Gender Equity as Institutional Transformation

THE PIVOTAL ROLE OF "ORGANIZATIONAL CATALYSTS"

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Research shows that the "glass ceiling" in academia is kept in place by everyday interactions occurring across the entire spectrum of faculty life. At each step of the continuum from graduate student to full professor, women face small differences in treatment, and these small disadvantages accumulate to produce large disparities in status and opportunity (Valian 1999; Cole and Singer 1991). These differences in treatment often occur without anyone noticing. They reflect unconscious biases reinforced by cultural patterns and shared by men and women alike. Within highly informal, unexamined, and poorly managed decision-making processes, these biases operate unchecked at many pivotal points of academic advancement (Bauer and Baltes 2002; Etzkowitz, Kemelgor, and Uzzi 2000). Women also face structural barriers to full participation, such as work-family policies and underinclusive indicators of academic promise. Organizational culture and processes preserve these exclusionary policies, without ever inviting scrutiny of their validity (Trower 2004).

Women's full participation in the academy cannot be achieved without examining these multilevel decisions, cultural norms, and underlying structures (Ely and Meyerson 2000). Change thus requires a process of institutional mindfulness. This means enabling careful attention to decisions that ultimately determine whether women and men of all races will have the opportunity to thrive, succeed, and advance. Research shows that self-consciousness about the processes, criteria, and justifications for hiring and promotion decision making minimizes the expression of cognitive bias (Bielby 2000; Fiske 2004). Institutional mindfulness also requires the capacity to institutionalize ongoing learning—learning about problems revealed by examining patterns of decision making over time, as well as about creative ways of addressing those problems, advancing participation and improving academic quality. Finally, it entails building incentives for improving inclusiveness and achieving excellence into ongoing governance systems (Sturm 2001).

Universities' decentralized governance systems complicate efforts to achieve institutional mindfulness. Power is highly distributed in academia, and change is often difficult to achieve (Birnbaum 1988; Trower 2004). However, the building blocks of systemic change are present in many institutions. There are influential faculty concerned about gender and racial inequality who are in positions to press for change but lack adequate occasions or incentives to do so. There are research and advocacy institutions with accumulated knowledge and networking relationships but limited access to those in positions of power. There are concerned insiders in positions of administrative responsibility who see the relationship of gender to deeper institutional efficacy and legitimacy but feel powerless to change the status quo. There is a substantial and accessible knowledge base about the status of women, the causes of women's underparticipation, and the strategies enabling women to succeed, but that specialized knowledge does not reach everyday decision-makers. There are underutilized professional networks that could bring faculty from different fields and institutions together on a regular basis.

Systemic change occurs through connecting the knowledge and action of these engaged participants. Changing institutional climates requires everyday leadership in the various nodes of decision making that determine faculty advancement (Meyerson 2001). Interventions to increase gender equity can design roles and processes self-consciously intended to produce these transformative synergies. This institutional approach lies at the core of a recent National Science Foundation initiative called ADVANCE. ADVANCE provides institutions with "institutional transformation grants" designed to increase women's participation in academic science by engaging universities in a process of institutional self-analysis, cross-institutional learning, and change.

A key aspect of ADVANCE's strategy involves the development of a new role that has proven to be pivotal in enabling systemic change. NSF has parlayed the familiar position of principal investigators into a role that places individuals with knowledge, influence, and credibility in positions where they can mobilize institutional change. Because of their
core function of mobilizing change at the intersection of different systems, we have called these individuals "organizational catalysts." Organizational catalysts are individuals who operate at the convergence of different domains and levels of activity. Their role involves connecting and leveraging knowledge, ongoing strategic relationships and collaborations, and forms of accountability across systems. The role is not unique to ADVANCE; organizational catalysts can be found in many settings. ADVANCE, however, places them at the center of its implementation strategy and builds their knowledge and ability to mobilize others into the role.

This chapter uses a case study of a large research institution with an ADVANCE grant to analyze the role of organizational catalysts as change agents and to consider the role's applicability in other institutional settings. It first introduces NSF ADVANCE's institutional transformation approach and the "organizational catalyst" role as a crucial component of the dynamic enabling institutional change. It then examines how organizational catalysts are playing a central role within the University of Michigan ADVANCE initiative—what they do, who they are, how they do their work, and why they are so important to an effective institutional transformation strategy. Finally, the chapter considers the implications of the organizational catalyst role beyond ADVANCE.

NSF ADVANCE as an Institutional Intermediary

Prompted in part by the 1999 MIT report documenting women's marginalization and underparticipation (Massachusetts Institute of Technology 1999), NSF undertook an analysis of its gender programs and determined that its individual grant strategy was not making a dent in the problem. This analysis led NSF to adopt ADVANCE—a foundation-wide effort "to catalyze change that will transform academic environments in ways that enhance the participation and advancement of women in science" (National Science Foundation 2001).

NSF ADVANCE does not prescribe specific programs, strategies, or outcomes. It instead promotes a methodology for strategically connecting knowledge and action to address identified problems. NSF does this through funding proposals for institutional transformation that articulate a conceptual framework, build on existing knowledge, present a workable plan based on analysis of institutional data, and document an effective implementation strategy (National Science Foundation 2001, 2005).

It then insists on ongoing monitoring and assessment of these interventions, relying heavily on collaboration and information sharing among ADVANCE institutions, along with peer review. It extends its impact to the larger field by requiring grantees to make much of their learning publicly available, by infiltrating the knowledge networks that universities operate within, by connecting ADVANCE grantees with their counterparts in other institutions, and by encouraging participation of key institutions in their programs.

The University of Michigan is one of nineteen institutions receiving institutional transformation grants in the first two rounds of funding. Through ADVANCE, Michigan has developed an integrated series of individual, departmental, and campus-wide initiatives. Individual initiatives include faculty career advising, research funds providing support for key transitions, and networks supporting women scientists and engineers. Departmental initiatives support departments aiming to improve their climates through departmental transformation grants and self-studies. Campus-wide initiatives include interactive theater interventions and a program called Strategies and Tactics for Recruiting to Improve Diversity and Excellence (STRIDE).1

This committee provides information and advice about practices that will maximize the likelihood that well-qualified female and minority candidates for faculty positions will be identified, and, if selected for offers, recruited, retained, and promoted at the University of Michigan. The committee works with departments by meeting with chairs, faculty search committees, and other departmental leaders involved with recruitment and retention.2

Less discussed but perhaps even more significant, Michigan's ADVANCE grant institutionalized a structure that, from the outset, harnesses the knowledge and social capital of individuals with a track record for effective problem solving. ADVANCE enables universities to locate individuals with legitimacy, influence, and commitment to promoting change, and to equip them with resources, visibility, access, and legitimacy.

The principal investigator (PI) role, which NSF builds into its award process, is the linchpin in the development of this institutional design. Like the conventional principal investigator, ADVANCE PIs collaborate with a research team to develop experiments in their institutions, analyze their effects, and report on them. They wield the responsibility,
accountability, and legitimacy built into the PI status. But NSF recasts the PI role to take account of the systemic dimensions of the gender equity project. NSF ADVANCE reinvents the PI role as a research-based change agent within the institution. The next section examines this innovative and pivotal role as it has unfolded at the University of Michigan.

Introducing Organizational Catalysts: Connecting Domains, Discourses, and Knowledge

In 2002, Mel Hochster, a distinguished University of Michigan mathematician and member of the National Academy of Sciences, won the Margaret and Herman Sokol Faculty Award in the Sciences. One of the University’s most prestigious honors, the award carried with it a widely attended public lecture—typically used as an opportunity to celebrate the recipient’s eminence and to feature pathbreaking research. Hochster chose this occasion to speak to a room full of mostly male scientists and mathematicians about gender bias. Hochster’s award lecture, entitled “Women in Mathematics: We’ve Come a Long Way—or Have We?” discussed the situation of women mathematicians and other women scientists, partly from a historical perspective and partly in terms of problems that exist today. He described “overwhelming evidence of gender bias in the evaluation of candidates and in many other contexts. Even when procedures seem to be objective and fair, studies have shown that gender bias is significant and pervasive.” Hochster’s speech was described by many as an important turning point in the institution. In the words of one high-level administrator involved in gender equity at Michigan:

People walked out of that meeting like they’d been thunderstruck. “I had never thought about this gender thing before . . .” It was that he, who was a member of the National Academy of Science, gave this talk. . . . It was the drama of his gesture that really affected people. The information had been out, and he just had such a huge impact. Why? The National Academy of Science gets it. He gives over this important occasion for himself. Instead of talking about math, he talked about the problem of gender in science. It was hugely important—an amazing lesson in how this progresses.

How did this prominent mathematician become such an effective gender mobilizer? Hochster was energized by becoming part of STRIDE—a group of scientists who used the methodology of scientific research and data to educate themselves and then others about the dynamics, causes, and possible remedies for subtle gender bias. His speech dramatically illustrates the power of placing individuals with social and intellectual capital in positions to mobilize learning and change. But Hochster did not become an “organizational catalyst” alone or by accident. His role resulted from the efforts of others playing a similar role, only on a broader scale. More specifically, the ADVANCE PI and steering committee developed STRIDE as part of a broader strategy to leverage the pedagogical capacities of strategically located individuals throughout the institution.

This section is based on a case study of the ADVANCE program at the University of Michigan in order to develop a theory about how organizational catalysts are created and how they are able to motivate organizational change. The observations about organizational catalysts at Michigan should hold true elsewhere as well, allowing for variation in the specific details of their roles within their own institutions. To conduct the study, a research team interviewed faculty, department chairs, deans, administrators, STRIDE members, and participants in ADVANCE at Michigan. They were asked to describe their experience with ADVANCE, including key turning points, and the programs and interventions that were most and least successful. There was a strong consensus that the role I have called “organizational catalysts,” particularly the principal investigators, steering committee, and STRIDE, were the linchpin of ADVANCE. For many, these organizational catalysts were the most important factors in what was perceived as ADVANCE’s initial success. Most of those interviewed did see an improvement in search and hiring patterns, the culture of the institution, the involvement of women in positions of influence, and the overall academic environment. They viewed these changes as fragile and incomplete, but as dramatic nonetheless, particular compared to the impact of previous gender equity initiatives involving science and engineering. Although it is both premature and beyond the scope of this study to draw any conclusions about ADVANCE’s impact, independent interim assessments confirm that the program has increased the hiring of faculty women in the sciences, improved the institutional environment for women, and in the process, fostered improvements in overall policies and governance at the University.
NSF casts the PIs of the ADVANCE projects they fund as the conceptualizers, planners, coordinators, conveners, and mobilizers of the institutional transformation process. In the context of ADVANCE, the planning stage is built into the grant application process. At Michigan, a group of five individuals took responsibility for assembling individuals and institutions that had been involved in promoting gender and racial equity, as well as leaders identified as crucial participants in an effort to institutionalize change. These five included the deans of the three colleges employing the largest number of science and engineering faculty and an associate provost (who serves as co-PIs), and the director of the Institute for Research on Women and Gender, who serves as the project’s PI. All were already members of a university-wide Committee on Gender in Science and Engineering, and all held administrative roles that would allow them to make an impact. These five became the project’s steering committee. They created working groups that included advocacy group members, experts on gender and race, and administrators willing to commit themselves to increasing women’s participation. The project’s administrative staff also pulled together studies documenting what was already known about the status of women and people of color at the institution, and undertook additional preliminary studies to provide information necessary to prepare a proposal. They canvassed the available research on the barriers to women’s advancement and effective strategies for addressing these barriers, as well as the voluminous reports from other institutions that had conducted gender and racial analyses. They proposed an integrated strategy aimed at transforming people’s understanding of how gender operates, and increasing departments’ capacity to attract, retain and advance successful women in academic science (NSF at the University of Michigan 2002).

As organizational catalysts, the PI and other steering committee members occupy a hybrid role, one that requires knowledge, legitimacy, and social capital to get powerful people to the table, include the steering committee in decisions, and allow the steering committee to influence their practices. Organizational catalysts must also be able to instill hope and trust in groups that have become skeptical about the possibility of change. The background and qualifications articulated by ADVANCE and possessed by the role’s occupants have a crucial part in equipping them to undertake the steering committee’s multiple duties. They tend to be respected scholars with administrative experience within the department or the university who are known for their commitment to academic quality and equity. They often come into the position having played a significant role as a mentor to graduate students and junior faculty, and having worked with faculty and administrators at different levels within the University. They are highly respected faculty bringing considerable knowledge, administrative experience, working relationships, and professional legitimacy to their role as steering committee members.

The Tools and Strategies of Organizational Catalysts

I have analyzed the interviews and reports to identify the strategies accounting for the effectiveness of the PI, steering committee, and STRIDE members as catalysts of meaningful systemic change. This analysis reveals three such strategies: (1) mobilizing varied forms of knowledge to promote change, (2) developing collaborations in strategic locations, and (3) maintaining pressure and support for action.

Mobilizing Varied Forms of Knowledge to Enable Change

Organizational catalysts have access to many different methods and forms of information relevant to addressing gender issues. Social science research provides one key form of knowledge. As part of her researcher role, the PI conducts or oversees surveys and statistical studies documenting patterns in women’s participation throughout academic life. Her long-standing institutional relationships and status as an NSF PI help the steering committee gain access to data that has previously been unavailable or difficult to obtain. Their knowledge and influence enables them to gather crucial information about the micro-level decisions that accumulate to shape access, such as data on offers, work assignments, research support, and the composition of the candidate pools actually considered in a search. They can then institutionalize this data-gathering so that reliable and relevant information is routinely produced. The PI and ADVANCE staff buttress their analysis of institutional data with climate and demographic studies from other institutions. They also collate and analyze the relevant scholarly literature on how gender bias operates in evaluations of men and women, and the types of interventions proven to reduce this bias. Equipped with this multifaceted knowledge, the steering committee then develops a conceptual framework to guide the institutional transformation project. According to one interviewee:
The strength of ADVANCE here is the bringing together of the social scientists and the scientists. Having someone with [the PI's] expertise as the leader of this and the scientists and engineers also deeply involved is important. We took the approach of study from a social science perspective. What Michigan is known for as an institution is social science research—with [Institute for Social Research] ISR, and what [the PI's] expertise is.

In addition to this empirical evidence, the steering committee's prior work within the institution, along with members' extensive interactions with different constituencies around issues of gender, provide them with cultural knowledge about the institution they seek to influence. The steering committee members often spoke of their familiarity with the history leading up to current conditions, coming out of their experience working on these issues over the years. They describe knowledge of where important decisions get made, who has influence within the department, and how people interact and advance. They have access to insider knowledge of what is valued and who has power, within particular departments. This informal knowledge equips them to work effectively within departments, to enlist allies, and to head off problems before they erupt into crises.

The steering committee members' work as troubleshooters and ombudsmen provides them with informal knowledge about the breakdowns or bottlenecks affecting women in particular departments. They learn about problems stemming from unsupportive managers, dysfunctional systems, or simple lack of awareness, and are in a position to intervene at the appropriate level within the university. Their work over time and across different departments also provides information about overarching problems that require coordinated or centralized interventions. For example, a committee focusing on recruitment, retention, leadership, and career development produced information about the impact of dual careers and work-family issues on recruitment and retention. The group identified the need for systemic change to address these problems that recur at the departmental level. The involvement of high-level administrators in the committee's ongoing work facilitated a successful process of policy change and implementation:

Some of the recommendations require university involvement, i.e., day care. Some of it is college level, some departmental. We have implemented a lot of these things. We will have a training manual about recruiting for search teams to talk about strategies and how to create a diverse pool and evaluating candidates. There are big issues with dual career that we can address because we're so big, but we needed formal mechanisms to make it easier to work across the college boundaries.

Steering committee members draw on their knowledge constellation to calibrate information's form and function to the context and problem at hand. They draw on empirical data to demonstrate the existence of the problem and examples of success to demonstrate the possibility of change. They analyze their informal interactions to determine the need for more systematic research. They also draw upon qualitative information gleaned from troubleshooting to help identify the source of gender disparities evident in the demographic data. Conversely, patterns revealed by the empirical research guide how and where to focus their problem-solving interventions. The combination of methodologies permits strategic use of additional empirical research, based not only on whether the problem is well documented in the secondary literature but also on an assessment of what it will take to reach different constituencies.

The steering committee's combined responsibility for research and action may explain its extensive efforts to tailor the form of communication to particular contexts and disciplinary cultures. Members devote considerable attention to the question of how knowledge about the dynamics of gender bias can be effectively communicated to diverse (culturally, methodologically, and demographically) communities. They thus value social science research not only for what it teaches about the underlying problem, but also for its cultural authority. They proceed on the premise that data is only effective if it reaches the people who are in a position to act on that information. So the PI has observed that data must be communicated repeatedly and in many different forms.

The steering committee also uses knowledge to empower people to act, to legitimize the need for change, and to enlist the participation of key collaborators. Members enlist the help of the most effective communicators within particular settings. Social science data played a significant role in recruiting people to become active in ADVANCE. One STRIDE member described his reaction to the PI’s presentation of social science evidence as a turning point in his decision to join STRIDE:
I said no initially . . . partly I was a little bit skeptical that a committee could do anything effective. . . . But after I heard her I changed my mind and agreed to be on the committee. . . . There was a lot of information about climate at the U of M, and that made me feel that the problem was larger than I had thought. I think everyone on the STRIDE committee, as we studied the literature on gender bias, realized that the problems were larger than people thought.

Every STRIDE member interviewed emphasized that their exposure to the social science data also increased their capacity and willingness to intervene about gender. Knowledge, in the currency of science with data to support it, gave them tools, arguments, and confidence that they otherwise didn’t have. STRIDE members used the credibility of science to identify gender bias as a serious problem justifying institutional change:

They were data-driven, so it’s incredibly convincing to skeptics. In our department, people were open enough that they would come out saying, “Wow, I didn’t know that.” We had them come in again this fall, and required the search committees to be there. A lot of what they do is provide data on evaluation bias. It becomes a very scientific discussion about the evidence and the nature of the evidence. People get engaged in the substance of it as a scholarly issue. This was timed to take place directly before a search. I had specifically talked to them about letters of recommendation, and the search committee read papers on this. . . . People went back and started looking at their own letters.

The PI, along with STRIDE members, also learned through experience that, for people to internalize the information, they required adequate incentives to pay attention to it. One strategy the PI used to motivate learning involved connecting the gender equity data to core concerns of the department:

Another use for the data was to go into each department with a picture of national and local data and have a one on one conversation with the chair. . . . To get the chair’s attention, we would figure out something that bothers them. Like graduate students not going on to Ph.D.s or academic positions or attrition. It is important to hook into something that is bothering them. . . . This provided a way to reach a department where not much or nothing is happening.

With experience, STRIDE shifted its focus to target the pivot points of decision and action and the individuals directly involved in those decisions, such as active searches or looming retention issues. This made STRIDE’s information relevant, important, and immediately usable.

The steering committee members did not limit themselves to scientific modes of gathering and communicating knowledge. They developed other methods that could motivate interactions among faculty about issues that were never before recognized or discussed. One way they did this was through teaming up with a well-established teaching and research institute that used interactive theater to build knowledge:

Using data from our interviews and from many studies nationally, they developed a sketch that presents a faculty meeting discussion of a recruitment. The sketch illustrates how a variety of non-conscious schemas and gender dynamics can lead a group to . . . less than optimal decision making about hiring and other matters.

The steering committee connected the CRLT Players (see chapter 13 in this volume) to deans and faculty, thus enabling a discussion of issues that must surface as part of a process of culture change. As one participant noted:

Theater draws you in in a way that empirical data doesn’t. There’s an immediacy that you almost have to react to. It is when you get beyond resistance . . . and into the climate issues. People start talking about things in a way they haven’t talked about it before.

The steering committee also participates in awarding funds designed to encourage departmental experimentation, and use the grant-making process to influence conduct and shape priorities within departments that choose to participate. These funds have supported departmental transformation efforts that operate like mini-NSFs located within their own institution, using funding to encourage experimentation and creativity. They provide support for innovative approaches to routine practices such as recruitment, selection processes, mentoring, and faculty support. The steering committee helps develop criteria for allocating
these funds, offers technical assistance to applicants, and facilitates the process by which funding decisions are made.

Developing Collaborations in Strategic Locations

The steering committee and ADVANCE staff involved women faculty (along with their male colleagues) directly in the process of defining the focus of ADVANCE, in part as a way of mobilizing people to take action and creating a venue for women’s voice. They have institutionalized this role of connecting women to each other as a way of mobilizing their knowledge and rekindling a sense of hope and possibility. This is one example of a second overarching function served by ADVANCE. It creates new “communities of practice” among individuals who share common interests, experiences, or concerns but otherwise lack opportunities to connect. The steering committee use its role to multiply occasions for women to meet, share their experiences, develop shared conceptual frameworks to inform their problem-solving strategies, and collaborate around issues of common concern. The steering committee’s role in the formation of an informal network among the women science chairs offers one example:

There are now five women chairs of science departments campus-wide. . . . So we decided, okay, five’s a number. We could have a group. So we invited them to lunch. They all came. I said at the end of this. . . . you guys could meet on a regular basis and be a group. . . . We’ll convene you, we’ll schedule you, we’ll make the reservation, we’ll pay for lunch, but you don’t need to have us there. . . . By the time they left, they wanted monthly meetings. . . . They were eager. They used the time, they came up with dilemmas they shared with each other and got advice from one another. It was great. So they’re learning to do it. They are learning how to be a collective and how to define their own needs.

Other newly formed working relationships have put STRIDE committee members and others committed to women’s advancement in regular contact with people in power around issues directly affecting women’s advancement. One chair has worked very closely with a member of his department who is also on the executive committee and a member of STRIDE. Over time, the chair describes how he has become more mindful as a result of those interactions.

There are simple, commonsensical things that she keeps pointing out to me. We really need to make sure that we shouldn’t have an admissions committee where there is not a woman on it. We shouldn’t have a graduate committee which has advising responsibilities for students without women’s participation. [The STRIDE member is the one who is my conscience. Anything I start to do where I am not thinking, [she] points out and says, you ought to think about doing it differently. I say, whoops, you’re right.

The ADVANCE steering committee members also meet regularly with chairs, deans, and other governance actors. These meetings provide regular occasions to connect gender issues to routine decisions. The steering committee creates new collaborations as well, bringing together groups that would otherwise never interact, to come up with solutions addressing common problems. They have developed task forces and committees to integrate new understandings about gender equity and organizational improvement into policy and administrative governance. They also identify faculty in a position to exercise moral leadership, and then equip them with the tools and support to speak up when they see a problem involving gender in the course of their daily routines. They thus bolster decisions to exercise everyday leadership at key pivot points defining access and participation. The architecture of the ADVANCE initiative increases the number of these pivot points and decreases the risk of taking action. These structural innovations sustain the conditions permitting activism to flourish and leadership to emerge (Meyerson 2001; Katzenstein 1990).

The steering committee members have also become national intermediaries of institutional change. They collaborate with their counterparts at other institutions, developing best practices, metrics of effectiveness, and toolkits for intervention that can be adapted to different institutions. They evaluate each other’s programs, both informally and as site visitors and external evaluators. They are invited into institutions that are beginning the process of institutional change, where they speak publicly, share their knowledge with local leaders, and give feedback on proposed plans. They are also contributing to the field’s development by
writing in peer-reviewed journals and editing books, including the volume in which this chapter appears.

Creating Pressure and Support for Change

A third crucial role performed by organizational catalysts involves keeping the pressure on. The steering committee members have referred to themselves as burns, nudges, "articulate pains in the ass," monitors, and prodders of change. They create occasions and incentives for people in positions of responsibility to act, and for people who care about gender to press for change. They maintain the institution's focus on gender as part of its core mission. They keep problems on the front burner and help put together workable solutions, making it harder not to take action. They see their role to require them to "hold the institution's feet to the fire and make sure that it gets institutionalized."

How do organizational catalysts do this? They spot gender issues when they come up and make sure they are the subject of explicit discussion. They put issues affecting women's participation on the agenda. They help create multiple constituencies for change—constituencies who otherwise wouldn't see their interests as overlapping. They frame issues so that faculty concerned about the quality of the graduate student experience and about faculty retention join with those concerned about the climate for women and people of color to push for change. They arrange meetings with high-level administrators so that they can hear the arguments from influential faculty together with advocates for improving the institution's involvement of women and people of color. They use the evidence from the data to demonstrate the existence of the problem and construct a case for action. They use their social capital and that of others whom they have brought into the process to make it more costly to do nothing. Perhaps most importantly, the organizational catalysts help figure out what to do, and then they do the legwork to maintain the momentum so that these proposed changes actually occur. Their sustained attention to the issue and their follow-through with concrete action plans makes it much easier for high level administrators to take action.

Moving Beyond ADVANCE

The organizational catalyst role has implications well beyond ADVANCE. If the role can be institutionalized and adapted to other settings, it could become a significant element of any change initiative requiring cultural or institutional transformation. Organizational catalysts could be the cornerstones for sustaining the change process begun by ADVANCE over the long run. Like other ADVANCE institutions, Michigan is exploring whether to create a permanent position within the university administration to sustain ongoing institutional transformation. Michigan has extended STRIDE to departments beyond the scope of ADVANCE, and has committed to continuing its operation. The organizational catalyst role has also surfaced in race and gender equity initiatives undertaken by institutions acting without NSF support. Some universities have created new administrative positions with responsibilities similar to ADVANCE PIs, such as Vice Provost for Diversity Initiatives at Columbia or the Senior Vice President for Diversity and Faculty Development at Harvard (Harvard University 2003).

Institutionalizing the organizational catalyst role holds considerable promise as a means of building in ongoing institutional mindfulness and accountability. There are, however, risks attached to relying upon a permanent organizational position as a change strategy. First, there is the risk of role substitution: reliance on an institutional position in lieu of a well-researched concept and action plan. Some non-ADVANCE institutions appear to have created a high-level position to spearhead a change process without supporting the institutional self-study and strategic planning so crucial to the role's effectiveness. These initiatives may also fail to incorporate monitoring and external accountability into the role's operation. Some internally generated proxy for NSF's grant application, monitoring, and renewal process might help to assure that the organizational catalyst role remains tethered to evidence-based planning and action.

Second, there is the risk of overcentralization. The position could foster the expectation that the responsibility for change lies primarily with this administrative official. The role-occupant might also be tempted to use a top-down strategy relying on formal administrative authority and access to push through policy changes. This approach would undercut the development of shared responsibility for change, and induce passivity by faculty and administrators whose active participation is necessary for cultural and systemic change. Overcentralization also encourages deference to administrative decisions, and limits the capacity of faculty to hold the organizational catalyst accountable for her actions. Centralization of responsibility in a single individual also renders the change initiative vulnerable if the occupant of the position were to
leave. The organizational catalyst role could be structured to minimize these risks by allocating responsibilities among different people, creating participatory oversight by groups in a position to evaluate the work of the office, and requiring ongoing public reporting on the office’s activities and impact.

Finally, there is the risk of bureaucratization. Part of what makes the organizational catalyst role work is its fluidity and experimental character. PIs and STRIDE are constantly reinventing themselves to respond to changes in the environment. If the position becomes too directly intertwined with and accountable to the central administration, it risks losing its independence, its openness to adaptation, and ultimately its legitimacy. If the position’s occupants become full-time administrators for too long, they might lose scholarly credibility and access to local knowledge and thus also lose the social capital so crucial to the role’s effectiveness. Over time, the role could become routinized and divorced from a change process with adequate resources and connections to constituencies for change, and, at worse, devolve into a symbolic or toothless position. An unlimited term in an administrative position may also blunt the sense of urgency and drive that the PIs now bring to their role. The relentless questioning of the status quo, which seem so crucial to the position’s impact, may be difficult for one person to sustain over the long run, especially without a break.

The challenge is to define a long-term role that institutionalizes the experimental qualities of the organizational catalyst. The role’s effectiveness depends upon cultivating the qualities that make NSF PIs and STRIDE members so effective: professional legitimacy, insider/outside status, operation at the intersection of multiple systems, evidence-based decision making, deep knowledge of relevant contexts, and external accountability. This poses essentially an institutional design problem. The position could be structured to build in collaboration with diverse constituencies. Checks against co-optation and bureaucratization could be achieved by establishing rotating and shared positions, which might also make it easier to recruit high-status faculty for these roles. It is also important that these roles maintain independence from the central administration as well as accountability to constituencies committed to gender and racial equity, including peer institutions involved in similar work. Organizational catalysts could themselves be crucial participants in designing the expansion and institutionalization of the role, with their successors in mind.

Conclusion

This study of organizational catalysts, as conceived by NSF ADVANCE and implemented at the University of Michigan, shows the promise of this role innovation as a way to achieve the institutional mindfulness so crucial to full participation by women and people of color in the academy.

NOTES

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1. http://www.umich.edu/~advproj/about.html. For an in-depth analysis of STRIDE, see Abigail J. Stewart, Janet E. Malley, and Danielle La Vaque-Manty, "Faculty Recruitment: Mobilizing Science and Engineering Faculty," in this volume.

2. http://sitemaker.umich.edu/advance/STRIDE.

3. Case studies and reports of other institutions suggest that organizational catalysts are playing an important role in other ADVANCE programs as well (Idalia Ramos and Sara Benitez, "Advancing Women Science Faculty in a Small Hispanic Undergraduate Institution," in this volume).

REFERENCES


http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/daily/2005/05/women-faculty.pdf