

Being Taken Seriously:

Gender and Organizational Climate at IUPUI

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August, 2010

### **Introduction**

It has been thirty-six years since Congress authorized Title IX in 1972, barring gender discrimination in education. Since that time there has been remarkable growth in women's college enrollment and degree completion. Current enrollment trends indicate that women are outpacing men in enrollment and graduation rates among all racial and cultural/ethnic backgrounds (Nitiri, 2001). Yet, even with tremendous strides in women's educational attainment, progress in some areas critical to advancement in the academy has been slow. For women students, staff, and faculty research continues to show barriers to academic and career success and micro-inequities in institutions throughout the nation. The literature recommends periodic investigation and analysis to initiate appropriate action to improve the situation for women. In 1994, Kunkel noted that due to the nation's history of disregarding, marginalizing, and trivializing women; and considering "them as less productive, less rational, and less serious than men" (p. 16), women's needs on college campuses are unique and different from those of men. Parsons and Ward (2001) indicate that more feminist scholarship in higher education research is necessary to re-shape institutional policy; and "because institutional needs are often different from and in conflict with student needs, it is necessary to consider women's perceptions of what their experiences and needs are" (Banks, 2002, p. 4).

### **Gender Equity at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis**

Data in the IUPUI Chancellor's 2008 State of Diversity report raise concerns about the campus climate as it affects women and minorities. The diversity performance indicator, campus climate for diversity, was assigned a red status. Red status indicates "the current status or direction of change is unacceptable. Immediate, high-priority actions should be taken to address this area." This finding was confirmed by the IUPUI Center for Urban and Multicultural

Education's (CUME) 2008 study of campus climate for students, in which gender was found to be a significant factor in students' perceptions of campus climate<sup>1</sup>.

Of particular concern for women are results of the 2005 IUPUI Faculty Survey, the 2006 IUPUI Staff Survey, and the 2007 IUPUI Continuing Student Satisfaction and Priorities Survey indicating that a significant number of women faculty and staff and some female students report having negative campus experiences. Slightly over 23% of women faculty in the survey identified with the item "not being taken seriously" based on their gender, and 15.9% indicated they have experienced "negative or disparaging comments" because of their gender. In all of the campus experiences listed on the survey, women faculty reported at least two times more negative experiences than other categories of faculty.

The situation of women faculty, in particular, the rates of promotion, and representation in higher level administration is also concerning. Data from IUPUI's Office of Information Management and Institutional Research (IMIR) indicates that the percentage of tenure eligible women at IUPUI has increased only 3.4% in the last twenty years (since 1986). The number of women full professors has risen to 20% in 2006, up from 13% in 1994. This is still under the national percentage. These positions are the gateway to academic leadership and the number of women in academic leadership positions at IUPUI has actually declined one percent since 1993 from 32% to 31%. These include positions as department chairs, directors, assistant and associate deans, assistant and associate vice-chancellors, and vice chancellors. Also, of note is the fact that the percentage of women recruited at the assistance professor position has only increased one percent from 36% to 37% since 1994.

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<sup>1</sup> This CUME study did not focus on gender as a variable; nonetheless the findings clearly indicated that perceptions of campus climate and comfort on climate are affected by gender, in addition to race and ethnicity which were the major demographic considerations of the study.

This local finding mirrors the results reported in 2006 by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) on faculty gender equity issues which concluded, “Women are receiving doctoral degrees at record rates, but their representation in the ranks of tenured faculty remains below expectations, particularly at research universities. Women face more obstacles as faculty in higher education than they do as managers and directors in corporate America” (West & Curtis, 2006, p. 4). This study states that women hold only 24% of full professorships in the United States.

### **Rationale**

The IUPUI Office for Women, in partnership with the Center for Urban and Multicultural Education and a graduate student in the IU School of Education at IUPUI, conducted a qualitative study examining experiences of women faculty at IUPUI. While the challenges are somewhat different for women students, staff, and faculty, there are common themes noted throughout the literature. These include an under-estimation or devaluation of their work and abilities, limited resources/options for balancing academic work and family, economic and physical stressors, institutional policies that obstruct advancement, and unintended bias and sexist attitudes. At IUPUI, as discussed above, indicators from past research suggest that all of these issues are also problematic for creating a gender equitable climate. However, none of the data focus on capturing women’s experiences and probing for to what degree and in what ways these issues are or are not affecting IUPUI women’s lives.

This study seeks to qualitatively assess which organizational and interpersonal practices demonstrate that female faculty are “taken seriously” on the IUPUI campus. This project is born out of the results of the 2009 and 2005 faculty surveys which indicated that faculty identified “gender” as the reason they are “not being taken seriously” or they are experiencing “negative or

disparaging comments. In 2009, 11.2% of respondents identified “not being taken seriously” based on their gender and 10.6% said they experienced “negative or disparaging comments” based on their gender. Therefore, this work seeks to discover what words, behaviors, practices, policies and experiences lead women faculty to the perception that they are or are not “being taken seriously” or have negative experiences.

### **Methodology**

Four focus groups of voluntary participants were conducted with female faculty members at IUPUI. Each focus group was one hour at length, and was conducted as an open conversation to discuss behaviors and practices when participants felt “taken seriously” or “not taken seriously” in their work. A semi-structured protocol was developed, working from existing climate surveys developed at other institutions as well as data from existing surveys and studies collected by the Office for Women. It included a list of questions in broad topics for the conversation, including

- General climate for women at IUPUI
- Equitable and inequitable treatment
- Being taken seriously
- Women’s roles in decision-making
- Feeling valued and supported

Before transitioning to a new topic, the protocol directed the facilitators to ask, “*Are there any other examples or experiences you’d like to share about that topic?*” The protocol also instructed facilitators to probe for examples if answers were abstract or too general.

### **Procedures**

During the Spring 2010 academic session, female faculty on three listservs (N=approximately 300) were invited to participate in the study. The invitation to participate was

published in the IUPUI newsletter, *JagNews*. The request for participants noted that the study would examine what words, behaviors, practices, policies and experiences lead them to the perception that they are or are not “being taken seriously” or are having negative experiences. Faculty who responded to the request were scheduled to attend focus group sessions according to their academic rank. The focus groups were conducted at the IUPUI campus. A graduate student in the IU School of Education and the Director of the IUPUI Office for Women facilitated the sessions. During each session, discussion of topics was encouraged until each topic was saturated, which was demonstrated when participant responses became similar or repetitive. Each focus group session was limited to 90 minutes in length. Recordings and notes of the sessions were transcribed and analyzed for themes.

### **Analysis**

Researchers developed a coding scheme that corresponded to the themes revealed in the focus groups. The analysis adhered to the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researchers made notes during and after each focus group, recording general impression of the group and how it enlarged the notion of “being taken seriously” in an academic context, similar to what van Manen (1990) termed the *wholistic approach* to thematizing. Then, researchers continued thematizing as the conversations were transcribed, making notes about possible themes, which were used to direct probing questions during subsequent focus groups. A standard of quality in qualitative research is to include verification to demonstrate *trustworthiness* and *authenticity* (Creswell, 2007).

The two methods I used to verify my results included rich, thick description and member checking. The findings are reported here with rich detail and extensive quotations from the participants as space permits. For member checking, after completing my analysis, I contacted

two participants and shared with them a summary of the themes that had emerged. They concurred that the themes reflected their experiences.

The resulting data revealed recurring themes regarding “being taken seriously” by women faculty at IUPUI. While the women at IUPUI who participated in this study rarely encountered blatant sexism, they did experience situations that gave them pause, but could not be attributed to their gender per se. Additionally, the women in this study did feel as if they carried a larger burden than their male counterparts in two areas. First, women in this study concurred that they need to be more proactive than men in order to receive the same mentoring or access to opportunities. Also, the women who participated felt as if they might be expected to shoulder a larger burden of unrewarded service. The specific examples of these themes are described in the following section.

## Results

### Apprehensive Attributions

Many women in the study did experience “not being taken seriously,” but the participants had difficulty attributing this to their gender. Some participants ascribed this to their own personality traits instead. For example, in describing a situation where she was “left out” of a conversation about a program for which she was responsible, participant 206 stated,

*[The deans] started talking, and I realized that they were talking about my program. I don't think they thought of excluding me; I just think they didn't think. I thought about addressing it, but I just didn't want to make a spectacle of it. The moment wasn't right.*

Participant 194 agreed that there were many times in which she heard other female colleagues being dismissed or ignored. For example, when a university guest was brought into a lab for a visit, the guest opted to direct questions about the research to the male lab assistant, rather than

the female professor. However, participant 4 attributed this to a lack of knowledge about the lab structure, rather than a gender bias. Participant 3 agreed; arguing that this issue could be attributed to an individual's personality, rather than their orientation to gender.

Three participants, in two different groups, described situations in which they felt "invisible." For participant 2116, she was left off the list of new faculty, as well as the department listserv and the online faculty directory. While she was unsure of the origin, participant 2116 did say that she felt "a bit hurt."

While many participants could not cite specific, blatant examples of sexism, many of them cited a climate in which women were treated differently than men. Participants often did not want to consider this gender discrimination; however, it is important to consider the frequency at which these comments arose in conversation. During the focus group sessions, ten of the participants (over one third), could offer an example to the question, "Can you give an example of how your work has been taken seriously on campus?"

### **Proactivity Required**

As Parsons and Ward (2001) contend, a number of women in the study described situations in which they were required to be more proactive than their male counterparts in order to receive similar treatment. Participant 216 described,

*It's true that women aren't allowed to make mistakes. But, I like working harder. The only time I wasn't happy was when I found out I was [the lowest paid faculty member in my unit]. I threatened to leave, and got an equity increase.*

Four participants discussed the presence of a network that was inaccessible to women. The "old boys' network" was associated with research collaboration, as well as access to leadership opportunities. Participant 226 stated, "There is a difference between the women who



can get along with the men, and those that don't. Guys have a way of navigating [the network], but I don't know how to be that woman." Men in the 'network' also seemed to value the work of women differently. Participant 226 also cited a situation in which a male counterpart stated he "so appreciated" her taking on additional teaching responsibilities because "true research faculty" do not have time. However, both she and the man were tenure-line faculty members.

The underlying assumption here is disconcerting for two reasons. First, it implies that that the time of the female faculty member is not as valuable as the male faculty member. Secondly, it places a larger value on research rather than teaching. The examples here echo the literature; there is a distinct difference between the perception of men and women's work in the academy (White, 2003).

### **Service Expectations**

Because some women are in departments where there are few others, they are often asked to take on additional service responsibilities. As participant 211 eloquently explained,

*We often do not recognize the systemic pressures [women face]. For example, I spend a lot of time with troubled students. Some is my choice, but none of that extra time is valued. Much of my work with students is done on informal basis; it is not available to track.*

Six participants in the study cited their reason for participating in service as related to the "good of the community." Participant 205 argued that women do more service,

*I serve because of the collective sense that it has to be done. Especially women [at the full professor level]. Men on the tenure track declare themselves as too busy. But, when you're the only full professor woman, someone needs to serve on those committees.*

Acker and Feuerverger (1996) consider the organizational implications of this phenomenon.

While women often “feel bad” about their service responsibilities, this seems to be related to the reward system in the academy, rather than the service itself (p. 404). Understanding this tension may help universities such as IUPUI to reconsider how rewards are structured and what support is in place to support this kind of work.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of this study should be considered when interpreting results. First, a limited number of faculty took part in the study ( $N = 27$ ), and only five faculty from underrepresented populations participated. While this analysis, to some degree considers perspectives based on family status and discipline, it does not account for other differences (such as rank) which may provide more context to the findings. Further, it is unclear if these issues reach beyond those who participated in the groups. Therefore, it could not be established if the input of a minority of participants was overrepresented in the findings relative to colleagues who might consider the climate to be a positive one. A future analysis with a survey of faculty could verify if themes from the present analysis are representative of the broader IUPUI community.

### **Conclusion**

The themes presented in this study offer an important opportunity to IUPUI as an institution. The notion of “being taken seriously” is an important part of any professional’s career. While the participants in this study did not feel marginalized by sexism, they could not remove gender from their perspectives, when considering negative interactions on campus. As the participants in this study illustrate, women entering the academy are often unprepared for the organizational politics that undergird professional life at a university (Gibson, 2006). Participant 201 explained, “Part of the issue is that we don’t have a skill set for dealing with [institutional

politics]. I got really rough around the edges, but nobody helped me. No one has the skills to. I was lucky.”

In 2000, representatives from IUPUI attended the National Initiative for Women in Higher Education’s conference on Improving Campus Climates and the Status of Women in Higher Education. The conference report included a series of recommendations including encouraging and rewarding mentoring and service work with appropriate credit and developing orientation programs for women faculty on such topics as mentoring and networking, negotiating the institution, and understanding institutional politics (Rios & Longnion, 2000). IUPUI should take this opportunity to revisit these commitments. By closely examining these data, building campus working groups and committees intentionally, and providing mentoring experiences for women faculty, institutions such as IUPUI have the opportunity to shape a climate that is inclusive and rewarding of all types of scholarly life.

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**Appendix A:**

## Focus Group Protocol

- Q1. What would you tell a woman who was considering taking a faculty position about the environment at IUPUI?
- Q2. In what ways have you been satisfied or dissatisfied as a woman faculty member at IUPUI?
- Q3. In what ways have you been treated equitably or inequitably as a woman faculty member at IUPUI? Can you offer specific examples or scenarios?
- Q4. Are there any examples of how you've been treated equitably or inequitably in terms of sabbatical leave, funding, course loads, preps, service loads, laboratory, computer and resources, pay, etc.?
- Q 5. What does it mean to you to be taken seriously? Is it possible for you as an individual to be taken seriously, without your work being taken seriously?
- Q6. Can you give an example of how your work has been taken seriously on campus?
- Q7. As a woman faculty member, how has your department or colleagues taken your perspective seriously when it comes to making decisions?
- PROBE: In terms of work conditions, including course load, preps, schedule, service loads (formal and informal), resources and other support, etc.?
- Q8. In what ways is IUPUI supportive or unsupportive of your family needs as a woman?
- PROBES: What about in terms of childcare, sick children, aging parents, etc? In what ways have your needs been addressed at the department versus university level?
- Q9. In what ways does IUPUI make you feel valued or not valued as a faculty member at IUPUI?
- Q10. In what ways have you been mentored, either formally or informally, in ways that are the same or different from others at IUPUI?
- Q11. In what ways has your [dean, chair, colleagues] been supportive or unsupportive of you?
- PROBE: Do you think this is different from how others are supported?
- Q12. What other thoughts do you have about the topics we've discussed today?