Launch Program Evaluation Summary: AY2013-2015
Conveners

In May, 2013 the ADVANCE Program initiated Launch with a pilot program of eight newly appointed assistant professor faculty in STEM fields in the 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 chair, 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 ADVANCE conveners, with examples of their responses drawn from the four conveners in the pilot year, the 15 conveners in 2014, and 13 in 2015.

BEST THINGS ABOUT THE LAUNCH COMMITTEE

Thirty of the 32 conveners responded to this question. All of them remarked on the value of the program for the launchees. In particular, several pointed to the quality of the advice that launchees receive through the program. One commented, “You put four good people in a room, they’re going to give helpful advice. The things we talked about were very useful. Lots and lots of good advice was given.” Another agreed, “The launchee gets exposed to a lot of people with a ton of experience—so they can get out on the learning curve quickly.”

Many also commented on the value of having multiple and interdisciplinary perspectives from different faculty. One noted, “They see that not everybody in the room always agrees on everything, and they see that sometimes it takes multiple people.” In addition, several stressed the ways in which networks and collaborations were facilitated through the committee. One commented, “Our new hires have research interests that are multidisciplinary. Having mentors who bring experience outside the discipline has tangible benefits in helping new faculty make [necessary] connections.” Another noted a collaborative project with the launchee and several of the committee member that was generated directly from the Launch meetings.

Several emphasized the value of the process for conveying the advice, “We dealt with issues that were real, substantive, bothersome issues for the new faculty member. Could they have found this information by other means? Yeah. But the fact that there are senior people giving them the information carried a lot of weight.” Another agreed, “It’s very systematic advising, not catch-as-catch-can advising like we so often have here.” Several noted that the Launch Committee was a critical vehicle for getting new faculty “up to speed quickly.”

Beyond specific advice, some noted that the committee provides the launchee a framework for understanding the University and what being a faculty member is all about. One noted that the Program, “integrates the new faculty member into the University. They meet people, they make friends, they learn about administrative hurdles. They also learn about the many opportunities available, but not necessarily easily apparent.” Another commented that the breadth of the committee
provided “connections to other parts of the campus and advice on how to navigate different geographies that they wouldn’t otherwise have had.”

Many valued that launchees were able to ask difficult questions in the context of the committee, and that they also heard others ask those questions on their behalf. One commented, “You don’t know what you don’t know.” In addition, the advice launchees heard normalized their concerns. One described a launchee who was very concerned about classroom performance.

[One launchee] was very appreciative knowing that [they were] not alone, that we’d experienced similar frustration [with teaching], and that there were ways to cope that we could offer. At the end of the term [the launchee] said, ‘I’m a much better instructor now.”

Several of the faculty conveners stressed the importance of the committee’s role as advocates and supporters for the launchees, as well as the chair. Some noted that they helped the new faculty member in important discussions and negotiations with their departments. One described the meetings as “an opportunity for a structured, moderated dialogue between the launchee and chair.” Another further commented that it “sets a good tone for their interactions with their chair and their senior colleagues for years to come.” Some described how the committee “applies pressure to ensure that a new faculty member gets off to a good start and is not forgotten.” For example, one didn’t want to think of the potential outcome for a launchee, “if we were not meeting monthly to strategize and advocate behind the scenes.” Similarly, several mentioned the value of the Launch committee specifically for the chair. “It helped keep [the chair] on track. And we resolved a lot of problems that [the chair] didn’t have to be concerned with.”

Other benefits the conveners pointed to were that the committee:
- is extremely useful for ensuring lab space is up and running quickly;
- provides a smooth transition to the launchee’s mentor(s) after the initial year;
- is for all new hires, thus, no stigma is attached to participating;
- gets the new faculty members started thinking, even before they get here, about all the things they have to do as soon as they get here;
- members make themselves available to the launchee for individual meetings during the first year as well as after the formal meetings have ended.

Finally, several of the conveners noted the benefits they personally experienced from participating on a Launch committee. Some appreciated “making connections, both with the new faculty and some of the other senior faculty” and learning more about the new faculty member’s research interests as well as those of their senior colleagues. Others “liked getting to learn about the way things work in other parts of campus.” Many simply enjoyed being able to be helpful to their new colleagues through what several described as a “terrific program.” One of the conveners observed that a particular value of the committee is that it “shows the care that faculty have for other faculty—it shows a lot of institutional investment in [their] career[s].”

ADVICE FOR IMPROVING THE LAUNCH PROGRAM

Far fewer conveners had suggestions for changes to the program; 17 made suggestions and 11 specifically indicated that they had no recommendations. Several conveners, especially those in the pilot program described difficulties scheduling the meetings. Proactively managing the scheduling seemed to help. “The scheduling is a difficulty, but to me the solution was at the end of every meeting
we just set up the next one, and that worked. People did not cancel.” Others suggested meeting without a full complement or over the phone if someone was travelling. However, there was consensus that it was important for the chair and the internal department member, as well as the convener, to be present at every meeting.

Several suggested some flexibility in terms of how often the committee met. One commented,

> As time went on we didn’t feel the need to meet as often. It did seem so productive up front to have all kinds of things and advice to share, and then as time when on, it seems like we were rehashing some of the same things, but were filling in more details.

Another noted that the content of discussions changes over time,

> At first I was concerned that we wouldn’t have enough to talk about and we would be done with the launch by December. But the conversation changes; it was the winter months that we finally got around to discussing the things that were most pressing to them. At the beginning they’re so flooded with logistics. And it’s important that we talk about that, because we can help them stomp out those fires quickly. But they’re not launched. They’re only set up to finally know what they should be asking about. But I think it is important to flip the conversation to the launchee and say now, ‘Drive the bus. What do you want to talk about here?’

A few expressed concerns about members’ commitment to and attendance at meetings. One felt it was critical for the chair to signal to the launchees the importance of the meetings. Similarly, some indicated that the faculty member external to the department felt less helpful to the committee and often that individual had the most difficulty making the meetings. Nevertheless, all agreed that that person provided a valuable viewpoint and should be included to the extent possible. One commented, “It’s still important to have somebody from the outside. They had their own piece of advice that complemented the chair and the internal senior faculty. So I felt that part was definitely worth keeping.”

Finally, a few indicated that it was important to provide launchees the opportunity, if wanted, to meet one-on-one outside the committee meetings to express concerns or worries without other department members present. Similarly, one emphasized that it was important to have a strong voice on the committee to keep other members “in check.”