over longer time scales, the downstream impact of institutional betrayal may result in disinclination to include the institution in one's estate plans (for those able to engage in

philanthropy), or to enthusiastically encourage others in positions to support the institution financially to do so. Why support an institution that has betrayed you?

Institutional Stagnancy and Intransigence

It is difficult to understand, much less justify, why this concrete-ceiling problem, this institutional betrayal, went unremedied for so long. Was this unfairness and inequity brought to the attention of those responsible for academic personnel policies at UC San Diego? Was information about policies and practices that obliterated this injustice at other UC campuses shared with campus leadership, including with the highest and second-highest ranking executive officers, the latter lauded as a leader in advancing the status of women in the academy? Were specific, well-researched, precedent-informed, concisely articulated policy changes to right this wrong formally proposed to the UC San Diego administration? To each of these questions, the answer is a resounding: Yes! Many times, and over many years.

What enables me to so confidently answer in the affirmative is that I played a leading role in raising awareness of the punitive impact of this academic personnel policy on ACs. I documented and communicated disparities in policy and practice among UC campuses that inequitably harm UC San Diego ACs, and I advocated for campus-policy change that would remove the concrete ceiling that demoralizes and disincentivizes some of the highest performing and most valuable members of the UC San Diego campus community.

The institutional transformation needed to solve the problem and mitigate the harm done could and should have been relatively simple and straightforward for the UC San Diego administration to achieve expeditiously: appropriately instruct the academic personnel office, draft changes to the campus policy, circulate the draft changes for review and approval by the appropriate bodies, and implement the changes. Yet, after decades of the administration ignoring

the problem, it took more than six years after submission of such a draft policy change by a campuswide committee (UC San Diego, 2024, a), on which I served (2017-2021), for the policy to be changed.

What can one make of this long delay in institutional transformation?

A charitable interpretation of lack of action at UC San Diego over two decades might attribute the resultant betrayal to “omission” rather than “commission”, as in Smith and Freyd’s (2014) diagram of the dimensions of institutional betrayal. The “omissions” at UC San Diego resulting in institutional betrayal and trauma include those of institutional *stagnancy* (inaction) and institutional *intransigence* (active refusal to change); both stagnancy and intransigence contributed to UC San Diego’s failure to achieve long-needed institutional transformation. The examples that follow, each associated with a university unit or administrator, encapsulate the unhelpful positions—not verbatim statements—I personally encountered.

Examples of Institutional Stagnancy

- Excuse-making for inaction, by UC San Diego Academic Affairs: We will not deal with this issue now/soon because we’re dealing with... COVID-19, or any of a seemingly endless stream of administrative issues we regard as more important than the one harming ACs and AAs.
- Ignorance, and bystander stance, of the chief campus administrator: Why do we even have or need ACs on this campus? Regardless, this matter is out of my hands. I choose not to get involved in matters that I have delegated to other administrators.

Examples of Institutional Intransigence

- Inequitably applied workarounds, in lieu of systemic solution, by the campus administrator responsible for academic affairs: Rather than expeditiously emplace a

systemic solution to the salary-capping problem, I will use my authority to approve a temporary practice that *undercompensates* typically and exceptionally performing ACs—granting them salary increases commensurate with academic *underperformance*.

- Withholding of information, by the Academic Personnel Office: No, we will not give the campuswide review committee information it requests—information already in the public domain, but burdensome to extract—because it’s our policy not to share it. In so doing, we obstruct the committee’s ability to promote communication, perhaps even including consideration of unionization, among members of the affected academic underclass, as well as hinder the committee’s analysis of non-sensitive personnel data.
- Misdirection, by the Academic Personnel Office: In response to the committee’s request for guidance on policy-change processes: Here is a diagram, a flow-chart, of a complex, minimally documented process for systemwide policymaking. What we aren’t telling the committee is that the diagrammed process isn’t relevant to what this committee seeks to accomplish, because the change sought can be accomplished at the campus rather than the UC-system level.
- Underrepresentation, by Academic Affairs: We appoint an ad hoc committee charged with analysis of and recommendations on policy issues harming ACs and AAs. The committee included six professors and only one AC who was effectively insulated from the harmful effects of policy-based salary capping, thus exacerbating the voicelessness and powerlessness of the impacted group.

My Campaign for Institutional Transformation

I personally experienced the sense of betrayal and demoralization described previously. I am among those who sought and were offered employment elsewhere, and then persevered

through a prolonged, exceptionally painful retention process—a separate experience of institutional betrayal not discussed in this narrative. I have also been a warrior for policy change. For more than six years I played a leading role in efforts to implement changes to UC San Diego policy—to dismantle this barrier that penalized ACs and AAs and bring UC San Diego’s academic-personnel policy for ACs into alignment with policy and practice that had already been changed on other UC campuses.

This work entailed: (a) independent research, analysis, and documentation of disparities among my campus’s and other campuses’ academic-personnel compensation, policies, and practices; (b) extensive writing—of proposed policy revisions, letters to high-ranking administrators, formal responses to campus reports, and statements for my academic-review and retention files; and (c) dozens of formal and informal meetings with staff, faculty, and administrators including the chancellor, executive vice chancellor, assistant vice chancellor for academic personnel, associate vice chancellor for faculty equity, diversity, and inclusion, chair of the academic senate, among others. This hard, often lonely, and emotionally stressful work was in addition to my regular work in service to my campus. Much of it was done on my personal time—on weekends, at night, on holidays and vacations. Over years, the (uncompensated) labor and the many setbacks I experienced took a toll on me, professionally and personally. Despite the arduousness of the struggle, I maintained conviction that the goal was worthwhile and attainable. With crucial support from allies (next section), I strengthened my resolve to keep fighting. Ultimately the goal—policy change—was achieved.

Recommendations for Change-Champions and Institutional Leaders

From my experience fighting for change, I can offer some recommendations that may be helpful to others engaged in struggles for institutional transformation. I also offer suggestions to

institutional leaders who may be able to spare their people trauma, and their organizations avoidable losses.

For Change-Champions

1. Cultivate allies—people who empower you, fuel your will and energy to fight for justice, and fight alongside you.

For members of marginalized groups, it can be especially helpful to have allies among more powerful groups in the institutional hierarchy (in my case, faculty) who are more difficult for the administration to ignore than members of relatively less powerful groups (e.g., ACs and AAs). My allies, for whom I am deeply grateful, included:

- My beloved spouse, now an emeritus UC San Diego faculty member, has been unwavering in supporting my campaign for justice. He freely shared his knowledge of academic-personnel policies and procedures—knowledge he accumulated over more than 30 years on the faculty, during which his extensive and diverse university service included four years as department vice chair and chair. He gave me enormously valuable, constructive feedback and counsel on countless statements, emails, and proposals I drafted, including a draft of this narrative. He used his own voice, as a professor, an administrator, and as a member of a standing committee on faculty welfare, to advocate for policy change. He has all along been a strategic co-thinker and a sounding board, and always, always a salve for my ravaged spirit that has taken a beating during this campaign for justice. He can unequivocally corroborate my experience of academic trauma. If not for his pragmatic and emotional support, I likely would not have persisted.
- A non-family-member faculty mentor with extensive experience in matters of campus and systemwide academic procedures gave generously of their time and advice in helping

me navigate the many obstacles I encountered and also encouraged me to carry on.

- A senior staff member with deep knowledge of academic-personnel policy patiently, thoroughly, and helpfully answered my many questions and offered sound guidance at key decision-making junctures.
- A dozen or so senior faculty members whose funding pursuits I supported over the years, interacted with in the Leaders for Equity Advancement and Diversity (LEAD) Fellows program (UC San Diego Office for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, 2024), and served with on campus committees, formally registered their support for proposed policy change, attested to the value of ACs' contributions, and called out inequities, errors, and omissions in university-authored reports and policy drafts.

Ideally, one would also engage peer allies. My efforts to engage other ACs and AAs met with limited success, possibly due to:

- Most ACs and AAs, as well as most faculty members and staff employees, lack awareness and understanding of the salary-capping issue and its impacts.
- Most ACs and AAs were years or decades away from reaching the salary cap, and so may not have perceived their risk of experiencing harm.
- There may be understandable reluctance or fear to go on record in challenging powerful university administrators who control their performance reviews and career advancement.
- Some may regard the battle as hopeless and be resigned to simply accept their fate.

All of the above may have contributed to disinclination to engage, to join forces in speaking truth to power.

2. Work with the system, to the extent possible. Do the research to inform yourself about the policies, practices, guidelines, procedures, and players relevant to the transformation sought.

3. If possible and appropriate, pursue multiple avenues simultaneously to achieve your change goals, as drivers on multiple fronts may be more effective than single-source pressure in fomenting action. An example:

I presented the case for policy change to institutional leadership as an individual, in the context of my own academic review, simultaneously led a campus committee's advocacy for policy change, and participated actively in campuswide focus groups and feedback sessions hosted by the Office for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, in which I raised awareness of the marginalization of ACs and AAs.

4. Be in it for the long haul. It can be astounding how long it takes to accomplish even relatively simple change in academia. Persist, to paraphrase Lennon and McCartney (1967), with a little help from your friends, as encouraged in point 1, above.

For Institutional Leaders

1. If the institution is truly committed to equity, diversity, and inclusion, as it claims to be, get your own house in order. Look close to home for opportunities to make small (perhaps to the administration, but large to individuals affected), meaningful institutional transformations that advance equity and diversity.
2. When you are made aware of a problem that has a straightforward solution, especially when solution precedents abound, don't kick the can down the road. Fix the problem promptly and avoid the vast tangible and intangible costs that may compound with institutional stagnancy or intransigence.
3. Work to clear rather than emplace obstacles in the paths of change advocates who are actively working to improve the institution.
4. Recognize that in a large public university system, leaving policy-setting to constituent

campuses can result in inequity among campuses. When harmful inequity that unjustly penalizes individuals or groups emerges, act swiftly to mitigate harm.

Closing Thoughts

The sad truth is that inordinate delay in reforming concrete-ceiling policies at my campus was a major factor in my decision to leave UC San Diego and a job I loved when I did. Changes to this policy were relatively easy to enact, and they had been enacted at many UC campuses. Despite having known about the problem for decades and having received proposed changes to the policy more than six years ago, the UC San Diego administration continued its intransigence and betrayal of its academics. The emotional and financial costs to members of this majority-women group are significant, and the harm will follow us for the rest of our lives through reduced pensions. The loss to the university through demoralized and disincentivized employees is unquantifiable, though I know of several superb, high-performing ACs who have changed positions, left the university, or retired in the face of the concrete-ceiling salary cap. Yet, by learning how to use the system, and with the assistance of knowledgeable, supportive colleagues, our efforts and persistence ultimately overcame intransigence and betrayal. The recently enacted policy reform should benefit many deserving academics and the campus for years to come.

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An oceanographer by training, Sharon E. R. Franks, Ph.D., is the founding director of the central research-development team at the University of California San Diego. Throughout her 30-year career she supported the success of hundreds of faculty members across diverse disciplines in competing for more than a billion dollars in research funding from public and private sponsors.