Perceptions of the Promotion Process: An Analysis of U.S. Medical School Faculty

Faculty satisfaction is important to medical schools for myriad reasons, including the empirical links between job satisfaction and increased organizational performance, faculty retention, productivity, and patient care.\(^a\,\,1-7\) Half of U.S. medical faculty leave their academic medical centers within 10 years,\(^8\) and the resulting loss of these faculty poses financial and human capital costs to the institution.\(^9\,\,10\) Additionally, the academic medicine workplace has changed significantly in recent decades, resulting in increased demands for research, teaching, patient care, and administration on faculty.\(^11\,\,14\)

To be effective, medical school leaders and researchers must remain abreast of the issues that comprise workplace satisfaction for their faculty.\(^15\) In this Analysis in Brief (AIB), we explore faculty perceptions of the promotion process as a key area of faculty satisfaction worth increased attention, given that the perception of equity in the promotion process is one of the lowest areas of satisfaction among academic medicine faculty members.\(^16\)

**Method**

We examined data from a spring 2009 Web-based administration of a medical school faculty job satisfaction survey. The survey was administered to all full-time faculty members at 23 U.S. LCME-accredited (Liaison Committee on Medical Education) medical schools as part of the AAMC’s Faculty Forward initiative. Prior analyses have shown the 23 participating medical schools to be reasonably representative of all LCME-accredited medical schools in terms of organizational and faculty characteristics (e.g., ownership of institution, faculty counts).\(^17\)

The overall response rate for this survey was 50.7% (N = 9,638), including 63.2% for basic science faculty and 48.5% for clinical faculty. Basic science faculty are more akin to the traditional non-medical faculty member where teaching and scholarship are a key components of their activities, whereas clinical faculty often spend more time in patient care and client services, but also may be involved in education and research.

Analysis included the use of descriptive statistics for levels of agreement on survey items and \(\chi^2\) analyses to assess significant differences between faculty groups on the collapsed Likert-scale items (e.g., agree/strongly agree, neither agree nor disagree, and disagree/strongly disagree).

For the open-ended question asking faculty to describe the number one thing their medical school could do to improve the workplace, we employed a qualitative research design to cull for responses that would add to the understanding of the quantitative data. Because over half of the institutions do not have a promotion and tenure process that is simultaneous,\(^b\) we refer specifically to the promotion process, independent of its relationship to tenure.

**Results**

Faculty perceptions of the clarity and reasonableness of the promotion process differed by mission area and between faculty groups (see Table 1). Among all respondents, 71.2% of faculty agreed that promotion expectations were clear for their work in research and scholarship—followed by 66.4% for teaching and education, 61.7% for patient care,

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\(^a\) All references to the literature appear in the supplemental information.

\(^b\) In 2008, 33% of the accredited schools had a written institutional policy that linked the award of tenure to the promotion of a specific rank, so that promotion and tenure awards were simultaneous (53% did not and 14% did sometimes). Source: 2008 AAMC Faculty Personnel Policies Survey, unpublished data.
have equal opportunities to be promoted in rank. Basic science and male faculty agreed more strongly on these items than did clinical M.D. and female faculty, respectively. In the biggest percentage difference between groups, 82.0% of men agreed that male and female faculty have equal opportunities to be promoted in rank compared to only 55.9% of women.

**Discussion**

Many faculty found promotion expectations unclear and unreasonable, and importantly, perceptions differed significantly among groups of faculty. Basic science faculty found expectations for promotion clearer and more reasonable than did clinical faculty, a finding supported and detailed by qualitative results. These results may reflect that the activities toward promotion for basic science faculty are generally more easily quantifiable (e.g., number of publications), whereas the clinical contributions of clinical faculty may not be reflected in promotion guidelines and can be difficult to measure. Our findings are consistent with previous research that has shown that academic advancement is typically slower for clinical faculty and that reward structures may need to change to recognize faculty contributions in clinical and educational activities.  

Results show significant gender differences in the clarity and reasonableness of expectations and in the consistent and equitable application of promotion criteria. Despite increases in women faculty at medical schools, women remain underrepresented among faculty at higher academic ranks and in decanal positions. Some researchers suggest this slow progression is due to things like competing demands between family and work (family responsibility), inadequate mentoring, and a lesser understanding of the criteria for promotion. Additionally, researchers have examined and found evidence for the theory of unconscious gender bias as a barrier to workplace equality that may exist within academic medicine. Consistent with our results that female faculty find the application of promotion criteria less consistent and equitable than their male counterparts, past research has shown that, once intervening variables like track and rank are controlled, increased advancement for male faculty cannot be attributed to greater productivity or institutional commitment.

Areas of satisfaction with promotion policies and process impact satisfaction with one’s medical school, which can, in turn, affect turnover rates. Institutions will be well-served by continuing to evaluate their own promotion guidelines and process as a means of improving workplace satisfaction. These findings speak to the need to be diligent in making sure policies and practices around promotion are transparent and fair to all faculty members.

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