Launch Program Evaluation Summary: AY2013-2015

Chairs

In May, 2013 the ADVANCE Program initiated Launch with a pilot program of eight newly appointed assistant professor faculty in STEM fields in LSA Natural Sciences Division and the College of Engineering. In 2014 and 2015 the program was open to all first year STEM professors in these two colleges; in addition, some STEM faculty from other colleges were included in the program. In 2014 there were 28 launchees and in 2015 there were 13 in the program.

Each year an evaluation of the program was conducted by the ADVANCE Program through interviews or surveys of all committee members (launchees, conveners, department chairs, faculty members inside and outside department). Included in the evaluations were open ended questions asking each respondent to describe the best things about participating in a Launch committee and also to suggest things that could have been done differently or better. Following is a brief summary of responses to these questions from the department chairs who served on the committees, with examples of their responses drawn from the four chairs in the pilot year, the 15 chairs in 2014, and 9 in 2015.

BEST THINGS ABOUT THE PROGRAM

All 28 of the chairs responded to the open ended question about the best things about participating in the Launch Program.

The chairs valued the **breadth of advice** that the program facilitated for junior faculty. One noted that “it is a great way to provide a large amount of information to the new faulty members at the start of their careers.” Another agreed that it is an “excellent format for providing advice from different perspectives.” A third commented that “it is helpful for [the new faculty] to know that they can receive thoughtful input from an independent source (i.e., faculty outside their area of research). Moreover, one pointed out that, “The Launch Committees are especially important for faculty who are working at the intersection between two departments as it brings in expertise from across campus to answer questions and to facilitate interactions.” Some appreciated that the junior faculty got advice that they, as chairs, wouldn’t necessarily have provided themselves or were in areas in which they have less expertise, “I think what I like about them is that the committees come up with some ideas that are not necessarily the way that I would do them, but they’re good suggestions.”

Beyond the quality of the advice, many chairs appreciated the Program’s ability to ensure that all the things that needed to be attended to were addressed through this **more structured, efficient, and comprehensive mentoring**. One commented, “Even with the best intentioned chair, there can be things that fall through the cracks, and the junior faculty don’t always know that they can be asking for help about certain things.” One also noted that the advice the committee provides is from a group and is more synthesized, accurate and consistent than launchees would receive from separate individuals and the “process brings forward issues that might not be apparent without it.” Moreover, several chairs noted that the committee “helped junior faculty to stay focused on what is important” and “allowed me, as chair, to identify issues as they arise.” The regularly scheduled meetings were also described as valuable as they provided a systematic avenue for communication, and provided launchees easy access to senior faculty to get answers to their questions. Moreover, it ensures “finding out about problems quickly and fixing those problems with minimal delay” and the new faculty member spends less time
(and stress) trying to figure out how to do things. Finally, several chairs appreciated the organizational structure that the conveners bring to the meeting.

**Several of the chairs commented on Launch’s value in introducing the junior faculty to the University and preparing them for success.** One noted that the program provides an “introduction to how things work and connecting [the junior faculty] with others across campus.” Another agreed that it provides a mechanism for meeting faculty outside their home departments and is of critical value in developing a sense for the new faculty member that they are part of a community. Moreover, the process ensures that critical issues are addressed and provides “an opportunity to list and track important matters for the [junior faculty member’s] first year.

In addition, the chairs noted that the launch committee made the new faculty member feel supported and complements what the departments do in terms of mentoring.

**ADVICE FOR IMPROVING THE LAUNCH PROGRAM**

Fewer of the chairs has suggestions for things about the Launch Program that could be changed or improved. Seventeen provided suggestions; eight specifically reported that they had no recommendations.

Several of the chairs mentioned issues related to the timing of meetings that could be improved. Some indicated that the meetings, at least for some faculty, were too frequent after the first two or three meetings. Others founds the meetings too long or repetitive in terms of the material that was discussed. A few noted that it was sometimes difficult to schedule meetings.

Some of the chairs’ comments addressed the content of the meetings. A few mentioned that a good deal of information was being relayed to the new faculty members and some of them appeared overwhelmed by it. Making expectations clear, including that the committee is advisory and not evaluative, could help. Some suggested that generating a list of questions and answers that arose in previous Launch meetings and/or having a way to easily identify the issues that need to be discussed at a given meeting could be helpful to the process. Another suggested having the new faculty members come to the first meeting with a list of questions and/or topics they would like advice on. Finally, one noted that it was important to manage the new faculty member’s expectations in terms of problem-solving and that delays shouldn’t prohibit them from doing their best to get their work done.

Some expressed concern about the mentoring process more generally. This included both the mentoring within Launch as well as the transition from Launch to the department mentoring program. One chair commented about Launch that it is the department chair’s role on the committee to manage the different interests of the new faculty member; however, another pointed out that if the chairs aren’t doing their job it’s good to have somebody, like the Launch committee, assuming this responsibility. Another recommended including in the last meeting an introduction for the new faculty member to the mentoring plan to follow.

Finally, one raised a question about the role of the chair on the committee, suggesting that it may not be necessary for the chair to attend every meeting (particularly if the department has several new faculty to launch); however, this chair also thought having the chair present, at least occasionally, may make him or her more approachable to the junior faculty member.
Finally, we were particularly interested in understanding from the chairs if they felt their faculty and their departments would benefit if the Launch program continued. Almost all (24 of 28) of the chairs unconditionally and enthusiastically agreed that it was important for Launch to continue. One commented, “It is much better than just having the usual department mentoring.” Another agreed that “it is even helpful to us—a department with a good mentoring program. It would be even more helpful to many departments that do not have a local mentoring system.” Others noted the program’s unique and specific value to the new faculty members. One commented that “it helps a lot with integration of faculty within the greater U-M context.” Another noted, “Only ADVANCE can bring together individuals from outside the new faculty member’s department. This is one of the best features of the Launch committee.” A third reported that the “process is very effective for an Assistant Professor. It ensures that they get accurate and consistent information.”

The four remaining chairs were not negative about the Launch program. Two felt the new faculty members were in a better position to assess the value of the program. One expressed concern about the chair’s time commitment on the committee in the context of the increasing workload for chairs.