

Exit Interview Study: Executive Summary
University of Michigan
ADVANCE Program
May 2016

Introduction

Since 2011 the ADVANCE Program has conducted exit interviews annually with tenure track faculty who choose to leave UM for other positions. This report draws on faculty who voluntarily left between September 1, 2009, and June 1, 2014. The total sample of faculty meeting these eligibility requirements was 215, and 110 of these faculty agreed to participate (51% response rate).

Of the 110 faculty interviewed over the four-year period, nearly half of the faculty interviewed were female, and one quarter were faculty of color. Most were associate or full professors at the time that they left the university, and the remaining one third were assistant professors. One-third of respondents were from the Medical School or one of the smaller colleges/schools within the university; fewer previously held appointments in the College of Engineering (9%) or the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts (19%). The sample is similar to the pool from which it is drawn on these dimensions.

The interviews asked about the circumstances under which faculty chose to leave UM, the factors they considered in their decisions, how their current situations compare to their UM positions, and their assessments of various aspects of their experience at UM. We describe faculty members' views of their motives and experiences, as they reported them to us. However, we recognize that people are normally strongly motivated to justify decisions they have made and that this motivation inevitably affects these results in ways we cannot assess directly.

Decision to Leave

Most faculty left UM for another academic position; a very few moved to industry, private practice, or the government. Two-thirds of faculty were recruited by another institution, and one-quarter reported that they actively pursued other positions. Nearly all of these faculty discussed the offer they received from their current institution with people at UM; however, junior faculty were less likely than senior faculty to discuss the offer with their UM department chair.

Nearly half of the faculty in this sample indicated that the decision to leave was made gradually over time. One third decided to leave UM while negotiating with their current institution (faculty of color were more likely to report this). The turning point for these faculty involved experiences related to promotion or leadership opportunities, structural changes in the department or specific negative events, including experiences of bias or discrimination. Women and junior faculty were more likely to report the latter.

Half of the faculty interviewed would have liked to stay at UM (men and senior faculty were more likely to report this) and another one-quarter could have been persuaded to stay. The remaining were not interested in staying under any circumstances.

Reasons faculty provided for their decision to leave UM included the follow broad categories: improving their own career opportunities (e.g., leadership opportunities, better prospects for research, increased salary, and promotions), improving the situations for their partners and/or families, and specific negatives about UM (e.g., poor department climate, teaching load) and/or positives about their new institution (more prestige, non-academic setting). Women and junior faculty were more likely than men and senior faculty to be cite negative climate at UM. Faculty of color were more likely than white faculty to report their dissatisfaction with teaching as a factor that contributed to their decision.

Counter Offer

More than one-third of the faculty reported receiving a counter offer from UM (there was a trend for faculty of color to have been more likely than white faculty to report this). Half of all interviewees did not receive a counter offer--in a few cases UM expressed an interest in developing a counter offer, but the faculty member indicated that a counter was not of interest.

More than half of the faculty who received counter offers agreed that the offers could have been improved to have retained them. Dual career support, salary increases, reduced teaching, additional research resources, and a leadership position were mentioned as things that might have encouraged them to stay. Compared to their male colleagues, women were less likely to report that leadership opportunities would have made a difference, and were more likely to indicate that a better working environment or resolution of joint appointment issues would have encouraged them to stay. Faculty of color were more likely than white faculty to report that better support for research might have changed their decisions.

Among the faculty who did not receive counter offers, half reported that a counter offer might have encouraged them to stay; most commonly cited as desired aspects of a counter offer included: higher salary, tenure or promotion, and leadership opportunities. Fewer cited support for research, more flexibility in workload, or an opportunity for their partner. In contrast, nearly one-third of those who received a counter-offer indicated that they would not, or could not, have stayed at UM.

Suggestions of ways to improve the counter offer development included improved communication with faculty and increased transparency about the process (in terms of timeline and how decisions are made), a faster timeline, and more frequent use of pre-emptive retentions.

View of University of Michigan

Faculty were asked to rate their level of satisfaction on several dimensions of their experiences as faculty at UM. The most highly rated aspects were quality of undergraduate students at UM, treatment by department colleagues, kinds of courses they were asked to teach, and teaching load. Also highly rated were informal mentoring, space and facilities, nature and amount of service they were asked to provide, and research support services. Women's ratings were lower than men's across several areas. Faculty of color were more satisfied with the formal mentoring they received and departmental expectations and feedback on their performance; they were less satisfied with the quality of undergraduate students and with the Ann Arbor area (e.g., diversity, local economy, amenities).

Most interviewees reported that their colleagues were the best aspect of their UM department. Several also mentioned the research conducted in their former departments, the University in general (such as availability of resources and diversity of disciplines represented across campus), and students as strengths. In contrast, they most frequently cited departmental leadership, specific faculty colleagues, or a general lack of collegiality as the worst aspects. Several faculty respondents also mentioned administrative and bureaucratic issues, resources and administrative supports, departmental climate, and poor research fit as the worst features of their former UM department.

There was a trend for women to be more likely than men to cite faculty mentoring and support as the worst feature of their former UM department. Junior faculty were more likely to report that mentoring was the best feature of their former department (trend); they were also more likely to identify the negative climate as the worst feature of their former UM department.

Nearly all interviewees indicated that they would recommend that others take a job at UM. Most also reported that they would encourage others to take a position in their former UM departments. Of those who indicated they would not encourage others to take a position in their departments, many expressed concerns about the lack of support for research and scholarly professional development, a negative departmental climate, or poor leadership. Women were less likely to report positive leadership and faculty of color were less likely to report supportive and collegial colleagues in their departments.

Current Position

Nearly all faculty reported that leaving UM was a good move on a personal level and most indicated that it was also good for them professionally. Junior faculty were less likely than senior faculty to report that the move was good professionally. Most frequently reported as better for them was availability of research resources, collaborators, and research fit. Several also mentioned leadership opportunities, quality of the department overall, geographic location of their current institution, salary and other financial resources, and quality of students and teaching load.

In contrast, some identified research productivity and/or opportunities overall as worse in their new position. A few also reported that the geographic location, students and teaching load expectations, administrative supports, salary, and national reputation of their current institution are worse.

Women were more likely than men to report that the quality of the department overall and the climate are better at their current institution, but were less likely to describe their home life as better. There was a trend for faculty of color, compared to white faculty, to describe their home life as better at their current institution. Junior faculty were more likely to report better mentoring and a better fit overall. In contrast, they were more likely to report fewer research-related resources and less prestige at their current institution.

Suggestions for Improved Policies and Procedures at UM

Faculty were asked if there were any particular university or departmental practices or policies that they thought should be changed or implemented to improve the situation for faculty at UM. Suggestions included clearer and more transparent expectations and criteria for tenure and promotion, changes in leadership, improvements in mentoring processes, increased administrative accountability and transparency, improved work environment and climate, addressing dual career needs, streamlining administrative or bureaucratic systems, better resources and salaries, and using pre-emptive retention offers to retain faculty. Junior faculty were more likely to suggest improvements to the climate and the tenure system.

Implications of Findings

Many of the experiences cited by faculty as motivating their departure from UM are consistent across gender, race-ethnicity, and tenure status (e.g., research support and leadership opportunities). Expansion of and equitable access to supports for research, funding, and opportunities for advancement are logical institutional responses to these concerns. Some factors, such as department climate, mentoring, and the quality of departmental leadership appear to be especially important for women, faculty of color, and junior faculty. Efforts to improve the climate and provide better mentorship and administrative transparency may be particularly instrumental in retaining these faculty. In addition, it appears that dissatisfaction with their teaching and the quality of undergraduate students at UM, as well as with the Ann Arbor area (including degree of diversity) coupled with reports that their home life is better at the current institution, are important factors for faculty of color in particular, suggesting that it may be easier to be a person of color both within and outside the classroom in the new communities.

Finally, quite a few faculty reported that, from their perspective, outside offers were not fully countered by UM, or counter offers were too slow in coming to be effective. Perhaps a logical institutional response would be to ensure that all layers of decision-makers understand that external offers need to be considered seriously, and they must assess the relative costs of losing faculty rather than fully countering; moreover, it may be important to alter that perception by altering the process (speed, courtesy, and expression of importance to UM) of countering rather than its specific content.