



Empower Through Inclusivity: Developing Pathways to Success

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Abstract: As part of an NSF ADVANCE Adaptation award, a STEM university in the Midwest established new opportunities for faculty communication in the form of an Advocates and Allies program and facilitated peer mentor circles. These programs were designed to empower faculty to communicate with one another, and with the administration, to facilitate policy and procedure changes related to faculty development as well as the promotion and tenure process. Due to the timeline of promotion and tenure, any long-term impacts on retention and campus climate will take time to come to fruition. Here, we present an overview of these programs, successes and challenges, and how these programs were integrated into the main functions of the university for continued support and program sustainability after the ADVANCE funding period.

Mentorship and representation remain pressing challenges in institutions, where gender and racial disparities persist despite efforts to increase diversity (McKeon, 1990; Bothwell et al., 2018; Durodoye et al., 2020; Gardner, 2012; National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2023; Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group, 2017). These issues are intensified by the attritional culture typical of STEM environments, where success is often tied to independence-driven competition and limited institutional support. Attritional systems emphasize rewarding individual initiative and culling those unable to carve out a means to fit into the structure which leads to high turnover of faculty (Durodoye et al., 2020; McKeon, 1990; Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group, 2017). In such settings, there is often little effort expended to build support or communication systems to aid individuals seeking advancement or inform them as to the criteria for promotion.

While institutions typically provide new faculty with training at onboarding, these programs often focus on generalized operational information delivered in orientation meetings during the first week of their arrival. Such information is required for faculty to function but rarely offer any form of support beyond the initial orientation (Lindbeck & Darnell, 2008). Ideally, faculty should be made aware of the standards for promotion incrementally as they become familiarized with how the institution operates (Cervato et al., 2024; Garrett et al., 2023; Llorens et al., 2021). If guidance regarding how any specific duty will impact promotion is not provided, it can undermine trust in the system; this, in turn, may lead to excessive or unnecessary documentation and reporting, as faculty attempt to prove their contributions without clear direction. The impact of such lack of trust is greatest on faculty who are members of underrepresented groups and/or have job descriptions involving multiple duties or appointment in multiple units (Bothwell et al., 2018; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Durodoye et al., 2020; Hill, 1993; Shaw et al., 2019; Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group, 2017). One approach to improve faculty retention is facilitating a culture of development and reducing attrition. Such a system includes

mechanisms for clearly communicating standards, procedures, and expectations in a supportive and cooperative environment.

The institution where this work was performed is in a sparsely populated region, where approximately 79% of the population identifies as White, 11% as Native American (largely Lakota), 5% Hispanic or Latinx, and 3% as African or Asian American. The university is a STEM-dominant institution offering degrees in engineering, natural sciences, and physical sciences. Four of the six counties surrounding the institution are classified as Frontier and Remote (FAR) areas having populations of less than ten people per square mile. The combination of isolation, a high proportion of male students, a STEM focus, and low racial/ethnic/national-origin diversity among faculty each contributed to the absence of a critical mass of women and other underrepresented minorities to drive change in campus culture and climate (Karlin & Surovek, 2009). This is particularly evidenced in statistics that show hiring, advancement, and retention of female faculty well below national levels across disciplines. In the resulting culture, faculty from non-dominant groups feel unheard, and cope with their professional environment by using minimization (Equity for STEM through Policy Change, 2021) and strategies (consciously or not) such as intentional invisibility (Ballakrishnen et al., 2019) or code-switching (McCluney et al., 2019) to navigate campus culture.

This paper outlines the efforts of the Empower project, funded by a National Science Foundation (NSF) ADVANCE Adaptation grant, at a STEM-dominant institution with the overarching goal to shift from a culture of attrition to one of development, fostering faculty diversity and inclusivity. The Empower project seeks to implement new programs such as Advocates and Allies (A&A) and Peer Mentoring Circles (PMCs), improve data collection, and develop and revise policies aimed at institutional transformation. These initiatives aim to enhance the representation and advancement of marginalized faculty by promoting gender, racial, and ethnic diversity. To incorporate an intersectional approach at a university with low diversity, programming intentionally included foreign-born and foreign-trained faculty. Using an intersectional framework, our analysis of campus-wide surveys and participant

feedback demonstrates the impact of these efforts on faculty attitudes, institutional culture, and faculty development practices.

Methodology

To support faculty in fostering a campus culture of development, the Empower project team (the authors of this paper) set goals to raise awareness of implicit biases, make campus culture and climate more inclusive, create a heightened sense of faculty belonging and engagement, and develop pathways for faculty success in all tracks and ranks. To address these goals, three project components were developed including (1) the Advocates and Allies Program adapted from North Dakota State University (NDSU; NSF ADVANCE Award # 1500604), (2) peer mentor circles (PMCs)—an adaptation of the facilitated peer mentoring circles from Murray State University (NSF ADVANCE Award # 1608576), and (3) institutional level review, revision, and establishment of policies under the direction of the Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs. As defined by the institution's Office of Faculty Development and Advancement (OFDA), the collective term "faculty" includes all full-time ladder faculty, non-tenure track (NTT) teaching faculty, and NTT research faculty, including research scientists.

We used campus wide surveys, participant surveys, and analysis of institutional data as described in each of the following sections to measure the impacts of the Empower project initiatives on changes in cultural awareness and engagement across campus. Overall campus progress was assessed using surveys and demographic data that encompasses gender and intersectionality, collected during the ADVANCE Adaptation award. The grant began July 1, 2021, and occurred over three years: Year 1: 2021-2022 (FY22), Year 2: 2022-2023 (FY23), and Year 3: 2023-2024 (FY24).

Advocates & Allies

The Advocates and Allies (A&A) program was adapted from the program at NDSU to address gender equity and inclusion on campus. The program aims to recruit Advocates who engage faculty, staff, and administrators to become Allies. Allies are expected to support a more inclusive campus culture that specifically improves the day-to-day experiences of women and other underrepresented faculty groups (Anicha et al., 2020; Anicha et al., 2022; Bilen-Green et al., 2013; Bilen-Green et al., 2015). The goals of the A&A workshops are to increase awareness of implicit bias, improve campus culture and climate, and raise the intercultural development level of faculty. Advocates are faculty members who educate themselves about issues of inclusivity and gender inequality in general and then identify and address specific issues at the institution. Allies refer to faculty, staff, and administrators whom the Advocates train (through workshops) as proponents for gender equity and inclusivity, carrying lessons learned in training into all their activities across campus. To leverage proactive engagement and advocacy of faculty from dominant groups to promote inclusion, Advocates were recruited to lead and develop Allies workshops and become agents of change and vocal proponents of gender diversity, equity, equality, and inclusion. The first and second cohort of Advocates were trained by Roger Green who guided the Advocate side of the A&A program at NDSU.

Our institution adapted the A&A program by focusing on the development of intercultural competence. Shifting from a culture of attrition to a culture of development requires the campus community to engage in both adult human mental development and faculty development. To assess progress in intercultural competence, the institution utilized the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), which categorizes intercultural development across five stages: denial, polarization, minimization, acceptance, and adaptation (Figure 1). Within this framework, large gaps between Perceived Orientation (PO) and Developmental Orientation (DO) scores can indicate an overestimation of intercultural competence at both the

individual and institutional levels. PO represents how culturally competent individuals believe they are, while DO reflects their actual level of intercultural competence as measured by the IDI, assessing how they navigate and engage with cultural differences based on their responses. Individuals often perceive themselves as being more advanced in intercultural competence than they actually are, and because DO scores are typically lower than PO scores, these gaps highlight discrepancies between self-perception and demonstrated ability, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to foster genuine intercultural growth.

One year prior to the Empower project, the IDI report for the campus community (faculty, staff, and administration) stated that the predominant mindset on campus is the Minimization stage (Figure 1), in which commonalities are highlighted and differences minimized. Minimization in the dominant majority group may explain why a large proportion of individuals do not believe there are any significant shortcomings in cultural competency to address on campus despite the high attrition of women.

The importance of cultural competence and intercultural development as an aspect of institutional transformation, especially in creating institutions that are welcoming to people despite their differences is well-established. Kegan (1982, p. 73-110) proposes that learning and development involves movement through progressively more complex ways of knowing and poses the question, "What happens ... if we think of gender differences as more like cultural differences?" (1994, p. 211-212). According to Kegan, it is the "evolution of consciousness, the personal unfolding of ways of organizing experience that are not simply replaced as we grow but subsumed into more complex systems of the mind" (1994, p. 9). Kegan (1994, p. 214) also identifies how institutions fall short in creating truly inclusive work environment that embodies intercultural competence:

If the workplace, or the academy, is one that advantages a particular style and that style is more closely associated with men, than women, no matter how vigorously recruited or warmly received, will remain visitors where they work. A work environment refashioned as a truly respectful 'multicultural' environment

would be one in which neither gender feels like a visitor. But to engage in the difficult process of getting from here to there will necessarily involve a period in which neither gender will feel perfectly at home.

Bennett's (1986) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) can be used as a framework for viewing intercultural development at institutions (Figure 1). This model assumes that people move through stages of intercultural sensitivity from ethnocentric (denial, polarization, and minimization) on to ethnorelative stages (acceptance and adaptation) (Bennett, 1986; Bennett, 1993; Hammer, 2011; Hammer et al., 2003). This development parallels the consciousness development proposed by Kegan (1982, 1994) as people move from selfish/uncomplex mindsets on to unselfish/complex mindsets through a 5-stage (Stuart, 2012) and 3-stage (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005) multidimensional model.

The success of the A&A program at our institution was quantitatively measured using the number of Advocates trained and the percentage of faculty that were trained as Allies as well as evaluation of survey feedback from workshop attendees. Success was also qualitatively measured through self-defined goals and milestones set and achieved by the Advocates (see Results).

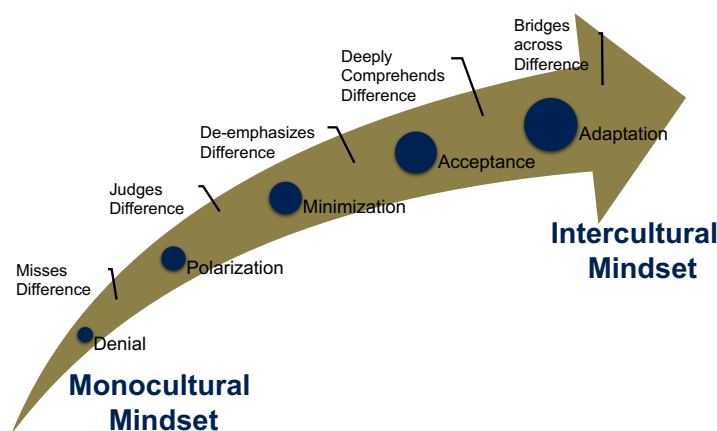


Figure 1: Modified form of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) described in Bennett, 1986.

Peer Mentor Circles

The institution has no history of campus wide mentoring, and while some departments engage senior faculty in the mentoring of junior faculty, there is no formal structure or assessment for these efforts. Department-level mentoring is typically dyadic, where a senior faculty member is assigned to a junior faculty member as a mentor. Dyadic mentoring is based on a model that fosters a challenging, competitive environment and stresses independence (Seymour & Hewitt, 1997), but many women prefer inclusive, cooperative mentoring environments that provide a sense of belonging (Gilligan, 1982). Additionally, the dyadic model is based on the misconception that mentoring is only important for junior faculty whereas faculty at all levels as well as administrators can benefit greatly from mentoring (Goltz & Sotirin, 2024).

On a small, geographically isolated campus, the limited number of faculty members can exacerbate the challenges associated with strictly dyadic mentoring approaches, where opportunities for forming mentoring partnerships are constrained. This is particularly problematic when changing institutional priorities can cause a generational difference in the expectations of junior and senior faculty with respect to research production. This shift in priorities, which often occurs at institutions transitioning from predominantly undergraduate to more research-focused statuses (Kramer, 2005), leading to a divergence in expectations. Senior faculty members are often shaped by more teaching-centric, less research-driven environments and hence tend to prioritize teaching and service in their career trajectories. In contrast, junior faculty, with a heightened focus on research productivity, are expected to meet more rigorous publishing and grant-writing benchmarks while still meeting teaching and service requirements. As the institution works towards achieving a Carnegie R2 classification, this disparity in expectations creates tension, as the mentoring system struggles to bridge the gap between the two groups, resulting in unclear or conflicting guidance on promotion and tenure pathways.

Campus silos, as is the case with this geographically isolated institution, combined with small- n values of women faculty can perpetuate a climate where male voices are dominant on campus. At the institution, with a total faculty pool of less than 250, women STEM faculty do not have critical mass in any department. At the beginning of the NSF ADVANCE grant period, there was also a significant imbalance of power with women faculty being most highly represented at the non-tenured Instructor or Lecturer rank and significantly underrepresented at the tenured Full Professor, Department Head, and senior leadership ranks. In addition to this underrepresentation, in a recent state-wide climate survey of all six state institutions (funded through an NSF ADVANCE grant) women faculty reported that their voices were often not heard or were dismissed, which led to low job satisfaction and/or low retention among women in STEM fields.

Several ADVANCE programs have examined the use of mentoring circles and/or networks to facilitate a faculty-centric approach that provides flexibility and self-determination based on individual career and personal needs as opposed to the more common dyadic approach to mentoring. Innovative mentoring strategies include the distributed mentorship model (Chesler & Chesler, 2002), an approach that breaks the traditional one-on-one, “senior faculty as mentor” model and provides alternative approaches (Groen et al., 2012). Successful peer mentoring programs have been implemented as part of ADVANCE awards at numerous universities, including Colorado State University (Gilfoyle et al., 2011), Ohio State University (Thomas et al., 2015), Murray State University, and University of Massachusetts Lowell (Li et al., 2023). We adapted the facilitated program at Murray State University to support all faculty.

At our institution, PMCs were first implemented in the Spring of 2022 and were designed to group faculty by rank or track (in the case of non-tenure track [NTT]) to provide more opportunity for a critical mass of women in these groups and a higher degree of authority for women’s voices. The objectives of PMCs are:

- To centralize campus mentoring to mitigate small- n concerns and promote cross-disciplinary and multi-generational mentoring.

- To provide a clear institutional message that mentoring is an important component of faculty advancement.
- To increase retention of all faculty, especially women and underrepresented minorities.
- To improve policy discussions by providing a safe space for faculty feedback that is passed back to the policy makers.

A key component of PMCs is facilitation. A Faculty Development Coordinator (FDC) position, whose primary role is to coordinate and facilitate PMCs, was created by the grant with a commitment from the administration to institutionalize the position. The FDC works in OFDA and the program was housed in this office, providing a mechanism for institutionalization of the program.

Facilitation played a crucial role in the success of the peer mentoring groups. There were several advantages to the presence of a FDC who was dedicated to organizing and facilitating the groups. First, the FDC built a repository of knowledge about the group members, their areas of interest, and the dynamics of each group. This enabled effective communication of discussion topics to members and fostered the creation of a safe space for challenging conversations. Additionally, the FDC facilitated the anonymous conveyance of individual concerns to the administration, allowing for feedback to be shared in aggregate. Collecting data in this manner helped identify recurring challenges, track broader faculty concerns, and inform institutional decision-making while preserving participant confidentiality. Finally, this structure allowed for value-added meetings tailored to address the specific needs of each circle.

Policy Development & Revision

In addition to the A&A program and PMCs program, a third key goal of the Empower project was to facilitate institutional policy transformation through development and revision. This effort aimed to create clearer guidelines for faculty advancement and evaluation while improving both the fairness of faculty assessments and the perception of fairness in these processes. Achieving this goal

requires an organizational framework that empowers, retains, and promotes a more diverse faculty and research staff. Meaningful policy change must be grounded in ongoing dialogue between faculty and administration, as well as among faculty groups. Ultimately, the objective is to establish a dynamic, “living system” of policies that remain responsive to evolving institutional needs, guided by continuous communication and feedback.

The Empower team’s goals for policy development and revision were to:

- Revise institutional and departmental workload guidelines for faculty.
- Develop faculty assessment procedures (mid-term review, peer review of teaching).
- Revise promotion and tenure guidelines.
- Provide meaningful feedback to promotion and tenure candidates and department heads.
- Document faculty support (e.g., start-up, space) in promotion and tenure dossiers.
- Build in institutional memory to the university promotion and tenure committee.
- Revise departmental faculty expectation documents.
- Develop policy on performance review and advancement in rank for research professionals.
- Develop a mechanism for performance review and advancement for non-tenure track faculty that includes the faculty voice.

Results

Advocates & Allies

The A&A program was initiated through a facilitated workshop led by NDSU’s Roger Green that included a call to faculty for self-nominations to become an Advocate. The goal was to have ten Advocates from across the institution and one-third of the faculty trained as Allies through workshop participation. The Advocates developed the Allies workshop and invited faculty and staff to attend. Over the course

of the A&A program (from Fall 2021 to Spring 2024), 12 Advocates were selected and invited to participate of which ten were trained. Further, approximately 30% of non-Advocate faculty, university leadership, and administrative leadership staff were trained as Allies.

In Year 1 (2021-2022), eight Advocates were selected by the A&A Advisory Board (AAAB), and three workshops were held resulting in 25 Allies being trained. In early fall of Year 2 (2022-2023), seven of the eight selected Advocates were trained. At this training for the first cohort, the Advocates established a mission, objectives, and set goals for the program. The mission of the Advocates is stated as: A network that advocates for equity and inclusion across genders. The objectives and goals of this group are outlined below.

Objectives:

- Provide an avenue for reflection and accountability about how our actions, both conscious and unconscious, may reinforce or exacerbate gender disparities.
- Promote resources and opportunities to educate men on campus about gender issues and foster an environment of mutual appreciation.
- Understand the scope of the problems and promote critical thought about gender issues on campus and STEM fields in general.
- Create a campus environment that provides support and encouragement for those experiencing gender discrimination.
- Challenge implicit systems on campus that create unfair workloads and standards.

Goals:

- Conducting bi-monthly meetings.
- Incorporating readings and discussions into the meetings.
- Developing a pilot workshop for the AAAB and Empower project team.
- Offering an Ally Workshops each semester.
- Sharing successes, failures, and obstacles.

- Receiving feedback from the AAAB each semester.
- Increasing Advocate visibility by engaging administration, faculty, staff, and students (e.g., lunch-and-learns, campus meetings, ALC, Faculty Senate, etc.).
- Building connections with other groups on campus to increase Advocate awareness and to identify opportunities for support and collaboration.
- Creating a mechanism by which people on campus can reach out to the Advocates for support or guidance.
- Considering how Advocates can support, value, and provide accountability for more equitable work and service loads in the promotion and tenure processes.
- Identifying and implementing personal and group actions in support of positive campus climate.

After the initial cohort of Advocates were trained, they developed an Allies workshop and presented it to the AAAB and Empower team. At the Advocate-developed workshop they presented faculty gender demographics on promotion and retention to highlight trends and disparities. Then they led a roundtable discussion by asking questions that had been used in other A&A workshops (provided by Roger Green). These questions were: “What are some barriers to gender equity at the institution?”; “What factors limit the engagement of men as gender equity allies?”; “What can we do to improve gender equity (opportunities for all) and inclusivity?”

Feedback from the AAAB and Empower team were incorporated and the workshop was then offered throughout Year 3 (2023-2024). The second cohort of Advocates was established in Year 3, with six Advocates from the first cohort continuing in the program, and the addition of three new Advocates. During Year 3, the Advocates led three workshops (one for all campus, one for university leadership, and one for athletics) and an open Q&A discussion for faculty and staff about the Advocate program.

Results from surveys taken after the workshops indicated that there are significant feelings of inequity among the women faculty. Attendees felt that their

knowledge of unconscious gender bias increased, as did their knowledge of the impact of unconscious gender bias on campus climate. All attendees committed to addressing issues of gender bias and discrimination experienced by women faculty. Comments from workshop discussions and surveys were focused on the need for programs to support women on campus, opportunities for communication and cultural connection building across campus, engaging those that either do not have time or do not see a need for gender equity training, and a better understanding of why women leave the institution.

Following implementation of the Empower Project, results from the IDI indicate meaningful progress toward fostering a culture of development. This culture of development is characterized by an institutional environment that actively supports continuous learning, mentorship, and professional growth. It encourages faculty and staff to engage in ongoing self-reflection, skill-building, and cross-disciplinary collaboration. Additionally, it promotes inclusive leadership, equity in career advancement, and the establishment of structures that sustain long-term development. By prioritizing these elements, the institution cultivates an atmosphere where individuals feel supported in their professional trajectories and are empowered to contribute meaningfully to campus-wide progress. In 2024, 129 of 315 faculty and staff (40% response rate) participated in the IDI, compared to 350 of 483 faculty and staff (72%) in 2019. Despite lower participation, key metrics showed improvement. The proportion of respondents in the polarization and denial stages decreased from 32% in 2019 to 18% in 2024, suggesting increased intercultural awareness. Additionally, perceived orientation (PO) scores rose from 120.35 to 122.68, and developmental orientation (DO) scores increased from 92.69 to 97.47, reflecting greater capacity for intercultural competency development. Notably, only 2% of 2024 respondents indicated that no significant cultural competency challenges exist, while 27% identified specific challenges, with gender cited as the most pressing concern (9%). These results suggest that the institution is moving beyond minimization (see Figure 1) toward greater recognition of cultural and gender-related differences.

Peer Mentor Circles

Peer Mentor Circles were initially formed in Spring 2022 across four faculty ranks: NTT research scientists, NTT teaching faculty, assistant professors, and associate professors. Recognizing the need to address the unique challenges faced by specific groups within these broader categories, the program expanded over the following two years to include additional circles focused on women faculty and international faculty. These additional circles were created to better address the intersectional nature of faculty experiences, acknowledging how factors such as gender, national origin, and faculty rank intersect to influence professional development, mentorship needs, and institutional experiences.

Participation in the mentoring circles program grew significantly from its inception in Spring 2022 through 2024, reflecting increased faculty engagement and institutional support. Starting with 25 participants in Spring 2022, the program expanded to 58 participants in 2024, representing 28% of full-time faculty. The number of mentoring groups grew from five in 2022 to ten in 2024, with participation from teaching faculty, assistant professors, and associate professors, demonstrating the program's broad appeal across faculty ranks.

Survey results from 2022 to 2024 consistently demonstrated high levels of psychological safety, perceived value, and program impact. Across all years, 90-95% of respondents reported feeling able to discuss meaningful topics, while 85% agreed the program helped build cross-disciplinary networks. Trust in facilitators and peers remained high at 94-96%. Gender-based analyses revealed no significant differences in survey responses, and diverse representation included 33% women and 33% international faculty. Additionally, willingness to recommend the program remained strong, with an average rating of 4.2 on a five-point Likert scale. With a 71% response rate from participants in the most recent year, these data highlight the mentoring program's success in fostering supportive, development-focused faculty relationships.

At meetings led by the FDC, topics that were identified ahead of time helped direct conversation and encouraged meaningful discussions. Faculty were able to reflect on their experiences and needs. It was the role of the facilitator to encourage positive and productive conversation. Throughout the PMCs program, each group had the autonomy to select its own discussion topics based on their specific needs and interests. However, if a group was unsure of what to focus on, several topics were suggested to guide the discussions. The topics covered by each group varied depending on the unique needs and dynamics of the participants, as reflected in the diverse themes presented in Table 1. Open discussions resulted in participants requesting that the FDC relay messages back to university administration such as the need for clear and consistent university messaging, need for recognition and celebration of achievement, and the need for feedback for evaluations, mid-term reviews, and the Promotion and Tenure (P&T) process.

Table 1. PMCs Discussion Topics of Interest

PMCs	Interests
Research Faculty	Research funding; collaboration opportunities; research scientist career tracks; opportunities to transfer to tenure track; grant opportunities (EPSCoR, seed); funding agency requirements; CV credentials; building a research career.
Teaching Faculty	Advancement; improving student learning and experiences; compensation; work-life balance; student advising; library resources; sexism (as the majority of teaching faculty are women); teaching critical thinking and advanced thinking; summer work; how to use and respond to student feedback on teaching; service expectations.
Assistant Professors	Effective communication skills; student advising and productivity; graduate student recruitment and employment; ABET; P&T process; new faculty mentors; library lending and journal access; IRB process; grading rubrics and ungrading.

Associate Professors	Writing for student skill development; sharing campus equipment; workload; expiring grant funds; start-up; R1 v. R2; career advancement; dossier preparation; P&T committee demographics and representation; leadership; support mechanisms for mid-level faculty; sabbatical process and eligibility criteria; faculty retention; graduate education culture; recognition for student achievements; university budget cuts impacting faculty workload; family friendly policies; faculty recognition; university and administration transition; service expectations; career development and opportunities; administrative roles; HR policies; staff turnover; website updates; spousal hires.
Full Professors	Leadership opportunities and responsibilities.
International Faculty	Different teaching and learning styles; how to recruit and attract international graduate students; communication challenges; research infrastructure; cultural challenges; English as a second language.

Guest speakers were invited for some PMCs meetings which focused on discussions related to: Research Scientist classifications, duties, and lack of pathway for promotion; Professor of Research and Professor of Practice proposals with associated funding and responsibilities (guest speaker within Research Scientist Circle); Proposed Lecturer Track Career Advancement and Proposals for New Professor of Research and Professor of Practice Classifications (guest speaker within Teaching Circle); Strategies to obtain grant funding (guest speaker within Research Scientist Circle); Ideas for Career Success; NSF, state EPSCoR (Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research), and other collaborative funding opportunities (guest speaker Vice President for Research within Research Scientist Circle); Human Development (special facilitator that led Advocates within Circles).

To supplement PMCs group meetings, additional programs were developed to further support faculty professional growth. These included panel discussions such

as a career advancement opportunities panel for Lecturer track faculty, and P&T Success Panels for faculty transitioning from Assistant to Associate Professor and from Associate to Full Professor. A campus visit by directors from state EPSCoR programs, including NSF, National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and National Institutes of Health (NIH), provided an overview of funding and program opportunities. Roundtable discussions were also organized, including an NSF career proposal roundtable featuring award winners, and a session on the sabbatical process. Research Scientists were invited to attend a Faculty Senate meeting to discuss updates and provide input on new classifications for Professor of Research and Professor of Practice (see Policy Development & Revision). Additionally, workshops were held on a variety of topics, including creating mentoring networks, recruitment and retention of graduate students, and bi-weekly dossier preparation sessions for faculty advancing from Assistant to Associate Professor, Associate to Full Professor, and Lecturer to Senior Lecturer. This comprehensive approach helped foster a culture of mentorship that extended beyond individual relationships to influence broader institutional support systems.

Policy Development & Revision

A central goal of the Empower project was to increase transparency within the institution regarding policies related to faculty assessment, promotion, and tenure. For new and revised policies to result in positive outcomes, a set of common procedures is required. With clarity in the organizational framework, we can empower, retain, and promote a more diverse cadre of faculty and research staff. Continued revision of policies and development of new policies has involved open discussions among unit faculty, the faculty senate, the administration, and the peer mentoring groups. This discussion has led to more transparency in performance expectations and the P&T process and provided new positions for NTT faculty (e.g., Professor of Practice) that allow for advancement and transition to other promotional tracks.

Adoption of guidelines for performance expectations included updating institutional priorities and expectations for faculty based on departmental workload standards. Departments were responsible for aligning their goals and reward system with institutional goals. This allows faculty members to discuss how they as individuals and as a unit fit into that set of goals (e.g., What is their role in accomplishing the departmental or institutional goals?). Departmental faculty expectations guidelines were created for all but one unit on campus.

Policy and procedures for mid-term review and peer review of teaching were developed and implemented during the course of the Empower project and will be monitored by the Office of Academic Affairs. Mid-term review procedures for Assistant Professors were developed with the goal of providing feedback at a critical point for all faculty on campus in time to be useful for making mid-course changes in faculty development prior to tenure review. This review process includes provisions for better communication between candidates and department and institutional leadership (provision allows for points of fact to be addressed before review is submitted to Academic Affairs).

Peer review of teaching was developed to provide a method for evaluating faculty performance independent of student opinion surveys. Student surveys provide important information on faculty performance but have been documented to be susceptible to bias (Heffernan, 2021; Kreitzer & Sweet-Cushman, 2022). The goal of a teaching peer review is three-fold. First, obtain information on teaching style and effectiveness that are based on the observations of experienced teachers. Second, put teaching onto the same peer review level as everything else a faculty member does (e.g., proposals, submitted papers, service on committees). Third, provide a framework that functions institution-wide and provides feedback and advice consistently and positively. Finally, a long-term goal is to collect peer review reports institutionally to hold reviewers accountable for their input and prevent reviews from being weaponized, written off, or simply not done.

To help create a fair and equitable P&T process, multiple procedures and policy revisions have been approved by university and state leadership and were

implemented so that expectations and performance are appropriately evaluated. Startup packages are now compiled for each new hire, and the level of initial support, as well as other institutional resources granted to faculty (e.g., matching funds) are included in the faculty evaluation process and the candidate's P&T dossier. Revised P&T metrics and dossier guidelines have been submitted to the Faculty Senate and are under review. A policy has been put in place to communicate feedback to candidates. Further, an effort is being made to have P&T committee membership staggered with respect to terms of service to provide more consistent standards year to year. One of the most important updates for P&T is more informative communication to candidates with respect to the grounds on which any decision was made.

Non-tenure track faculty (NTT) are particularly vulnerable to inconsistency of promotion guidelines. This was particularly problematic because promotion for NTT faculty was handled by the Office of Academic Affairs without an intermediary step that involved a faculty-level committee. To add faculty input to the NTT promotion process, a new committee was created that will be advisory to Academic Affairs on both promotion decisions and transfer between NTT tracks (e.g., Instructor to Professor of Practice). As part of the Empower project and in collaboration among the Faculty Senate, Academic Affairs, and the Academic Leadership Council, guidelines were developed for the constitution of this NTT committee as well as for the responsibilities and characteristics of different NTT tracks. This committee will become active in academic year 2025.

Prior to the Empower project, guidelines defining different ranks and promotion of those in the Research Scientist track had not been reviewed for over 25 years. A lack of clarity in those guidelines resulted in the perception that there was no clear way of building a promotion dossier nor a way of defining the responsibilities of a new hire that were consistent across the institution. In addition, there were no guidelines for the responsibilities and duties for the Research Faculty track, a position type that exists at other state institutions. Draft guidelines for the responsibilities of both Research Scientists and Research Professors have been developed and presented

to the faculty senate and are currently under review by Academic Affairs and Human Resources.

The policy survey, which aimed to track faculty attitudes and opinions regarding new policies and guidelines, was first distributed in May 2022, with approximately 45% faculty participation. The results were shared with the Faculty Senate in September 2022 and highlighted the need for improved communication with faculty about policy development activities. Specific feedback informed the development of a draft plan for campus-wide peer review of teaching, addressing concerns such as the lack of mid-term reviews in six of the eight units that should have completed them. As a result, Academic Affairs directed these departments to conduct these reviews in Spring 2024.

The faculty survey was updated and redistributed in May 2024, though participation decreased to 30%. Notably, no female assistant professors participated in the 2024 survey, despite six being listed on campus according to human resources records. This absence may point to deeper systemic issues that disproportionately affect women and underrepresented groups, such as the lack of trust in administration or discomfort with institutional processes. Additionally, international faculty, who often face unique challenges in navigating academic policies and may feel marginalized, could be underrepresented in survey participation, exacerbating the need for more inclusive outreach. Furthermore, the decrease in overall participation, and continued low levels of trust in administration reported in 2024, suggest that the campus climate may still be unwelcoming or disengaging for certain faculty demographics, especially women and international faculty, reinforcing the need for more targeted interventions to address these concerns.

Discussion

The interventions described in this study—primarily the A&A Program, PMCs, and institutional policy revisions—aimed to foster a culture of development at the institution, shifting from one characterized by attrition to one focused on retention, support, and inclusivity. These efforts were designed to increase diversity and

inclusivity by addressing both individual and structural barriers faced by underrepresented groups, including women faculty and international faculty. At the heart of this approach is an intersectional framework that recognizes the multiple and interlocking systems of oppression that influence faculty experiences. For women, particularly those from marginalized racial, ethnic, and international backgrounds, these systemic barriers are compounded by institutional practices and cultural norms that often go unchallenged.

Our analysis integrates both quantitative and qualitative data, including campus-wide surveys, participant feedback, and IDI results, which provide insight into how these interventions contributed to changes in faculty attitudes, institutional culture, and faculty development practices. Notably, the IDI results showed measurable improvement in intercultural competency, with faculty moving beyond the Minimalization stage into a more advanced stage of intercultural competence. This shift suggests that efforts to raise awareness of implicit bias and promote intercultural dialogue through the A&A Program, in tandem with the PMCs, have had a tangible impact on faculty perceptions and attitudes.

Furthermore, campus-wide surveys conducted in 2022 and 2024, which captured data on faculty attitudes toward new/revised policies and guidelines, provided an opportunity to assess faculty engagement and the level of trust in administration. While participation in these surveys fluctuated, with a marked decrease in 2024, the data collected helped identify areas for improvement in communication and policy implementation, particularly for women and international faculty. Results from these surveys suggested that there is still work to be done to foster a sense of trust and engagement among faculty members, particularly those from underrepresented groups, in order to fully realize the potential of these interventions.

This discussion will explore the impact of these programs through an intersectional lens, analyzing how the data highlights both successes and areas for continued growth. By considering the complex interplay of gender, race, rank, and institutional context, we aim to better understand how these initiatives contribute to

transforming institutional culture and improving the retention and advancement of faculty from underrepresented groups.

Successes

The A&A program succeeded by encouraging discussions among faculty, including those not directly involved in the official A&A program activities or the Empower project. In addition, the Advocates showed dedication, enthusiasm, and persistence in supporting faculty on campus and a more inclusive climate.

Prior to the implementation of the Empower project, formal mentoring opportunities were limited, leaving many faculty members without structured support for career advancement and professional development. As a result of the project, mentoring activities are now institutionalized on campus and are administered through OFDA with results reported to Empower leadership. The Empower Project successfully established the new position of FDC to support mentoring programming at the university. The creation of this position further institutionalized mentoring practices and ensured their sustainability. The PMCs program has continued to thrive, connecting faculty from across disciplines and providing a confidential space to raise concerns and share feedback with campus administration. Notable outcomes of the PMCs are the promotion and tenure of five participants including three Lecturers to Senior Lecturer (two of which were women) and the promotion of two Associate Professors to Full Professors (both women). These individuals were encouraged by their peers to pursue promotion, highlighting the role of mentoring in fostering confidence, providing guidance on the promotion process, and reinforcing professional development. Through the PMCs, participants gained insights into institutional expectations, received constructive feedback on their career progression, and benefited from a supportive network that helped them navigate the challenges of advancement. The structured peer mentoring environment created a space where faculty could discuss their readiness for promotion, share strategies for compiling dossiers, and seek advice from those who had successfully navigated the process. These achievements highlight the significant impact of the PMCs program on faculty

success and retention, particularly among women and other underrepresented groups. The PMCs remains a highly favorable and effective mechanism for promoting cultural change on campus, supporting the development of faculty across diverse ranks and backgrounds, and fostering a sense of community and belonging. The intersectional focus of the PMCs continues to be an important aspect of its success, ensuring that faculty from various identity groups are provided with the support and resources needed to thrive in the academic environment.

Policy guidelines for the Professor of Practice, Research Faculty, Research Scientist, NTT promotion, mid-term review, peer review of teaching, and departmental performance expectations were created and revised as part of the project and are scheduled for full implementation in 2024-2025 academic year. For instance, the guidelines for the composition of the responsibilities and promotion thresholds for the Professor of Practice track was implemented and resulted in three faculty members being transferred to these tracks.

Additionally, new or revised policies are being rolled out across the university, with key procedural shifts expected to be fully operational within the 2024-2025 academic year. These changes are designed to better align faculty development and advancement practices with the goals of enhancing inclusivity and fostering a supportive academic environment. The outcomes of these procedural shifts, however, have not yet been fully recorded or analyzed. Given that the policies are in the process of being implemented, it may be premature to assess their full impact. Moving forward, progress will be closely monitored, with future surveys and data collection efforts aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of these changes, particularly in terms of their impact on faculty from underrepresented groups. While it is too early to report definitive results, the ongoing implementation provides a foundation for future assessment of how these policy shifts contribute to institutional transformation.

Mentoring circles assessments and IDI results provide clear evidence of institutional transformation through intentional interventions. The mentoring program's growth in participation, coupled with consistently high ratings for psychological safety, trust, and program value, demonstrates a shift toward a

supportive, development-oriented campus culture. Similarly, IDI results show progress in intercultural competence, with reduced polarization and increased developmental orientation scores. Together, these findings reflect meaningful cultural change, emphasizing transparency, inclusion, and faculty development as central components of institutional transformation.

Challenges

As the Empower project progressed and more A&A workshops were held, the number of participants declined from over 25 Allies at the first workshop to three Allies at one of the Spring 2024 all-faculty and staff workshops. Given the small size of the campus, it is likely that only those who were interested in the workshops attended, and once the interested population had been trained, they were no longer inclined to repeat the sessions, thus leading to lower attendance as the years went on. Survey feedback indicated that many women would like to participate in the A&A program as Allies, however, the program's design intentionally limits women's roles to avoid burdening them with additional service work, with the understanding that men would act as Advocates. The A&A program has successfully recruited individuals eager to learn about gender equity, yet this has left out those who may need the training most—those who either do not perceive the value of the program or are too busy to participate.

Further, while the term "Advocate" is intended to signal allyship and support, the act of claiming the title of "Advocate" or "Ally" is fraught with complexities. Claiming the role of "Ally" or "Advocate" can sometimes center those in dominant groups and unintentionally shift the focus away from the people the program intends to support. Ideally, "Advocate" is not a title self-claimed nor conferred by others from a position of privilege; it should be earned through continuous, humble engagement with marginalized communities. The A&A program acknowledges this distinction, though we recognize that the term itself may be problematic, as it may unintentionally reinforcing the hierarchical dynamics it seeks to challenge.

Future efforts will seek to broaden recruitment strategies, including through participation of Advocates in department faculty meetings to increase engagement of faculty who have previously not participated in the program. However, it is also important to address the resistance encountered, including an Advocate stepping down from his role—likely due to concerns emerging from divisive state legislation. For instance, early A&A workshops led to complaints to a Governor’s hotline, with some individuals expressing discomfort with the topics discussed. The program was perceived by some as unfair or exclusionary, as it focused on addressing gender equity by engaging men as Advocates while limiting women's participation in that role. These challenges underscore the difficulty of navigating entrenched power dynamics and cultural resistance, which can limit the reach and effectiveness of allyship programs.

Due to state law, attendance at training workshops cannot be mandated, resulting in lower participation in introductory mentoring workshops. Further, the resignation of the first FDC in the Fall of 2023 led to multiple challenges for PMCs. Communication with faculty, recruitment, meeting facilitation, data access for analysis, and general logistics were affected. The impact was significant as PMCs sessions occur infrequently (once a month), and the FDC arranges and communicates meeting dates, times, and locations to participants. Depending on each group, the impacts were as narrow as a single individual missing a meeting for several weeks to as broad as temporary dissolution of a PMC, e.g., Women Faculty Spring Semester 2024. Going forward, a consistent day, time, and location is recommended to keep participants from missing meetings accidentally.

Another challenge is anonymity and confidentiality of PMC participants while still ensuring that valuable feedback reaches the administration. Facilitators must carefully navigate the balance between protecting individual identities and conveying critical insights that can drive institutional change. This can be particularly difficult when feedback highlights sensitive issues or concerns raised by a small group, increasing the risk of inadvertent identification. Additionally, there is the challenge of ensuring that participants feel secure in voicing their experiences, knowing that their

trust in the process will not be compromised. Developing protocols for aggregating and anonymizing feedback, while still preserving the nuance and urgency of participants' concerns, has been essential to fostering open dialogue and achieving meaningful outcomes.

There are also challenges to establishing policies that have impact across departments and ranks on campus. Peer review of teaching is conducted in several departments, but individual departments wish to retain internal control of the means and methods of the process. Accuracy and consistency of reviews will be administered by the Office of Academic Affairs; however, a specific assessment approach has not yet been determined. At present, there are no requirements that teaching peer review be considered in annual review or be a part of promotion and tenure decisions. Consequently, the only requisite element of teaching evaluation remains student evaluation surveys which have been continuously shown to be both biased and unrelated to student outcomes (Heffernan, 2021; Kreitzer & Sweet-Cushman, 2022).

The P&T process remains an area of continual improvement. In that regard, the next challenge is to redevelop the process of adding members to the campus level committee to stagger terms, maintain institutional memory, and maintain consistent leadership particularly in terms of the committee chair and P&T member training. Since P&T is an element of shared governance, changing practice requires more than just policy adjustments. Continued collaboration of the Faculty Senate and the Office of Academic Affairs in monitoring processes is necessary to sustain policy changes.

Sustainability and Future Directions

After the ADVANCE-funded Empower project concludes, the A&A program will continue; however, its long-term success will largely depend on the level of ongoing support from the administration. The program will be permanently administered through an office of multicultural affairs or the Provost's Office. While the primary charge of this office is to support students, the Advocates will work closely with the

office to bridge the faculty and staff gap. The continued activities of the A&A program include participation in the multicultural affairs book club, additional Allies workshops, Lunch-n-Learns, campus discussions, small, focused meetings, more informal coffee meetings for small groups, and an invited speaker series. The time the Advocates spent on this program counts as part of their service dedication to the institution, and committed Advocates have spent about an hour per week on meetings, emails, and background reading, which fulfills around 2.5% of the service expectation. Given that service at the institution is typically at 10% of total time, the Advocates are using about one quarter of their service commitment towards these activities.

The success of the PMCs has solidified them as a flagship program of OFDA, and they will continue under the direction of the FDC. Moving forward, P&T Success Panels for Associate Professors, Assistant Professors (including mid-term review), and Teaching Faculty will become an annual component of OFDA programming. The mentoring program will continue to be assessed to ensure that faculty participants have the requisite psychological safety to engage in candid conversations and to develop effective peer networks. These efforts will help sustain and strengthen faculty support structures, fostering a more inclusive and supportive institutional culture.

Policy revisions on peer review of teaching are being fully implemented, and the Empower team will continue to develop feedback mechanisms for policy changes that involve the Advocates, PMCs, and the institution level administration. Long term success will depend on continued active monitoring of the review processes being implemented (mid-term review and peer review of teaching) at least until the processes become part of the culture of faculty review and reward.

Conclusion

This paper presents a case study of an institutional initiative aimed at shifting from a culture of attrition to one of development by supporting faculty through mentoring, advocacy, and policy changes. While the project achieved successes in faculty engagement, mentoring structures, and policy revisions, challenges such as

resistance to change and declining participation highlight the complexities of institutional transformation. Despite these obstacles, the findings emphasize the importance of structured efforts to foster inclusive faculty development. We hope that similar initiatives can be adapted by other institutions, particularly in Midwestern, rural, and FAR (Frontier and Remote) regions, where systemic barriers to faculty retention and advancement may be even more pronounced.

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