

# **Creating a Positive Departmental Climate at Virginia Tech: A Compendium of Successful Strategies**

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## Table of Contents

### I. Introduction

### II. About the *AdvanceVT* Departmental Climate Initiative (DCI)

### III. Departmental Climate Components and Strategies

#### **Component One: Creating a Sense of Intellectual Community**

- Why Intellectual Community Matters
- What Our Survey Data Tell Us about Intellectual Community
- Points to Consider about Creating a Sense of Intellectual Community
- Virginia Tech Successful Strategies:
  - Tools and resources Virginia Tech faculty use for building and maintaining a sense of intellectual community in their departments

#### **Component Two: Providing a Fair and Full Evaluation**

- Why Good Evaluation Practices Matter
- What Our Survey Data Tell Us about Evaluation Practices
- Guidelines for the Evaluation Process
- Virginia Tech Successful Strategies:
  - Components of Virginia Tech Departmental Evaluation Model

#### **Component Three: Providing Effective and Supportive Communication**

- Why Effective and Supportive Communication Matters
- What Our Survey Data Tell Us about Departmental Communication Issues
- Points to Consider about Effective and Supportive Communication
- Virginia Tech Successful Strategies:
  1. Maintaining regular meetings with untenured faculty
  2. Employing multiple communication venues
  3. Mentorship programs
  4. Active appreciation strategies
  5. Departmental values statements to guide collegial communications.

## **Component Four: Providing Effective Policies**

- Why Having Written Departmental Policies Matters
- What Our Survey Data Tell Us about Departmental Policies and Practices
- Points to Consider about Providing Effective Policies
- Virginia Tech Departmental Policy Practices

## **Component Five: Focusing on Work- Life Balance**

- Why Focusing on Work/ Life Balance Matters
- What Our Survey Data Tell Us about Work/Life Issues
- Points to Consider about Providing Work/Life Policies and Practices
- Successful Strategies
- Policy Tools and Programs to Address Work/Life Issues for Faculty Members

## **Supplemental Materials**

### *Providing Fair and Full Evaluation*

1. P&T Good Practices
2. Proposed Qualitative Terms For Use in Faculty Evaluation
3. Sample Written Feedback to a Faculty Member
4. Pre-Tenure Faculty Reviews (including reviews for part-time tenure-track faculty). Section 2.8.2 of the *Faculty Handbook*
5. Faculty Annual Evaluation and Salary Adjustments. Section 2.9.1 of the *Faculty Handbook*
6. Guide to Faculty Expectations and Evaluation Procedures  
Department of Biological Sciences

### *Effective and Supportive Communication*

1. Responsibilities of Mentors and Mentees
2. Examples of Successful Mentoring Programs in Other Universities
3. Holding Difficult Conversations:
  - a. Issue Discussion Form
  - b. Sixty Second Opening Statement
  - c. Delivering Negative Feedback
4. Communication Faculty Guide, Department of Communication
5. Department of History Statement on an Inclusive and Scholarly Community
6. Department of Industrial and Systems Engineering Values Survey

*Providing Effective Policies*

1. Reappointment, Tenure, and Promotion Productivity Indicators, Department of Human Development
2. Tenure and Promotion Policies and Procedures, Department of English

*Focusing on Work/Life Balance*

1. On-line Virginia Tech Resources for Departmental Heads
2. External On-line Resources and Forms
3. University Policies that Promote Work/Life Balance

## I. Introduction

“Creating a Positive Departmental Climate at Virginia Tech: A Compendium of Successful Strategies” was created as part of the *AdvanceVT* Departmental Climate Initiative (DCI). The Department Climate Committee collected policies and practices from a variety of sources to provide department chairs and heads with opportunities to learn about departmental issues at Virginia Tech, to understand more fully the ways in which these issues manifest themselves within departments, and to share both successful and unsuccessful strategies illustrative of the different approaches departments have taken towards promoting effective, efficient, and pleasant work environments.

The purpose of the compendium is to help make departments places in which faculty, staff, and students live, work, and prosper with the utmost success. It draws from results of an initial 2006 DCI survey, a follow up *AdvanceVT* workshop discussions of existing strategies, *AdvanceVT* survey data, a literature review, and materials from other institutions. The compendium focuses on five critical areas that emerged from these sources: creating a sense of intellectual community, providing for fair and full evaluations of staff and faculty, improving communications to insure clarity and mutual respect and understanding, building more effective departmental policies, and helping department members achieve an effective work-life balance.

Each section makes reference to survey data which address the topic. The *AdvanceVT* survey was conducted in 2005 and had a 60% response rate. The results reported here are from tenured and tenure-track respondents only. Details of the survey methodology and complete results are available at

[http://www.advance.vt.edu/Measuring\\_Progress/Faculty\\_Survey\\_2005/Faculty\\_Survey.htm](http://www.advance.vt.edu/Measuring_Progress/Faculty_Survey_2005/Faculty_Survey.htm). References to this survey are identified as “*AdvanceVT* 2005.” Virginia Tech participated in a national survey of pre-tenure faculty conducted by the Harvard COACHE (Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education) in 2006-07. The issues addressed by this survey included tenure, the nature of the work, climate, collegiality, and departmental culture, policies and practices, and overall satisfaction. This survey provides invaluable comparative information on five selected peers and all participating research universities. The response rate for this survey was 59%. References to results in this report are identified as “COACHE 2007.” The complete executive summary and several presentations summarizing these data are available at [http://www.advance.vt.edu/Measuring\\_Progress/COACHE/COACHE.html](http://www.advance.vt.edu/Measuring_Progress/COACHE/COACHE.html). Data from these surveys help guide and inform the departmental climate initiative, suggesting areas where further attention may make measurable improvements in faculty productivity, success, and satisfaction.



## II. The Departmental Climate Initiative

As the *Advance* institutional transformation project has evolved, the leadership team has become ever more convinced that the departmental climate is the most important place to focus our collective attention in order to improve recruitment, retention, and satisfaction of all faculty. Analyses of the *AdvanceVT* survey by department illustrated a broad range of departmental profiles. Response patterns from faculty in some departments showed wide and deep satisfaction with their collegial relationships, departmental management, opportunity for input, and work conditions. Other departmental profiles were mixed or more negative than departments in the same college. These patterns suggest opportunities to learn from the practices of departments with apparently more positive climates and more supportive practices, a guiding principle behind the compilation of material for this compendium.

The initial DCI inquiry focused on departmental life in two of Virginia Tech's eight colleges: the College of Science and the College of Engineering. In 2006, department heads in these two colleges were asked about current practices and strategies designed to cultivate positive academic climates within their departments. From the beginning we recognized the legitimacy of disciplinary differences that shape departmental climates in different colleges; however, a cross-disciplinary approach allowed us to isolate and identify similar structures underlying successful strategies for achieving positive environments at Virginia Tech.

As the initiative unfolded, we shifted its core emphasis from identifying experiences to sharing these experiences and cultivating new ideas conducive to the achievement of positive departmental climates. Much of the shared learning in this regard took place during the *Successful Strategies to Promote Department Climate* workshop in January 2007, an opportunity to present the results of the survey of departmental practices and to discuss honestly and candidly various departments' efforts—both successful and unsuccessful—to achieve positive results. We are confident that promoting a positive department climate throughout the university will enhance Virginia Tech's excellence in teaching, research, and outreach.

*AdvanceVT* Department Climate Committee

Jack Finney (Chair)	Ishwar Puri
Carla Finkelstein	Don Taylor
Joe Merola	Eileen Van Aken



### III. Departmental Climate Components and Strategies

#### Component One: Creating a Sense of Intellectual Community

##### *Why intellectual community matters*

- A sense of intellectual community is of vital importance as a way of preserving academic traditions and the advancement of knowledge. Of the utmost importance is the willingness to share with colleagues and students the wealth of knowledge present and past without concern for competitive advantage
- Rich intellectual discourse in a department is a sign of excellence. A sense of intellectual community broadens this discourse, encourages intellectual discipline in the department, and reveals possibilities for academic scholarship. These possibilities should be open to all and teamwork and joint projects encouraged
- A sense of intellectual community has less to do with laboratory and office space than with relationships, opportunities for personal expression, and climates conducive to collegiality, mutual appreciation, encouragement, assistance, and sharing of ideas, an open mind, helping hand, and generous heart.

*“Communities...must be nurtured and conscientiously maintained, and often the smallest gestures- including simply placing intellectual community on the agenda! - can yield results.”*

*Victoria Rosner,  
Department of English,  
Texas A&M\**

\* From: *Creating and nurturing robust intellectual communities in Texas A & M University Department of English*, reflection by Dr. Victoria Rosner. Adapted with permission. On-line resource: [http://gallery.carnegiefoundation.org/collections/cid/english/texas\\_am/community.html](http://gallery.carnegiefoundation.org/collections/cid/english/texas_am/community.html)

## *What our survey data tell us about intellectual community*

- 45% of Virginia Tech pre-tenure faculty members are very or somewhat satisfied with the intellectual vitality of the senior faculty members in their department; 34% were somewhat or very dissatisfied (COACHE 2007).
- Opportunities to collaborate with colleagues were an important contributor to faculty satisfaction in the *AdvanceVT* survey. 88% of men and 78% of women (difference is significant at  $<.01$  level) strongly or somewhat agree that they have the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues in their department who share their interests. Non-Caucasian respondents were less likely to agree to this statement as well. (*AdvanceVT* 2005)
- Opportunities for collaboration with senior faculty members were also addressed in the COACHE survey. 53% of pre-tenure faculty respondents were very or somewhat satisfied with opportunities to collaborate with senior faculty members, while 31% were dissatisfied. (COACHE 2007)
- According to the director of the Harvard COACHE project, sense of “fit,” or belonging was the most important factor in predicting global satisfaction of pre-tenure faculty. Men were more likely to feel they “fit” at Virginia Tech than women (80% compared to 66%, difference is significant at  $<.01$  level) and whites were more likely to feel they fit in compared to non-whites (77% compared to 55%, difference significant at the  $<.05$  level). (*AdvanceVT* 2005)



## *Points to consider about creating a sense of intellectual community*

- A strong intellectual community is a product of purposeful action, the result of constant stimulation, nourishment, and conscientious maintenance. A sense of intellectual community does not emerge as a result of faculty in-fighting and sub-grouping.
- A sense of intellectual community evokes feelings of belonging and connectedness sometimes at odds with the organizational and institutional life of the college and university.
- Departments characterized by genuine and respectful collegiality are more likely to foster strong, resourceful, and successful intellectual communities.
- The intellectual community is based not just on common scholarly interests, but also on personal connections and interactions. Faculty often value quality relationships within a department more than the compensation package it offers.
- Scholarly exchange between different departmental sub-groups intensifies intellectual discourse and fosters intellectual development and engagement.
- Intensifying intellectual engagement within a department must be done within an atmosphere of mutual respect for scholarship and for the individual and joint efforts of all members of the department. Criticism should be directed toward ideas, not toward individuals.

*“Faculty members in my department adopted a set of core values designed to help us assess and improve our department climate and culture. This was not an easy task, and it requires continued focus over time to reinforce these shared values. The department today is in a better place to promote the success of faculty, students, and staff.”*

*Eileen Van Aken, Department of Industrial and Systems Engineering and AdvanceVT College Liaison*

## Virginia Tech successful practices

### Tools and resources Virginia Tech faculty use for building and maintaining a sense of intellectual community in their departments:

- Faculty colloquium series that allow faculty to present their research
- Sponsored social events (see “Providing effective and supportive communication” chapter)
- Faculty mentoring program (see “Mentorship” section in the “Providing effective and supportive communication” chapter)
- Invited guests and visiting scholars
- Collaborative course teaching, joint grants (Co- PI), joint publications
- Providing faculty professional development opportunities

*“For the past two years I have held a Faculty Seminar Series which has been pretty successful. Approximately three times each semester we have two faculty members who give 20-minute seminars on their background, research and teaching interests, and personal hobbies/interests as part of a luncheon gathering...*

*Several beneficial interactions have arisen in research and teaching by faculty now knowing more about what each other’s work and interests involve.*

*Bill Knocke  
Civil & Environmental Engineering, VT*



## Component Two: Providing Fair and Full Evaluation

### *Why good evaluation practices matter*

- Evaluation ensures improvement of the academic planning process and the performance of faculty members and their research teams.
- Evaluation provides the basis for salary adjustments, retention, promotion, and tenure decisions.

*“We are shifting our departmental system from one that is more of a “bean counting” system that results in a continuous ranking scale to a system in which we have 4 categories: Extraordinary Contributor, Above Contributor, Contributor and Below Contributor... We are also for the first time allowing faculty to individually designate their evaluation criteria (i.e., %T, %R, %S) ahead of time to tailor these criteria to how they expect best to contribute to the department and university.”*

*Robert Tracy  
Department of Geosciences, VT*

### *What our survey data tell us about evaluation practices*

- About 71% of tenured and tenure-track respondents agreed that performance expectations are communicated clearly in their department. (*AdvanceVT 2005*)
- About 75% of the tenured and tenure-track respondents agreed that faculty members at Virginia Tech are usually promoted or given opportunities based on good performance. Men are significantly more likely to agree to this statement than women (77% compared to 66%). (*AdvanceVT 2005*)
- 94% of the pre-tenure respondents to the COACHE survey indicated that periodic formal performance evaluation was important for their career progress, but only 68% felt that their departments were effective at this important practice. (*COACHE 2007*)
- While 71% of all tenured and tenure-track faculty members agreed that the requirements for tenure or promotion are clearly articulated in their department (*AdvanceVT 2005*), **pre-tenure** faculty were much less likely to think so. Only 51% pre-tenure faculty found the tenure standards (performance thresholds) in their departments to be very or somewhat clear. (*COACHE 2007*)

## *Guidelines for the evaluation process*

- Keep the evaluation focused on the major responsibilities of faculty members. Make sure that all of the evaluation procedures are in writing, are in accordance with the departmental bylaws, and are consistent with the Faculty Handbook.
- Involve faculty. Careful deliberation in developing and running an evaluation ensures its acceptance by faculty, whose involvement in the evaluation process promotes support of the project.
- Discuss expectations. The faculty should know what is expected from them and how their work will be judged. Assignments should be consistent with the Faculty Handbook and equitable within the department.
- Communicate openly. Every faculty member should know and understand the evaluation procedures, criteria, and department standards, as well as institutional policies and procedures with regards to performance evaluation.
- Develop and refine an evaluation instrument. Constant and continuous modification of the evaluation instrument is most important in promoting the fairness and success of the process.
- Be flexible. The nature of research, teaching, service, and outreach is discipline-specific, and variable assignments within a discipline are common. It is prudent, therefore, in evaluating faculty, to account for an individual's contributions to the mission of the department, college, and university.
- Be judicious. Implementation of a new evaluation system will be threatening to many faculty. Be honest, consistent, and fair in the implementation. Avoid discussions about other faculty members' productivity with other faculty members who are not involved in the evaluation process. Expect one or two years for the process of acceptance and implementation.
- Set a context for the individual's understanding of their performance. Several department heads provide summary data for all faculty as part of the evaluation feedback. This allows the individual to better understand their accomplishments in relation to others. See a sample letter of this type in the Supplemental Materials.

## Virginia Tech Successful Strategies

### Components of Virginia Tech Departmental Evaluation Model

- The main approach to the annual review of the faculty should be based on transparency and consistency of the process.
- The annual evaluation is based on the Faculty Activity Report (FAR), which is completed annually by each faculty member.
- Department chairs and heads have ultimate responsibility for the formal evaluation. However, an appropriately charged committee of faculty members may provide evaluation ratings and comments to the chair or head.
- Annual evaluations must be written.
- Departmental evaluation criteria should reflect the overall college standards for teaching, research, service, outreach, and diversity. In many departments, assignments may be individually negotiated with and agreed to by the chair or head and the faculty member.

*“The [evaluation] process seems to work quite well. Junior faculty are invited to serve on the evaluation committee early on in their careers, to get a clear sense of department standards.”*

*Beate Schmittmann  
Department of Physics, VT*

*“The written evaluation contains an invitation to meet about the content of the letter, or any other matter. Some faculty do come meet with me, but not everyone.”*

*Hayden Griffin  
Engineering Education, VT*

Examples and further guidance are provided in the Supplemental Materials:

- Good practices in evaluating faculty members
- Qualitative rating terms for evaluating faculty activity
- Sample written feedback to a faculty member
- Faculty Handbook language concerning the probationary period for pre-tenure faculty and annual faculty evaluations
- Guide to expectations and evaluation from the Department of Biological Sciences

**Faculty Evaluation (revised policy – Sec 2.9 Faculty Handbook)\***

- Departments are required to have written guidelines for process and criteria for faculty evaluations.
- Annual written evaluation by head/chair may be informed by an evaluation committee. The committee's evaluation ratings and comments should be shared. However, the chair or head completes the final evaluation, basing the final evaluation of the FAR, committee comments, and knowledge of each faculty member's unique contributions to the university's mission.
- Evaluations must be completed within 90 days of FAR submission.
- Faculty members must acknowledge receipt by signing and returning a copy to the chair or head.

**Pre-tenure Reviews (newly revised policy – section 2.8.2 Faculty Handbook)\***

- Two thorough reviews must be completed during the 6-year probationary period. One model is to have the faculty member prepare a tenure and promotion dossier, which is reviewed by the department P&T Committee and the chair or head.
- Written feedback must be provided from the department P&T committee, with a copy signed and returned by faculty member.
- The written feedback is accompanied by a meeting with the P&T committee, the chair or head, and the faculty member.

*“There are some faculty who just don't want to meet one on one. The personnel committee, after reviewing the FARs and discussing each faculty member, provides me with comments and recommendations that I consult in providing the written evaluation. The written evaluation consists of:*

- 1. A letter describing the process used to come up with the evaluation and giving an overall evaluation.*
- 2. A copy of the form provided to the Dean.*
- 3. A copy of the comments and evaluation that the personnel committee gives to me.”*

*Joe Merola  
Department of Chemistry, VT*

*“I used to have formal annual review meetings with all faculty and found that most tenured faculty did not see much value in the face-to-face meeting. All get written feedback on performance, and I offer to meet with anyone who has questions/concerns about their review. A few take me up on the offer. Likewise, my style is to deal with things more "informally", so these types of input/dialogue activities go on in various ways throughout the year as opposed to in one formal, annual meeting. I do meet one or more times each year with untenured faculty to review performance.”*

*Bill Knocke  
Civil & Environmental Engineering, VT*

\* Complete policy references available in the *Supplemental Materials*.

## Component Three: Effective and Supportive Communication

### *Why effective and supportive communication matter*

- Effective and supportive communication is a critical factor in retaining and promoting faculty.
- Clear and open interaction with faculty fosters the generation of knowledge by introducing new ideas for research, teaching, outreach, and service. Administrators who communicate effectively with faculty members gain insight into new opportunities and creative solutions.
- Supportive conversations with faculty, both formal and informal, strengthen bonds between faculty and administrators and remind faculty of their paramount importance to the university.

*“I think that open communication is the single most critical factor in a healthy department. Faculty will certainly not agree with everything that a department chair does, but they are willing to support decisions if the reasons have been openly discussed and they feel that their input was considered.”*

*Joe Merola  
Department of Chemistry, VT*

### *What our survey data tell us about departmental communication issues*

- Many department heads work hard at sharing information. 77% of respondents agreed that the administration in their department kept the faculty informed about key issues. (*AdvanceVT*, 2005)
- The surveys provided quite a bit of data on mentoring and collegial relationships. Here are a few nuggets from those findings:
  - *Formal* mentoring programs at Virginia Tech leave a lot to be desired according to the pre-tenure faculty – only 7% thought they were very effective; 35% thought they were *fairly* effective. The remaining respondents were either neutral or found them to be ineffective. *Informal* mentoring is working better – 60% of the respondents thought informal mentoring was very or somewhat effective. (COACHE 2007)
  - Half of the respondents (all tenured and tenure-track faculty) in the *Advance* survey somewhat or strongly agreed that they have received effective mentoring in their department; half disagreed. (*AdvanceVT* 2005)

- 67% of pre-tenure faculty members were somewhat or very satisfied with the interest that senior faculty members take in their professional development; 24% were dissatisfied. (COACHE 2007)
- Two-thirds of pre-tenure faculty were somewhat or very satisfied with *personal* interactions they had with other junior colleagues; 55% were satisfied with *personal* interactions with *senior* colleagues. (COACHE 2007)

*Points to consider about effective and supportive communication*

- Communication is potentially explosive, especially with regards to sensitive issues. Tenure and merit compensation are topics of considerable concern, causing the most anxiety and eliciting the most questions.
- Communication is bilateral. Simply providing information to faculty, especially information of a sensitive nature, is not sufficient. A timely and convenient feedback mechanism is necessary to prevent misunderstandings.
- Communication is complex, the opportunities for misunderstanding innumerable. Keep messages simple and discuss intricate matters face to face. Remember that non-routine messages concerning novel events are likely to be misunderstood.
- Active appreciation intensifies a sense of belonging and makes faculty feel valued and respected. Praise accomplishments and extend your attention beyond faculty members' research and funding successes.
- Really difficult and persistent tensions in the department may require special interventions. Seek help from a professional facilitator or consultant to work through rough times. The Office of Organizational Development in Human Resources can assist in identifying someone appropriate.

See the Supplemental Materials for a structured approach to handling difficult conversations, delivering negative feedback, giving recognition, and developing departmental values statements.





## Virginia Tech successful strategies

### I. Maintaining regular meetings with untenured faculty.

<u>Purpose:</u>	To nurture professional development.
<u>Advantages:</u>	Reduces interruptions during scheduled meetings and discourages unscheduled meetings with individual faculty.
<u>Limitations:</u>	Time-consuming, but not as time-consuming as unscheduled interruptions.
<u>Recommended communication style:</u>	Supportive, non-threatening. When evaluative, be empathetic, constructive, and respectful.
<u>Description:</u>	Meetings with untenured faculty are frequent, private, and proactive (rather than “when a mistake is made” appointments). In the first session, the faculty member and department head discuss mutual expectations, administrative and faculty responsibilities, and evaluation standards.

#### • Agenda for a first meeting:

- What are the goals of the faculty member for research, teaching, outreach, and service?
- How can the department head facilitate the achievement of the faculty member’s goals?
- Introduction to departmental expectations for scholarship, promotion and tenure, and annual evaluation.
- Questions and topics for future meetings.

*“We are a small department, and I have an open door policy, unless I’m extremely busy trying to meet a deadline. I generally see and speak with each faculty member on a daily basis. We have faculty meetings on an as-needed basis.”*

*Thomas Novak  
Mining and Minerals  
Engineering, VT*

*Maintaining regular meetings with untenured faculty (Continued)*

• **Agenda items for the following meetings:**

- Discuss questions and topics generated at previous meetings.
- Clarify performance goals, information sharing, feedback on job performance, etc.
- Resolve personal needs or concerns, e.g., time-management problems, family issues, reports and paperwork, etc.
- Review new proactive goals generated during the meeting.

*“When there is a specific issue at hand which needs a vote, success comes in the form of a collegial discussion which leads to a decision that the faculty support (not necessarily agree with). On other issues (strategic planning, etc) success [of the meeting] is measured by the enthusiasm level of the discussion and a discussion that moves the department forward in its collective thinking about those issues.”*

*Joe Merola  
Department of Chemistry, VT*



## 2. Employing multiple communication venues.

- **Internal department communication strategies**

Purpose: To achieve greater coherence and improve coordination within the department by enhancing communication between the administration and the faculty.

Means:

- Holding regular departmental meetings.
- Publishing departmental organizational chart and a meeting structure.
- Announcing calendar of departmental and college events to facilitate advance scheduling of departmental meetings, colloquium series lectures, and social events.
- Distributing departmental newsletters to college and university.
- Sending periodic “From the Chair” e-mail messages.
- Establishing listserv to communicate news about faculty and students.

*“Open communication in both directions between the chair and the faculty allows faculty to feel involved and to have input into decisions. Discussions of issues may spontaneously go in directions not anticipated and provide new information to the chair to guide policy and direction. By only having 2-3 meetings per semester faculty do not feel unduly burdened with meetings and enough time has transpired that there is usually plenty of new information to share in both directions.”*

*Robert Stephens  
Department of Psychology, VT*

- **Informal communication strategies and social events**

Purpose: To promote collegiality, intellectual and social solidarity, and a sense of community.

Means:

- Expanding the department head’s open door policy and rewarding him/her for spending more and more time with faculty, staff, and students.
- Gathering faculty for informal, lighthearted brownbag lunchtime discussions of issues of some import that might otherwise be stressful or unpleasant.
- Holding informal social events, e.g., a monthly TGIF party, in the department itself or local tavern or pub.
- Scheduling athletic contests, e.g., softball, table tennis, horseshoes, etc. with rival departments.

*“We are a small department, and some of our faculty travel a lot, so we have difficult finding good times to do this. We have a holiday potluck lunch on Reading Day in Fall Semester. We also have a retreat in May that is part business part social. We have agreed to institute a couple more social events every year.”*

*Hayden Griffin,  
Engineering Education, VT*

*Informal communication strategies and social events (Continued)*

- Holding social events in faculty homes to gather together professors, alumni, graduate students, and staff.
- Using common spaces within the departmental offices as lunch rooms and lounges in which faculty are encouraged to hang out and chat.
- Holding "Iron Chef" competitions (patterned after the TV show) to promote camaraderie and community.

- **Internal and external communication strategies**

*“We have sporadically had departmental picnics, some dinner/dances, etc. The reality is that with a very large department these extra social events become a "drain" on those staff, spouses and myself who have to organize them. Likewise, a significant number of faculty view such activities as pulling them away from family time and, as such, choose not to participate.”*  
Bill Knocke,  
Civil & Environmental Engineering, VT

Purpose: To enhance and promote image and reputation of the department.

Means:

- Designing or updating an inclusive departmental website with something for everyone, from scholarly articles to favorite recipes, snapshots of the department picnic to art photography, etc.
- Encouraging faculty to publish on the website, promoting the free, open, and generous exchange of ideas in a convivial, frequently humorous, markedly non-threatening environment.
- Hosting departmental open houses for alumni and prospective students.
- Bringing in distinguished speakers, research fellows, prominent authors, artists, and musicians to enhance overall vitality and visibility of the department.



### 3. Mentorship programs

#### Purpose:

- To enhance faculty's prospects for promotion and tenure.
- To foster collegiality and create greater sense of community in the department.
- To help junior and untenured faculty to better understand the promotion and tenure system.

#### Assumptions:

- Faculty mentoring is a type of interpersonal relationship and it is highly individual. Mentoring might not work the same way in different departments and with all faculty across an entire campus.
- Mentoring is a complex practice and it cannot be reduced to a simple recipe of behaviors and procedures.

#### Description of a mentorship program:

- In most cases, mentoring programs are not heavily structured. They are informal in nature, and faculty members' participation in a mentoring program is entirely voluntary.
- Since mentoring is a partnership, mentoring programs are flexible to meet the needs of both mentors and mentees. They are allowed to select one another and to determine their mutual goals.
- Mentor participation in a faculty development program is often compensated by merit raises and favored in promotional reviews.
- Mentoring programs are generally evaluated from a 360 perspective, where both mentors and aspiring faculty are allowed to measure the effectiveness of their professional relationship.
- Mentoring responsibilities can be assigned to a specific senior faculty member, yet all members of the department are provided opportunities to assist in the development of each junior faculty member.
- Within a department there are opportunities to discuss effective mentoring practices as well as challenging moments and difficult situations among fellow mentors. Discussing mentoring techniques and styles provides perspective to faculty as they lead junior members towards tenure.

*"The "formal" mentoring program... is formally set up to be "informal". We do not have a written document of expectations of mentors and mentees... I try to see that each untenured faculty member has 1-2 faculty members who work with them on an as-needed basis for mentoring on research, scholarship, instruction-types of issues.*

*The feedback that I have received is that people prefer a more informal approach to this versus having lots of procedures, meeting expectations, etc."*

*Bill Knocke,  
Civil & Environmental Engineering, VT*

The Supplemental Materials provide further guidance on the responsibilities of mentors and mentees and webpage references for mentorship programs at other institutions.



#### 4. Active appreciation strategies

Purpose: Establish a sense of belonging within a department, make faculty feel valued and respected for who they are, and appreciated for what they do.

Principle: Praise! Praise! Praise!

Examples of appreciation strategies (formal and informal) at Virginia Tech:

- Public recognition at social and formal events
- Celebration of an accomplishment ( individual or groups of faculty) through social events and get-together
- Assigning special titles to faculty members
- Public postings in special recognition and appreciation spots on a departmental website and in a newsletter
- Creating a plaque engraved with a name of faculty or a group of faculty who made outstanding contribution
- Monthly “Birthday Coffee Breaks” gatherings

*“I generally send a personal 'thank you' e-mail to PIs as I am notified of new grants. Major awards are generally acknowledged via mass e-mail or in faculty meetings.”*

*Don Taylor,  
Industrial & Systems  
Engineering, VT*



## 5. Departmental values statements to guide collegial communications

Purpose: Engage the faculty and staff in an extended conversation about departmental climate, interactions among and between members of the department, and the shared values about how such interactions ought to occur. Develop a departmental statement of those shared values and hold members accountable for respectful and professional treatment of others.

Principle: Setting written, shared expectations for civility and care toward one another is a useful way to promote a positive departmental climate and to make sure that new members understand their responsibilities to the departmental culture.

Examples of departmental values statements at Virginia Tech:

- The faculty and staff of the Department of Industrial and Systems Engineering engaged in a lengthy and constructive process to identify the issues that were the source of considerable tension and to define for themselves a statement of values. Department members are surveyed regularly on how well those values are being carried out in daily interactions, and special efforts are then initiated to improve on those areas where issues remain. See the survey and listing of values adopted by the department in the Supplemental Materials.
- After much discussion, the faculty in the Department of History reached agreement on a set of principles for creating a more inclusive and scholarly community. See the statement that they adopted in the Supplemental Materials.

It is not the mere listing of principles that help a department move forward, but a **process** in which participants engage in defining their common values. That buy-in is essential if they are to make a meaningful commitment to a set of expectations and agree to be held accountable to those standards. A professional facilitator can be very helpful in structuring such a process.



## Component Four: Providing Effective Policies

### *Why having written departmental policies matters*

- Well-structured and successful programs and departments depend on a shared sense of purpose, which requires a commitment to the creation and documentation of a set of carefully considered, intelligent, and well-written departmental regulations and procedures, openly available to scrutiny by all and whenever possible the product jointly of all staff and faculty.
- Department heads are responsible for many important decisions, such as hiring and promoting faculty and staff, determining salary increases, making tenure recommendations, defining job responsibilities, etc. They should document carefully all such decisions in order to maintain administrative processes that are fair and equitable and avoid abuses and conflicts that might lead to legal actions.

*“We are currently developing formal policies and procedures. Once we decide to develop a policy someone (usually me) drafts the policy, and then we flesh it out through discussion at faculty meetings. The final document requires a 2/3 majority of the faculty for implementation.”*

*Hayden Griffin  
Engineering Education, VT*

### *What our survey data tell us about departmental policies and practices*

- Long-standing but unwritten departmental policies and practices may seem clear or well known to some segments of the faculty, but they can be unknown or frustrating to new or non-majority faculty members. Women and minority faculty are especially likely to feel as if “others” know things they do not, and that they have been left out of critical information networks. For example, women were significantly more likely than men to agree that “Other faculty in my department seem to know about policies or opportunities of which I am unaware” (41% compared to 28%); non-white faculty members were also significantly more likely to feel that they did not have as much information as others (about 50% compared to 29%). (*AdvanceVT 2005*)
- On 10 out of 12 questions on the COACHE survey concerning the clarity and reasonableness of expectations for tenure and promotion, our pre-tenure faculty members scored significantly lower than respondents at similar research universities. Several departments have tackled the challenge of describing their expectations for P&T in writing so that both candidates and committee members operate from a shared and consistent understanding of those expectations. See the Supplemental Materials for examples.



## *Points to consider about departmental policies*

- Programmatic requirements and departmental policies should be aligned with specific departmental and institutional goals, created collectively with input from the staff and faculty. They should remain transparent and fully accessible to staff and faculty.
- Transparency simply means keeping expectations and the decision making process mutually clear and comprehensible to all, which requires continuous interactions with staff and faculty and involvement of staff and faculty in the decision making process.
- Policies, whether new or existing, should not come as a surprise to the people who are affected by them. Secrecy in decision making, as well as “silent” policy modifications, seldom bring about positive results and almost always create tension.
- Decisions and policy implementations, particularly difficult ones, have a better chance of being received in a positive manner by staff and faculty who are the part of the decision-making process.
- To avoid potential lawsuits filed by staff and faculty against institutions of higher education, workplace rules and regulations should be made well-known to everyone concerned.
- When communicating policy modifications and important decisions, department heads and other departmental officials should practice civility and respect for the feelings and self-esteem of staff and faculty, which is always appreciated, ultimately saves time and effort, and, in the case of difficult situations, minimizes stress as the situation unfolds.



## Virginia Tech departmental policies and practices

While many departments and programs have excellent written policies and documents that clearly describe and govern procedures for annual review, etc., some do not have in place the fail-safe mechanisms needed to head off problems, and there is a lack of consistency in the way many departments implement their departmental policies.

Examples of departmental guidelines or policies that are especially important to be in writing and available are:

- Process and criteria guidelines for promotion and tenure (see the supplemental material for examples)
- Post-tenure review policy
- Policy or guidelines on teaching buyouts, distribution and use of overhead funds, and cost sharing
- Guidelines on allocating funds for faculty travel or other professional needs
- Process for conducting peer evaluations of teaching
- Process for nominating faculty members for departmental, college, or university awards, especially departmentally controlled professorships
- Faculty evaluation procedures (see supplemental material for an example)

*“Overall, the department is quite congenial. There is a tendency not to bother too much with formalities. As a result, it is not always clear whether junior faculty are made fully aware of existing procedures and ‘traditions’. Collecting all policies and putting them into a generally accessible location is on my to-do list.”*

*Beate Schmittmann,  
Department of Physics, VT*

## Component Five: Focusing on Work-Life Balance

### *Why focusing on work/life balance matters*

- The ability of Virginia Tech to attract and retain the best faculty depends upon a culture that values and supports both the work and life needs of all faculty over the course of their careers.
- Men and women PhDs typically experience family formation and academic career progression differently. Although women now earn 50% of PhDs granted to U.S. citizens, they remain significantly underrepresented among tenure-track and tenured faculty. Given that the tenure clock generally coincides with the biological clock, women faculty often face particular challenges in achieving balance and success.

### *What our survey data tell us about work-life issues*

- Data from two recent Virginia Tech surveys tell us that issues of work-life balance are sources of concern and dissatisfaction for **both** women and men in tenure-track and tenured appointments. However women are significantly more likely to agree to statements indicating a high degree of tension between professional and family commitments. For example:
  - *76% of women and 55% of men agree that “It is difficult to have a personal life and be promoted or earn tenure at Virginia Tech”*
  - *60% of women and 43% of men agree that their personal or family responsibilities have slowed their advancement at Virginia Tech*
  - *more than half of all women respondents and 41% of the men have seriously considered leaving their current job in order to achieve a better balance between their personal and professional life*
  - *55% of the women and 44% of the men feel that their professional/job demands force them to make unreasonable compromises about personal or family responsibilities and interests (statements above from AdvanceVT 2005)*
  - *60% of the **pre-tenure** women and 39% of the pre-tenure men are somewhat or very dissatisfied with the balance between professional time and personal or family time (COACHE 2007)*
- Data from the Virginia Tech Human Resource Information System also tell us that women faculty are twice as likely to leave Virginia Tech voluntarily as their male counterparts, an unfortunate loss of talent and investment.

- Focus groups conducted by AdvanceVT and the Commission on Faculty Affairs in 2005 gave voice to these concerns and how they play themselves out in the lives of individual faculty members:

*“I am feeling more and more that you sign on as a faculty member to work 24/7. There is an attitude that this is a privileged position; that I am lucky to have this job and that faculty should not expect to work only 40 hours.”*

*“Right now I feel like everyone thinks they own my soul, I feel abused.”*

*“I had two children under the age of five during the tenure process. Three years after my child was born my department head asked me what the sex of the child was. This shows a lack of understanding of that dimension of my life.”*

*“When I first came to Virginia Tech I was looking around this campus to try to find someone I could talk to about pregnancy and the tenure process. I asked someone here and they referred me to a colleague in Oregon because they did know anyone on this campus in a similar position. I feel private industry does better job of addressing the issue of work and family.”*

*“Some faculty spend too much time on work, work is their life, the Top 30 mentality makes matters worse. My daughter best summed it up to her kindergarten teacher when asked if she wanted to be a professor like her dad when she grew up, my daughter quickly replied “No, professors neglect their families.”*

*“I have the opportunity to meet with every candidate interviewing for a faculty position in the college. I enjoy learning about each person’s research program and discussing potential opportunities for collaboration. Candidates often ask questions about a range of university policies, and this allows me to highlight many of the new work/life balance policies that have been added.”*

*Nancy Ross, Associate Dean,  
College of Science and  
AdvanceVT College Liaison*

### *Points to consider about work/life balance*

- You can make work/life balance a priority and goal for your department by encouraging faculty to take advantage of institutional policies, resources, and practices to successfully integrate work and life/family needs, and making sure that they know they have departmental support if they do so.
- Actively highlight, advertise, and support your department’s work/life balance accommodation policies and procedures for **all** faculty—this helps assure faculty that they won’t be arbitrarily disadvantaged in promotion, advancement, or compensation.
- Make the use of work/life balance accommodations standard for conducting business in your department rather than

viewing them as exceptions or “special privileges.”

- Actively highlight your department’s work/life balance policies, benefits, and resources in faculty recruitment. Provide brochures about work-life policies, dual career hires, and the Work-Life Resource Center as part of **all** candidate recruitment packets. This sends a very positive message to candidates, even if they do not need the information at the time, and invites them to ask questions or to follow up individually with the offices listed.
- Schedule a time for women candidates to meet with other women faculty members, the *AdvanceVT* office, or the college liaison if available, so they can ask the questions that may be too sensitive to ask you or the search committee. (This same advice can apply to male candidates, but it is even more important for women candidates in departments where they may be among a very small number of women.)
- Communicate that your department is a place where faculty with current or potential caregiving responsibilities can thrive.
- Tenure and promotion committees should be directed to focus on quality and total quantity of scholarly productivity rather than time since degree or job hire so that faculty who slow down their

professional lives to meet personal obligations are not unduly penalized in the review process.

- All individuals and committees participating in tenure reviews should understand that any individual who has received a probationary period extension must be held to the same standard-not a higher or more stringent one-to which other candidates without such an extension are held. (Section 2.8.2.1 of the *Faculty Handbook*.)
- If a candidate has received an extension of the tenure probationary period, this should be addressed in the external review request as follows: “This candidate has received an extension of his or her tenure probationary period under approved university policies. You are asked to evaluate the candidate’s accomplishments and appropriateness for tenure and promotion to associate professor as if the record had been accumulated during our normal six-year probationary period.” (Section 2.8.4.4 of the *Faculty Handbook*)

### *Best Practices*

- I. A positive departmental climate rests on acknowledgement and acceptance of the diversity of faculty lives, family structures, situations, and needs. For example, dispel myths about lack of seriousness among faculty who stop the tenure clock to meet family needs.

2. Schedule meetings, seminars, and receptions to take into account the competing and often simultaneous demands of work and caregiving for faculty trying to excel in both realms. Whenever possible, departmental events should be scheduled between 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. to allow faculty parents to meet the dual needs of work and family. A small change like this can have a large impact on departmental culture, feelings of inclusion among faculty, and faculty success in the academic arena.
3. Mentor faculty. Junior faculty can benefit greatly from mentoring by department heads or senior faculty. To counter feelings that work/life balance is a unique situation to be figured out alone, junior faculty need to hear from and see others who are able to successfully balance their professional and personal lives without negative repercussions.
4. Make appropriate accommodations for those who need short-term relief and take an interest in their concerns by checking periodically with them. Department heads should work closely with faculty to determine course and committee assignments to make them more manageable during times of difficult personal or family situations, or following birth of a child.

*“All the rules and policies in the world cannot help faculty and their families if administrators are not kind and supportive people. One administrator was truly supportive of me, and facilitated my life as a mother and a scholar. I am extremely grateful to her. She is someone who has made a huge difference to my life and to that of my family. She established and helped maintain my commitment to the [university].”*

*Female faculty member*

### *Policy tools and programs to address work-life issues for faculty members*

The Supplemental Materials provide more detailed information on the following policy tools and programs available for addressing work-life and health issues. Call Pat Hyer, Associate Provost, for help in navigating policy options, and refer individual faculty members if they would like to have a confidential conversation about their options.

- Stopping the tenure clock
- Modified duties
- Part-time tenure-track and tenured appointments
- Family Medical Leave Act
- Family leave
- Sick leave
- Leave without pay
- Dual Career Assistance Program
- Faculty Retirement Transition Program
- Childcare
- Elder care
- Lactation facilities
- Work-Life Resources Center