

# Lack of awareness limits use of flexible career policies

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To attract and maintain a diverse, qualified academic workforce, institutions of higher education should have—and promote—policies to help balance career and family life, according to an article published by UC Davis researchers in the June 2013 issue of *Academic Medicine*.

Policies allowing medical school faculty to care for family while advancing their careers are more available today than ever before, the authors said in the article. Yet these policies are also underused, primarily because faculty members do not know they exist.

Based on the outcomes of a comprehensive communications intervention conducted at UC Davis, the authors outline tactics that are effective in increasing awareness of family-friendly career policies.

"Brochures or web pages about work-life balance are a good first step but not enough," said Amparo Villablanca, a professor at UC Davis School of Medicine and lead author of the paper. "It truly takes a culture shift where accommodations for family care are clearly communicated, encouraged, supported and accepted to ensure that family-friendly policies are both understood and utilized."

In addition to being a leader in [cardiovascular medicine](#), Villablanca has a long track record of encouraging organizational changes that support women who are committed to both their careers and their families. She and Lydia Howell, chair of the Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine, and Laurel Beckett, chief of the Division of Biostatistics in

the UC Davis Department of Public Health Sciences, were one of just 14 teams nationwide who received grants from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) for research on factors that influence the careers of women. The goals were to identify ways to overcome gender differences in career paths and needs and to stem the attrition of women from science and engineering.

The NIH funding was a response to the [National Academy of Science](#) report that showed, despite gender parity in scientific undergraduate and graduate programs, representation of women decreases with each step up the tenure-track and academic leadership hierarchy. The report also suggested that providing more support for working parents could be an effective strategy to keep women in the academic pipeline.

Villablanca and colleagues' initial research focused on evaluating the influence of family-friendly policies on the career trajectories and success of women faculty in medicine. As part of their investigation, they surveyed more than their UC Davis colleagues in the School of Medicine, School of Veterinary Medicine and College of Biological Sciences and found very low awareness of the university's flexible career policies, which have in been place for more than two decades.

"UC Davis has been a leader and national model for career policies that allow faculty to care for family while maintaining their career paths," said Villablanca. "It was disappointing to discover that so many of our faculty didn't even know the opportunity existed."

Those who were aware of the policies were not inclined to use them due to confusion over eligibility, fear of limiting their promotional opportunities, reactions of colleagues or concerns about increasing their colleagues' workloads.

Villablanca and her colleagues then developed and implemented in 2010

and again in 2011 a comprehensive promotional effort focused on raising awareness of the availability and benefits of flexible career policies and reducing barriers to their use. Their approach, reported in the current article, included:

- Offering faculty workshops and grand rounds presentations
- Designating faculty liaisons in each department to provide guidance on family-friendly career policies
- Making presentations to leadership
- Providing broad, current resources via public and internal websites, social media and print communications

The overall theme of all these activities was to present career-flexibility policies as something faculty were entitled to and an important part of their academic career satisfaction.

A follow-up survey showed that the intervention was effective in significantly increasing both awareness of flexible-career policies and in reducing barriers to their use, especially barriers related to overburdening colleagues.

"It's clear that gaining acceptability, comfort with and willingness to use career-flexibility options takes a culture-shifting communications campaign," said Howell. "Organizations need to do more than just adopt policies. They need to demonstrate a clear commitment to them as well."

Villablanca, Howell and Beckett will conduct another assessment in the fall of 2013 to determine if their communications program led to increased professional and personal satisfaction and improved retention for UC Davis faculty. Their hope is to develop a model for [policy](#) development and communication that could be applied in a variety of settings.

"Our intervention could be useful well beyond UC Davis and academia for organizations interested in strategic tools that can help attract and retain top talent," said Villablanca.

**More information:** "Improving Knowledge, Awareness and Use of Flexible Career Policies Through an Accelerator Intervention at the University of California, Davis, School of Medicine", *Academic Medicine*, 2013.

Provided by UC Davis

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