

Institutional Ethnography of Women Faculty in Higher Education: Understanding Gendered Experiences and Power Dynamics

Fredricka R. Saunders
Laura J. Parson
Emily C. S. Johnson
Cailin M. Shovkopyas
Lisa R. Arnold
Rajani Ganesh Pillai
North Dakota State University

ABSTRACT

In this study, we explored the day-to-day work of women faculty members in higher education to understand the impact of various processes, policies, procedures, and discourses on their work-life balance. For this study, *faculty* includes lecturers, assistant professors, associate professors, and full professors. The term *women* encompasses individuals who identify as women, including cisgender and transgender women, to ensure inclusivity in our analysis. Utilizing feminist standpoint theory, we analyzed data collected from four focus groups to highlight the challenges and barriers women faculty encounter in balancing their professional and personal lives, with a particular focus on how privilege and power dynamics influence their academic experiences. Framed as an institutional ethnography, our analysis reveals that women faculty often struggle to balance their personal and professional responsibilities. Participants described the challenges of rigid work schedules, insufficient medical leave, and heavy and uneven workloads. These findings reinforced the need for equitable policies to create a more inclusive and empowering academic environment for women faculty members.

Keywords: institutional ethnography, women faculty, caregiving, care receiving, receiving care, uncompensated work, ideal academic worker, tenure, career advancement, feminist standpoint theory

Research suggests that women faculty members face distinct challenges impacting their career trajectories and work-life balance.¹ Researchers have documented the persistence of gender disparities in higher education and revealed the barriers that women faculty members face, which impact their path to promotion, job satisfaction, and overall career progression (Hart, 2016; Xu, 2008). For example, research has found that women faculty experience biased evaluation processes (Valencia, 2022), limited access to resources (Ceci et al., 2023), and disparities in promotion and tenure outcomes in academia (Ceci et al., 2023; Mickey et al., 2022). Workplace inequalities compound the challenges women faculty face in balancing their personal and professional lives (Mickey et al., 2022). Specifically, women faculty members struggled to achieve a satisfactory work-life balance due to the double burden of academic responsibilities and caregiving obligations (Bender et al., 2021; Breuning et al., 2021). These disparities and barriers profoundly affected the work-life balance, job security, professional development opportunities, leadership roles, and contributions to the academic community of women faculty members (Rosa, 2021). Understanding and addressing these issues is essential not only for promoting gender equity but also for creating an inclusive and diverse higher education environment that benefits all faculty members.

In this study, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of the institutional processes that organize and coordinate the experiences of women faculty, with the goal of identifying systemic issues contributing to gender disparities and their implications for work-life balance (Smith, 2005). Specifically, we began from the standpoint of women faculty at a Midwestern University (MU, pseudonym) to shed light on the underlying institutional structures that perpetuate gender inequities and hinder work-life balance in higher education. Through the lens of feminist standpoint theory (Campbell & Gregor, 2004; Smith, 2005) and intersectionality (Collins, 1998), we sought to understand how the intersection of gender with other social identities impacted the work-life balance of women faculty members. Acknowledging this intersectional perspective is important for understanding the challenges and inequalities faced by women faculty members in higher education. By examining how various social identities intersect with gender, we aimed to contribute to the research on higher education as a gendered institution (Blalock et al., 2023) and offer recommendations for creating a more inclusive and equitable academic environment.

Through this research, we aspire to contribute to the existing knowledge base on gender inequities relating to work-life balance in academia. By recognizing the complexities of women's experiences and considering the broader institutional context, our findings informed policy changes impacting women faculty members. We begin by discussing the literature on gender equity and work-life balance in academia, including the challenges and barriers that women encounter in academic settings, as well as initiatives that promote work-life balance and support. Next, we

¹ We define work-life balance as a person's capability to navigate, coordinate, or integrate their personal and professional lives in a manner that matches their intended way of life and work (Culpepper et al. 2020).

describe our IE approach, including data collection and analysis. We then present an in-depth analysis of the barriers that women faculty face, including scheduling workarounds, imbalanced workloads, and short-term medical leaves, exploring the impact of institutional practices and power dynamics. We conclude by providing recommendations for promoting gender equity and work-life balance in academia as we endeavor to create a more equitable and supportive environment for women faculty members.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender Equity and Work-Life Balance in Academic Settings

First, research suggests that gender inequities in academia make it difficult for women, especially mothers, to maintain work-life balance and scholarly productivity (Bender et al., 2022; Breuning et al., 2021; Casad et al., 2020; Mickey et al., 2022). For example, Bender et al. (2022) conducted a reflexive thematic analysis of open-ended survey responses from 51 academic mothers (faculty and graduate students) recruited globally, with the majority located in the United States, to examine how COVID-19 impacted their scholarly productivity. The study found that pandemic-related disruptions intensified the conflict between personal (parenting) and professional (academic) roles, resulting in reduced scholarly productivity, altered childcare demands, and increased emotional distress, including guilt, anxiety, and exhaustion.

Similarly, Breuning et al. their colleagues (2021) surveyed 1,003 scholars of political science and international studies (655 women, 338 men), with the majority of participants based in the United States. While both men and women perceived the COVID-19 pandemic as negatively affecting their productivity, qualitative responses revealed that women, particularly mothers, experienced greater challenges due to increased caregiving responsibilities. The authors concluded that the pandemic may widen existing gender and parent productivity gaps in academia. Mickey et al. (2022) conducted a case study of U.S. university responses to the pandemic. They found that while institutions adjusted some evaluation procedures, such as tenure delays, these changes often reinforced neoliberal ideals of the *ideal academic*. These standard disadvantages women and caregiving faculty. Finally, Casad et al. (2020) reviewed gender inequality in STEM fields. They identified systemic barriers, including unequal service loads, a lack of mentorship, and biases in performance evaluations, which hinder women's advancement and make achieving a sustainable work-life balance challenging. These studies demonstrated that structural and cultural barriers in academia continue to disadvantage women faculty, especially mothers, limiting their capacity to thrive professionally while managing caregiving responsibilities.

Challenges and Barriers that Women Encounter in Academic Settings

In addition to the work-life balance concerns faced by women in academia, scholars have also documented persistent structural barriers that hinder their professional advancement. Research suggests that gender biases and stereotypes in hiring,

evaluation, and promotion processes continue negatively impacting women's academic careers (Ceci et al., 2023; Chesak et al., 2022; Mickey et al., 2022; Ward & Hall, 2022). For example, Ceci et al. (2023) examined gender bias across six domains of academic science using meta-analytic and adversarial collaboration methods. They found that while explicit bias was reduced in some domains, such as hiring and grants, women still faced disadvantages in teaching evaluations and salary, with broader structural inequities continuing to affect career progression.

Similarly, Mickey et al. (2022) conducted a case study on faculty evaluations during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that even well-intentioned institutional changes often reinforced neoliberal assumptions about productivity, disproportionately disadvantaging women and caregiving faculty. Chesak et al. (2022) analyzed focus group data from 28 women physicians at various career stages and identified recurring barriers, including implicit bias, structural inequity, and institutional opacity, in promotion processes. Ward and Hall (2022) qualitatively synthesized tenure denial lawsuits filed by Black professors. They found that gendered racism and inconsistent application of promotion guidelines contributed to inequitable outcomes in historically white institutions. These studies demonstrated that gendered structural and cultural barriers persist in academia, limiting women's full participation and reinforcing disparities in advancement and recognition.

Challenges in Achieving a Satisfactory Work-Life Balance

Another theme that builds on these challenges is the difficulty of achieving a balance of work and life in academic settings. Research identifies long working hours, high workloads, and publication expectations as contributing factors to work-life imbalance across faculty (Blackburn, 2022; Fazal et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2023; Rosa, 2021; Shi et al., 2021). Rosa (2021) conducted a critical review of work-life balance literature in neoliberal academic contexts. The review found that institutional responses often emphasize individual responsibility rather than addressing structural or systemic barriers, reinforcing expectations of constant availability and self-management.

Fazal et al. (2022) synthesized eight qualitative studies conducted in Pakistan, focusing on women faculty in higher education. Their review reported that inflexible schedules, limited childcare provisions, and weak administrative structures hindered participants' ability to balance caregiving and academic responsibilities. Shi et al. (2021) conducted a systematic review of 27 studies examining the global experiences of women in neurosurgery. Articles included data from 25 countries and highlighted challenges such as balancing work and caregiving, advancing professionally, and accessing mentorship.

Lee et al. (2023) reviewed 20 studies on university academics in Australia and New Zealand. Their scoping review found that high workloads, performance expectations, and limited time for research were consistent sources of occupational stress. Blackburn (2022) reviewed literature published between 2020 and 2022 on women in STEM in U.S. higher education. The review reported a decrease in research productivity, an increase in caregiving responsibilities, and limited institutional support for women faculty during the COVID-19 pandemic. These studies document

the institutional and structural conditions that contribute to conflicts between academic workload and work-life balance among faculty.

Successful Initiatives to Support Women Faculty

A growing body of research has addressed these persistent challenges by examining institutional efforts to enhance work-life balance and support the career advancement of women faculty. Research suggests that institutional supports such as family-friendly policies and mentorship programs positively influence women faculty's work-life balance, job satisfaction, and career progression (Agha et al., 2017; Culpepper et al., 2020; Lester & Sallee, 2023; Llorens et al., 2021; Ocobock et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2014). For example, the University of South Carolina implemented family-friendly policies, including modified duties and flexible tenure clocks for faculty with caregiving responsibilities (Lester & Sallee, 2023). Agha et al. (2017) surveyed 625 higher education faculty members in Oman to examine the effects of work-life balance on job satisfaction and teaching performance. They found that work-personal life enhancement had a positive impact on faculty outcomes. In contrast, work interference with personal life and personal life interference with work have adverse effects on job satisfaction.

Similarly, using surveys, interviews, and reflective essays, Thomas et al. (2014) examined a peer mentoring initiative involving 42 tenured women STEM faculty at a large Midwestern research university in the United States. They found that peer mentoring circles offered both personal and professional support, enhanced participants' sense of belonging, and contributed to institutional retention efforts. Participants also utilized the mentoring structure to communicate faculty needs to leadership, resulting in policy adjustments and an expansion of mentoring support. Ocobock et al. (2021) conducted a literature review focused on mentorship in academia and presented a set of recommendations emphasizing the value of structured mentorship networks, formal mentor training, and accountability mechanisms.

Culpepper et al. (2020) conducted a study at a single land-grant university (LGU) located in a suburban area near a large urban center in the United States. The researchers used a mixed-methods approach, analyzing survey responses from 828 tenure-track faculty at this research-intensive university and examining 443 open-ended comments to explore how partner status, gender, and rank influence faculty agency in work-life balance. They found that single women associate professors experienced less institutional support and greater scrutiny in work-life decisions than married colleagues, especially those with children. Llorens et al. (2021) conducted a global perspective review to examine how gender bias manifests as a series of distinct but interconnected issues throughout the course of an academic career. Drawing on literature synthesis and insights from international workshops, they found that these biases accumulate over time, shaping disparities in publishing, funding, hiring, and recognition, particularly for women with intersecting marginalized identities. The authors outlined concrete actions at the individual, institutional, and societal levels to foster a more equitable academic environment. These studies demonstrate that institutional policies and programs, such as flexible work arrangements and structured

mentorship initiatives, can help women faculty address barriers to achieving a satisfactory work-life balance and advancing in their academic careers, while also underscoring the importance of addressing systemic inequities and the psychological impacts across diverse faculty groups.

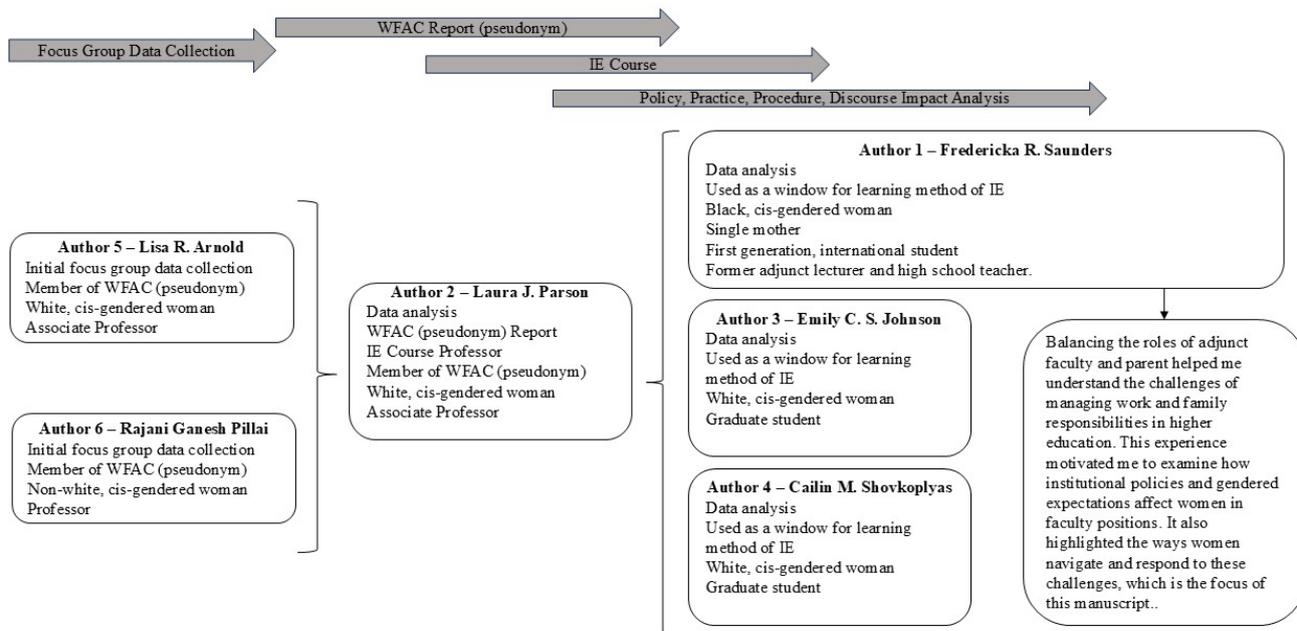
Work-Life Imbalance Relative to Men and Nonbinary Faculty

Comparing the experiences of cisgender men with those of women faculty members helps us better understand the difficulties they encounter in attaining work-life balance. Research suggests that structural expectations in academia often privilege cisgender men over women and nonbinary faculty in achieving work-life balance (Bianchi et al., 2012; Ceci et al., 2023; Mickey et al., 2022; Wright-Mair, 2023). For example, Ceci et al. (2023) conducted an adversarial collaboration that examined gender bias across six academic science domains in the United States. They found that although women's representation has improved in specific disciplines, caregiving expectations and institutional norms continue to disadvantage women's academic success and integration of work and personal life. Similarly, Mickey et al. (2022) conducted a case study of faculty evaluation systems during the COVID-19 pandemic and found that neoliberal logic persisted in U.S. higher education. These systems prioritized quantifiable productivity, undervaluing the service and caregiving work disproportionately performed by women. Bianchi et al. (2012) analyzed time-use data from U.S. households. They found that women, especially married mothers, performed nearly twice as much unpaid domestic labor as men in similar family structures. This imbalance reduced the time available for professional work and contributed to long-term disparities in academic achievement.

Nonbinary faculty face different but related challenges due to institutional structures that uphold binary gender norms. Wright-Mair (2023) employed critical qualitative inquiry to explore the experiences of racially minoritized LGBTQ+ faculty. This study found that racism, heterosexism, tokenization, and neoliberal academic norms collectively undermined participants' mental health, professional advancement, and sense of institutional belonging. Mentoring relationships, typically viewed as sources of support, often reinforced institutional expectations and symbolic labor that disproportionately burden marginalized faculty. These findings demonstrate that while cisgender men benefit from institutional norms that support uninterrupted academic focus, women and nonbinary faculty encounter systemic barriers that interfere with their ability to achieve work-life balance and sustain long-term academic careers.

In this study, we report on how institutional processes and policies influence the ability of women faculty to achieve or struggle with achieving a sustainable work-life balance. We aim to show how these systems either support or hinder women in managing both professional and personal responsibilities. By identifying policies, procedures, and practices that may hinder work-life balance, we aim to provide insights that contribute to creating a more equitable and supportive academic environment for women faculty. Understanding the intersection of work and personal life is essential for advancing gender equity in higher education, and our research addresses these important challenges.

Figure 1: Researchers' Positionality



METHOD

We employed an institutional ethnographic approach to explore the intricate dynamics of gender inequities and their effects on the work-life balance of women faculty members in higher education. We focused on exploring how institutional texts, policies, and practices shaped the daily experiences of these women. By examining the systemic issues that contribute to gender disparities and, by extension, work-life challenges, we gain a deeper understanding of the institutional structures and barriers that impact work-life balance. The institutional ethnographic (IE) framework (Smith, 2005) served as the methodological backbone of this research, aligning to understand the social organization of work and how institutional policies, practices, and procedures shape individual experiences. For example, we examined how formal parental leave policies and unwritten expectations around research productivity during leave shape women faculty's decisions about when and how to take time off after childbirth. We aim to reveal the challenges and identify areas for potential intervention within institutional structures. This study represents an effort to address gender inequities and improve the work-life balance of women faculty members in higher education, fostering a more equitable and supportive academic environment. Three questions coordinated our data analysis and subsequent data collection:

1. What is the day-to-day work of women faculty members in higher education?
2. What are the processes, policies, procedures, and discourses that coordinate the daily work of women faculty members?
3. What challenges do women faculty members in higher education face in the pursuit of work-life balance?

We collected data through focus groups and document analysis to provide context for participants' experiences. In addition to the focus groups, we conducted a targeted review of institutional documents to gain a deeper understanding of the formal structures that shape faculty experiences. We examined tenure and promotion guidelines, departmental bylaws, faculty onboarding materials, and relevant web pages from MU. These documents were publicly available or shared by participating departments and dated between 2023 and 2024. This analysis helped identify alignment or disjuncture between formal policies and the lived experiences shared during focus groups. We remained reflexive throughout the research and used the discussion to acknowledge and discuss potential biases that might impact data analysis. Our methods section ensures transparency by outlining data collection and analysis steps. As is typical of IE research, we combined focus groups and policy identification to explore the experiences and institutional structures that coordinate the work of pursuing work-life balance for women faculty.

Participants

Participants self-selected into the study by responding to campus-wide recruitment emails or targeted messages to faculty members interested in gender equity. Members of the research team sent recruitment messages using their password-protected MU email accounts, which ensured the confidentiality of participants' responses. A total

of 23 full-time employees participated in four focus groups, with 19 identifying as White, two as Asian, and one as Black or African American. We assigned each participant a pseudonym to protect their identity.² Participants had the option to choose between single-gender or mixed-gender focus groups. Each of the four focus groups (see Table 1) consisted of 5-7 tenured-track faculty members as participants.

Table 1: Faculty Participants by Racial/Ethnic Group and Focus Group

Focus Group	Number of Participants	Type of Focus Group	White	Asian	Black or African American
1	5	single-gender, women	5	0	0
2	6	single-gender women	5	1	0
3	5	single-gender women	4	1	0
4	7	single-gender, men ³	6	0	1

Data Collection

The primary data collection method included analyzing data from four focus groups at MU in March 2022, following the recruitment of participants in February 2022. Focus groups were held in person at MU for approximately one hour. Facilitators posed 5-6 open-ended questions about participants' experiences as faculty members at their current institution, which covered onboarding and orientation, promotion, leadership opportunities, career support, and gender equity policies. Facilitators audio-recorded and transcribed focus group discussions for later analysis (Creswell, 2014). We securely stored all material data on a password-protected drive. Our exploration of focus group data provided insights into individual experiences, which informed the document analysis of institutional policies, tenure guidelines, promotion criteria, and the MU web pages.

² To protect participant confidentiality, we do not include a full demographic table that links pseudonyms to specific characteristics. Due to the small size of the focus groups and the combination of personal, professional, and demographic details shared, providing such a table could increase the risk of identification.

³ An IE seeks to understand the standpoint of the population of interest, but participants are not limited to members of that group, as members of other groups, such as allies, may be able to provide insight into the institutional factors (policies, procedures, and discourses) that coordinate the activities of the population in focus. In this study, we also spoke to men faculty to provide a more nuanced understanding of the institutional factors that coordinate the work of women faculty as they pursue work-life balance.

Data Analysis

After receiving IRB, we explored the daily experiences of women faculty members at MU as a starting point to understand the integration of their work within the higher education institution (Smith, 2005). We collected entry-level and level two data. Entry-level data consisted of the day-to-day work of women faculty in balancing academic and non-academic tasks, while level two data encompassed the policies, practices, procedures, and discourses that coordinate the work identified in step one (Campbell & Gregor, 2004). We began by identifying the work-related work-life balance as described by participants in the interview responses (Campbell & Gregor, 2004). This involved a close reading of transcripts to examine how participants discussed their everyday work and how institutional expectations influenced their experiences. We labeled the work the participants identified as the explicit, formal tasks they were responsible for (such as attending meetings, teaching classes, and conducting research). Then, we labeled the unspoken work that went into that task as the invisible, emotional, and logistical labor (such as coordinating childcare, managing emotional stress, multitasking during meetings, and navigating institutional barriers for accommodations). Next, we explored the work identified in the level one data to identify the policy, practice, procedure, or discourse that coordinated that work. To identify MU and state-level policies, procedures, practices, and discourses that coordinated the work. The policies we explored included MU's policies on flexible work and remote work opportunities to assess how supportive or restrictive they are compared to state regulations that promote work-life balance. We also investigated MU's medical leave policies to understand how they support faculty during major life events and how they compare with state mandates. Finally, we analyzed practices around scheduling meetings to assess how they accommodate or conflict with faculty members' responsibilities. We scrutinized the procedures for promotion and tenure at MU to determine their impact on women faculty, especially those who may need to take leave or work flexibly.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data collection, analysis, and reporting process, we sought trustworthiness through triangulation (Creswell, 2014). Trustworthiness is important because it helps reduce bias and makes the findings more credible by using diverse types of information to support the results (Creswell, 2014). For example, we utilized multiple data sources, including focus groups and institutional records, which enabled cross-validation and data convergence, thereby enhancing the credibility and dependability of the results. Further, we ensured transparency in reporting the research process by clearly documenting the methodology, data collection procedures, and data analysis techniques (Creswell, 2014). This transparency enabled other researchers to evaluate the study's validity and potentially replicate it, further enhancing its credibility.

Ethics

We adhered to the ethical guidelines and principles of relevant institutional review boards and professional organizations. We obtained participants' informed consent prior to their involvement in the study and ensured voluntary participation by reminding them that they could withdraw from the study at any time. We protected their privacy and confidentiality by using pseudonyms and saving research files in password-protected files. We kept any identifiable information anonymized or confidential to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of the participants.

FINDINGS

Our analysis of focus group data identified the key challenges women faculty face in pursuing work-life balance. Those challenges include scheduling work around life, an imbalanced workload, and short-term medical leave. Each of these findings are discussed in detail below. As part of this, first, we discuss each challenge as described by participants (entry-level data). Then, we identify and describe the policy, practice, or procedure that coordinated the daily work and provided evidence of that theme (level two data). According to our analysis, these issues are not unique; instead, they are intricately linked to institutional policies and structures that shape the day-to-day experiences of women faculty members. We aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of how work-life balance is negotiated and where systemic changes are needed by examining these topics through participant narratives, as well as an analysis of institutional regulations. Each problem is examined in detail in the sections that follow, which also establish connections between personal experiences and the broader institutional context.

Scheduling Work Around Life

Our analysis of focus group data suggests that personal work-life integration presented a significant challenge for women faculty members, including navigating meeting times that coincided with the need to pick up children from school and care for them after school. First, participants described how attending meetings often conflicted with family commitments, leading to challenges in achieving a satisfactory work-life balance. Mary shared some of the following concerns:

Cuz' recently; this is something that I've been thinking about, like, pretty much all the meetings that I go to that relate to my leadership role are like starting at 3:00 PM. And it's really hard if you have elementary-aged kids to swing it. I've just, you know, like, someone sitting in the group has been aware of me frantically, like, I'm on the phone, I'm on Zoom, trying to get into my house, and get kids set up with snacks, and then switch over, and it feels like I'm always getting called on to contribute to the meeting right when I'm in the midst of doing that.

Mary expressed her frustration with the timing of meetings related to her leadership role, noting that the meetings typically start at 3:00 PM. As a parent of elementary-aged children, Mary faced a scheduling challenge between those meetings and

picking up her children, as schools in the Midwest operate between 8:00 am and 3:00 pm. This presented a challenge for Mary as a parent, balancing her work and the demands of parenting without support to accommodate or adjust her scheduling.

As a result, Mary described her efforts to manage responsibilities, often multitasking between phone calls, Zoom meetings, and attending to her children's needs, such as setting them up with snacks. Despite her efforts, Mary described how she would be called upon to contribute to meetings precisely when juggling these tasks, adding to the difficulty of balancing her professional and family obligations. Although University hours in the Midwest are typically between 8:00 am and 5:00 pm, there was an institutional practice of holding meetings at 3:00 pm, which created a challenge for her as she wanted to be a good employee by fully engaging in meetings and a good parent by attending to her children's needs.

Luna also shared the difficulties she faced as a single mother, particularly in balancing her responsibilities of getting her child to school and attending meetings. Meetings were frequently scheduled at 8:00 a.m., directly conflicting with her school drop-off duties. Additionally, her after-hours responsibilities, such as student discussion groups and contributing to teaching and service for promotion and tenure, created further challenges in managing her role as a full-time parent.

I would- I was going to say, I would, meeting times I was like "Eh! Meeting times." But then I realized I had a part of an institute that I'm regularly required to show up at things either 8:00 in the morning, um, or, like, discussion groups with students at 6:00 in the evening. And I don't, I, I'm a single mom, I don't, you know, and I just have to say, I just have to say, "I can't be there." I have to get my child to school, I can't just not take her to school today. Um, and I suppose they could say I should get a babysitter but I, 8:00, 8:00 in the morning is not my working time. Um, and so potentially a policy that says no required meetings can be held outside of whatever we decide the university's working hours are would be useful. I don't- I don't know what our- I don't know what the university's working hours are.

Luna reflected on her struggle to balance her responsibilities as a single mother with the demands of her professional obligations. She reflected on how she often had to attend events early in the morning or late at night as part of her institute commitments. Luna expressed frustration with the conflict between taking her child to school and attending these required meetings for her role as a faculty member. Luna emphasized that early morning meetings do not align with her schedule as a single mother. As a single mother, Luna cared for the children and ensured they got to and from school; the practice of having meetings at 8:00 am and 6:00 pm created a challenge between her desire to be a good parent and to be a good faculty member as she had to determine priority between her child and her employment.

The experiences that participants like Mary and Luna shared are directly reflected in these institutional inequities. Mary explained the challenge of juggling her meeting schedules with her parental duties, emphasizing how strict institutional procedures did not adequately consider her dual roles. Similarly, Luna's challenges as a single mother highlighted how institutional scheduling procedures unfairly burden professors with caring responsibilities, particularly regarding early morning and late evening meetings. These incidents highlight the necessity of adaptable

regulations that consider caregiving responsibilities and take into consideration the many realities of faculty life. Institutions can better support faculty members like Mary and Luna by addressing these systemic gaps and guaranteeing fair treatment across a range of personal and professional circumstances.

Imbalanced Workloads

Participants described having heavy workloads that they felt were unattainable, which led to burnout for some women faculty participants. For example, Joanne described the pressure to teach more classes, retain students, and attract students as challenges to the research expectations. Joanne voiced her concerns about the increasing workload expectations in her department, particularly regarding teaching responsibilities. She highlighted the challenges of balancing teaching, service, and research obligations, especially as a pre-tenured faculty member:

It just feels like we're expected to do more and more with less and less. Um, teaching is a huge problem in my department. We have so many PTAs, and we can't teach our classes, and we're pressured to teach more, and retain students, and attract students. And, so, my time is spent teaching and doing service, when, and that's really concerning for someone who is pre-tenure. My research is taking a real hit, and it feels like I am not doing a good job at balancing it. And that bleeds over to my home life, feeling like I'm not good at any of the roles that I'm in.

Joanne expressed worry about the impact on her research productivity due to the heavy teaching and service demands. The pressure Joanne felt to contribute to the teaching and service functions created a challenge in meeting the requirements of her position to make research contributions. Her desire to be a good faculty member and achieve tenure conflicted with her ability to manage her workload without compromising her well-being. This workload imbalance affected her professional advancement, spilled over into her personal life, and left her feeling inadequate in all roles.

To understand the policy that organizes expectations for research productivity at MU, we explored the MU Promotion, Tenure, and Evaluation (PTE) policy, which outlines the expectations for making research contributions. The MU PTE Policy stated that each faculty member would contribute high-quality research. However, while the policy described a need to meet those expectations, the document does not provide clear expectations of how much research productivity was needed to achieve a substantial contribution as measured by meeting PTE expectations. The expectation that faculty members conduct research without clearly communicating how much should be done created a challenge for women faculty members who felt they should be doing more research. However, because their expectations were not clearly outlined, they never knew how much was enough and felt pressure to keep pushing to achieve an unclear baseline. The policy creates a challenge for faculty members who want to be effective, receive promotion and tenure, and achieve a work-life balance.

Short-Term Medical Leave

Women faculty described challenges with requesting and receiving accommodations for parental leave. For example, Violet described her experience of being pregnant and delivering a baby during the semester as a faculty member in academia.

Um, I'm, uh, not in a tenure-track job, so my experience has been very different.

Um, without a lot of protections, uh, you mentioned maternity leave. Um, when one year, many, many years ago, I was, I found myself pregnant and going to deliver during uh, a semester. Um, and I asked my, my Department Chair to give me part-time and be paid part-time, of course, for that for that time. Um, his response to me, "Well, you understand from my perspective, that's not good news." Um, yeah, and, and so I took, I taught halftime and was paid half time.

And was back in the classroom a week after my daughter was born.

Violet described the challenge of requesting maternity leave for individuals on a non-tenure track. She recounted her experience of being pregnant and due to deliver during a semester, as it created a challenge between being a woman and working. When she requested part-time work and partial payment during her maternity leave from her Department Chair, she received a dismissive response implying that her pregnancy news was unwelcome. Despite this, Violet was compromised by teaching halftime and being paid accordingly. Although she wanted to spend more time with her young child, she returned to the classroom just one week after giving birth to her daughter, as she felt pressured to do so.

Alice provided accounts of her experiences of working 80-hour work weeks and teaching from a sick bed after having a stroke in academia.

Uh, my department is completely toxic and dysfunctional. I would just like to be treated fairly... I have filed equity complaints, and they have found discrimination, but they said it's the whole department, not just the Chair, so they can't take action... And I mean, you know, before tenure, you keep quiet, it's so scary of losing your job. You get tenure, and even I got promoted myself, nothing changed. No matter what how much I do, what I accomplished, I work 80-hour weeks, nothing matters. I have taught while hospitalized after a heart attack, you know, from my hospital bed. Who cares? Nobody. So, I, I am actually completely sick of the environment here. And, you know, I will say, I think [Cultivate] for what, has done a lot for white women. It has done nothing for women of color. I am completely isolated. Nobody has ever reached out to find out how I'm doing. All right? I, I, I, things like work-life balance don't apply to Brown people like me. I realized that a long time ago. So, I, I, I have nothing good to say is the bottom line.

Alice expressed her frustration with the toxic and dysfunctional environment in her department, emphasizing the need for fair treatment. Alice highlighted the silence often maintained before obtaining tenure due to fears of job loss, contrasting with the unchanged circumstances even after achieving tenure and promotion. She spoke to the disregard for her extensive efforts, including working 80-hour weeks and teaching while hospitalized after a heart attack.

Alice also noted the disparity in support between white women and women of color, feeling isolated and overlooked in her experiences. She felt that the work-life

balance did not apply to individuals like her, expressing that she had nothing good to say. The PTE policy states that the Department/Unit Chair/Head shall review and evaluate the candidate's portfolio, prepare a written report, and evaluate the faculty member's performance in teaching, research, creative activities, and service since their last post-tenure review. Although Alice was experiencing health challenges, she still felt pressured to teach and work based on her perceptions of how the PTE policy would be implemented and the evidence she needed to provide to support her career advancement. This created a challenge for Alice, who felt pressure to teach during her hospitalization and struggled to balance work and life.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our analysis of focus group data from MU revealed significant challenges women faculty members faced as they tried to balance their professional and personal lives. These challenges included the need for more flexible work options, heavy workloads, and the inadequacy of medical leave. We linked each of these issues to specific institutional factors. First, we found that participants described how MU's policies were often rigid, and they noted limited flexibility in scheduling, which was crucial for those with caregiving responsibilities. Second, participants described how practices at MU disproportionately allocated administrative and service tasks to women, which are often unrecognized in tenure and promotion considerations. Third, participants described how procedures for parental leave were not only insufficient but also inconsistently applied, which affected women more meaningfully due to societal expectations around caregiving roles. Finally, participants described how prevailing discourses within MU perpetuated gender stereotypes and biases, contributing to a work environment that felt unwelcoming or even hostile to some women faculty. Next, we discuss each finding in detail, situating it in the literature and providing recommendations for future practice.

Flexible and Remote Work

Mary and Luna described how flexible and remote work options were needed because they found it difficult to attend meetings while having to tend to their children during the time that the meeting was being held. Having flexible meeting times is important, especially for faculty members who were also parents or had other caregiving responsibilities. This necessity aligns with prior research indicating that flexible working arrangements can meaningfully alleviate work-life conflicts and enhance job satisfaction among academic staff (Hansen, 2020; Lee et al., 2023). Participants suggested that scheduling meetings and work responsibilities around school pick-up and drop-off times would greatly improve their ability to balance professional work with family responsibilities. Accommodating these times would help them manage their roles as faculty members and parents more effectively. Allowing faculty to choose their work hours and locations could also enhance focus and productivity, accommodating personal commitments more effectively.

We recommend formalizing support for flexible and remote work arrangements to ensure all faculty can avail themselves of these options without penalty. Future

research should explore how these flexible work policies impact faculty members' long-term career trajectories and academic productivity, particularly among women and underrepresented groups in academia. In this study, traditional schedules often clashed with personal responsibilities. Universities need to rethink their scheduling policies to accommodate their faculty's varying needs so that they can accomplish institutional and personal goals without stigma. Likewise, research suggests that setting policies that limited meetings to standard working hours meaningfully helped faculty manage their dual responsibilities more effectively (Thomas et al., 2014). Those changes not only helped individual faculty members but also enhanced the overall productivity and morale of the academic community.

Heavy and Imbalanced Workloads

Joanne described heavy and imbalanced workloads as a significant challenge, particularly for pre-tenured faculty who expected to excel in teaching, research, and service. The PTE policy mandated high-quality contributions in these areas but does not clearly define what constitutes substantial evidence for their PTE dossier. This lack of clarity created a challenge between the desire to meet professional goals and maintain a work-life balance.

Joanne highlighted the increasing workload expectations in her department, especially in teaching. She noted that the pressure to teach more classes, retain students, and attract new ones has meaningfully impacted her ability to conduct research. Her story illustrates the conflict many faculty face: striving to fulfill the comprehensive demands of the PTE policy while managing personal well-being and professional development.

This issue aligns with prior research indicating that imbalanced workloads can lead to faculty burnout and dissatisfaction, particularly affecting those not yet tenured (Ceci et al., 2023; Mickey et al., 2022). To address these challenges, participants suggested that universities clarify what constitutes substantial contributions in teaching, research, and service within the PTE policy, thereby helping faculty better manage their time and efforts. Additionally, implementing policies that ensure a more equitable distribution of teaching, research, and service responsibilities, acknowledging faculty members' varied strengths and career stages, could alleviate some of the pressures.

We recommend policy adjustments, including redefining success in tenure and promotion processes to include a broader range of valuable contributions beyond traditional metrics. Establishing support systems, such as teaching assistants or research grants, could help faculty manage heavy workloads and maintain productivity without compromising their well-being.

These recommendations are supported by research suggesting that when institutions provide clear guidelines and support for managing workloads, faculty satisfaction and retention improve (Ceci et al., 2023; Mickey et al., 2022). Future research should explore the long-term impacts of these workload management policies on faculty career trajectories, especially for women and underrepresented groups, to ensure that tenure and promotion processes are equitable and supportive. Addressing heavy and imbalanced workloads is crucial for preventing burnout and

ensuring that all faculty members have a fair opportunity to succeed in their academic roles without sacrificing their personal lives or well-being.

Medical Leave

Violet and Alice shared their experiences, highlighting the challenges associated with medical and parental leave within academia, especially for non-tenure track faculty and women of color. Violet recounted her struggle with obtaining adequate maternity leave; when she requested to work part-time during her pregnancy, her department chair responded negatively, suggesting her situation was inconvenient for the department. Despite her needs, she returned to teaching just one week after giving birth, feeling pressured to resume work prematurely to maintain her position and income.

Alice detailed her severe health challenges, including teaching from her hospital bed after a heart attack. Her narrative revealed not only the lack of support for her health concerns but also a broader issue of equity and inclusion within her department. Alice also touched on the additional layers of difficulty she faced as a woman of color, feeling isolated and unsupported, and highlighted the disparity in how work-life balance policies are applied.

These accounts underline significant faculty support gaps during crucial life events, such as childbirth, severe illness, or other personal crises. Current policies often compel faculty members to return to work too soon, risking their health and hindering their professional performance. This challenge is further compounded by disparities in how institutions interpret and implement federal guidelines such as the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which provides basic leave protections but often falls short in addressing the nuanced needs of academic professionals (U.S. Department of Labor, 2023). This aligns with research that underscores the necessity of comprehensive parental and medical leave policies (Bender et al., 2021; Breuning et al., 2021).

For example, even though the FMLA requires unpaid leave for qualified workers, many faculty members struggle to fully utilize these benefits due to financial or career progression constraints. Furthermore, the availability and application of parental and medical leave policies are strongly influenced by the type of institution, including public versus private, unionized versus non-unionized, and research-intensive versus teaching-focused. For instance, because they have more funds, research-intensive universities may be able to offer more comprehensive policies, while smaller institutions may not have the means to provide sufficient support. These gaps might be filled by improving cooperation with professional associations and bringing institutional policies into compliance with federal criteria. This would ensure that all professors, regardless of the type of institution, receive fair and substantial support during life events.

To address these issues, we suggest institutions develop and enforce clear, equitable leave policies that support faculty during significant life events without forcing them back to work prematurely. There should also be a supportive environment that acknowledges and actively addresses the unique challenges faced by non-tenure track faculty and faculty of color, ensuring that all faculty members

receive fair and equitable treatment. Additionally, implementing robust support systems that include not just leave policies but also resources for mental and physical health, childcare, and eldercare, catering to the diverse needs of the faculty, would greatly enhance their work-life balance.

Future research should explore the impact of improved leave policies on faculty retention, satisfaction, and overall well-being. Investigating how these policies are implemented across different demographics within academia could provide deeper insights into achieving equity and effectively supporting a diverse faculty body. Studies could examine how flexible and comprehensive leave policies influence the career trajectories of underrepresented groups, such as women of color, nonbinary faculty, and those in non-tenure track. Furthermore, studies that compare institutions with diverse policy frameworks may shed light on the most effective ways to promote inclusion and fairness in various academic contexts.

Strengthening parental and medical leave policies is not just a matter of fairness. It is also crucial for retaining talented faculty and promoting a healthier, more productive academic environment. Studies reveal a strong correlation between supportive work environments and improved organizational loyalty, lower turnover, and higher productivity (Samsudin et al., 2024). Additionally, by tackling challenges faced by people with multiple disadvantaged identities, policies can reduce their struggles and create a more inclusive environment. These changes are essential for building a supportive academic community that values and cares for its members throughout their personal and professional lives.

Based on these findings, higher education institutions can collectively address these challenges by establishing standardized, flexible work arrangements that accommodate the diverse schedules of their faculty members while considering institutional and regional differences. Workloads should have been carefully balanced through clear policies that ensure to avoid overwhelming faculty, focusing on a fair distribution of teaching, research, and service duties supported by professional organizations and regional collaborations to navigate varying state and federal regulations. Comprehensive parental and medical leave policies should be developed and implemented universally, with flexibility for local adaptation to allow faculty to take adequate time off without pressure to return prematurely (Rosa, 2021).

CONCLUSION

In this study, using institutional ethnography, we explored the significant challenges women faculty face in achieving work-life balance. Our findings from focus group data, combined with an analysis of current policy practices, procedures, and discourses, revealed key areas of concern, including the need for flexible and remote work options, the burden of heavy and imbalanced workloads, and the struggle to secure adequate parental leave.

We identified that inflexible work schedules, disproportionate workloads, and insufficient parental leave policies systematically disadvantage women faculty, particularly affecting those with caregiving responsibilities. These challenges are compounded for non-tenure track faculty and women of color, who often face additional systemic barriers.

Our analysis aligns with existing literature that underscores the importance of institutional support in enhancing work-life balance. Research has consistently shown that flexible working arrangements can meaningfully alleviate work-life conflicts and enhance job satisfaction among academic staff (Kumar et al., 2023). Such findings suggest that by implementing flexible work policies, institutions can improve faculty retention and job satisfaction. Additionally, equitable workload distribution policies must be established to ensure that faculty members distribute workloads fairly. This includes redefining success in tenure and promotion to recognize various scholarly contributions. Moreover, extending and enforcing comprehensive parental leave policies and supporting faculty during significant life events are crucial.

Future studies should investigate the long-term effects of these policy changes on faculty members' academic productivity and career trajectories, with a particular focus on gender and racial disparities. It is also vital to explore the institutional climate and its impact on the implementation and effectiveness of these policies. Research should continue to investigate how various models of flexible work and leave policies impact faculty engagement, satisfaction, and overall well-being. Higher education institutions can create a more supportive environment by addressing these critical areas through informed policy changes and supporting a culture that values diversity and equity. This not only promotes gender equity but also enhances the overall success and well-being of all faculty members. Such changes are essential for nurturing a thriving academic community that respects and supports its members' varied needs and contributions.

REFERENCES

- Agha, K., Azmi, F. T., & Irfan, A. (2017). Work-life balance and job satisfaction: An empirical study focusing on higher education teachers in Oman. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, 7(3), 164–171. <https://doi.org/10.18178/ijssh.2017.v7.813>
- Bender, S., Brown, K. S., Hensley Kasitz, D. L., & Vega, O. (2021). Academic women and their children: Parenting during COVID-19 and the impact on scholarly productivity. *Family Relations*, 71(1), 46–67. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12632>
- Bianchi, S. M., Sayer, L. C., Milkie, M. A., & Robinson, J. P. (2012). Housework: Who did, does or will do it, and how much does it matter? *Social Forces*, 91(1), 55–63. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/sos120>
- Blackburn, H. (2022). The status of women in STEM in higher education in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic: A literature review, 2020–2022. *Science & Technology Libraries*, 42(2), 180–200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/019462x.2022.2082630>
- Blalock, A. E., & Stefanese-Yates, A. (2023). Hierarchies and paradoxes: How women in non-tenure-track faculty positions experience a gendered organization. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000486>

- Breuning, M., Fattore, C., Ramos, J., & Scalera, J. (2021). The great equalizer? Gender, parenting, and scholarly productivity during the global pandemic. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 54(3), 427–431. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096520002036>
- Campbell, M., & Gregor, F. M. (2004). *Mapping social relations: A primer in doing institutional ethnography*. Rowman Altamira.
- Casad, B. J., Franks, J. E., Garasky, C. E., Kittleman, M. M., Roesler, A. C., Hall, D. Y., & Petzel, Z. W. (2020). Gender inequality in academia: Problems and solutions for women faculty in STEM. *Journal of Neuroscience Research*, 99(1), 13–23. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jnr.24631>
- Ceci, S. J., Kahn, S., & Williams, W. M. (2023). Exploring gender bias in six key domains of academic science: An adversarial collaboration. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 24(1), 15–73. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15291006231163179>
- Chesak, S. S., Salinas, M., Abraham, H., Harris, C. E., Carey, E. C., Khalsa, T., Mauck, K. F., Feely, M., Licatino, L., Moeschler, S., & Bhagra, A. (2022). Experiences of gender inequity among women physicians across career stages: Findings from participant focus groups. *Women's Health Reports*, 3(1), 359–368. <https://doi.org/10.1089/whr.2021.0051>
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- Collins, P. H. (1998). Intersections of race, class, gender, and nation: Some implications for Black family studies. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 29(1), 27–36. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jcfs.29.1.27>
- Culpepper, D., Lennartz, C., O'Meara, K., & Kuvaeva, A. (2020). Who gets to have a life? Agency in work-life balance for single faculty. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 53(4), 531–550. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2020.1791280>
- Fazal, S., Masood, S., Nazir, F., & Majoka, M. I. (2022). Individual and organizational strategies for promoting work–life balance for sustainable workforce: A systematic literature review from Pakistan. *Sustainability*, 14(18), 11552. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su141811552>
- Faculty work life policies - Office of the Provost | University of South Carolina*. (n.d.). University of South Carolina. https://www.sc.edu/about/offices_and_divisions/provost/policiesandprocedures
- Hansen, D. S. (2020). Identifying barriers to career progression for women in science: Is COVID-19 creating new challenges? *Trends in Parasitology*, 36(10), 799–802. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pt.2020.07.016>
- Hart, J. (2016). Dissecting a gendered organization: Implications for career trajectories for mid-career faculty women in STEM. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 87(5), 605–634. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2016.11777416>
- Hesse-Biber, S. N., & Leavy, P. L. (2007). *Feminist research practice: A primer: A primer*. SAGE.
- Kumar, S., Sarkar, S., & Chahar, B. (2023). A systematic review of work-life integration and role of flexible work arrangements. *International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, 31(3), 710–736. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOA-07-2021-2855>
-

- Lee, M., Coutts, R., Fielden, J., Hutchinson, M., Lakeman, R., Mathisen, B., Nasrawi, D., & Phillips, N. (2021). Occupational stress in university academics in Australia and New Zealand. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 44(1), 57–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080x.2021.1934246>
- Lester, J., & Sallee, M. (Eds.). (2023). *Establishing the family-friendly campus: Models for effective practice*. Taylor & Francis.
- Llorens, A., Tzovara, A., Bellier, L., Bhaya-Grossman, I., Bidet-Caulet, A., Chang, W. K., Cross, Z. R., Dominguez-Faus, R., Flinker, A., Fonken, Y., Gorenstein, M. A., Holdgraf, C., Hoy, C. W., Ivanova, M. V., Jimenez, R. T., Jun, S., Kam, J. W. Y., Kidd, C., Marcelle, E., ... & Dronkers, N. F. (2021). Gender bias in academia: A lifetime problem that needs solutions. *Neuron*, 109(13), 2047–2074. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuron.2021.06.002>
- Mickey, E. L., Misra, J., & Clark, D. (2022). The persistence of neoliberal logics in faculty evaluations amidst COVID-19: Recalibrating toward equity. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 30(2), 638–656. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12817>
- Ocobock, C., Niclou, A., Loewen, T., Arslanian, K., Gibson, R., & Valeggia, C. (2021). Demystifying mentorship: Tips for successfully navigating the mentor–mentee journey. *American Journal of Human Biology*, 34(S1). <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajhb.23690>
- Rosa, R. (2021). The trouble with ‘work–life balance’ in neoliberal academia: A systematic and critical review. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 31(1), 55–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2021.1933926>
- Samsudin, A., Ikaningtiyas, M., Mulia, F., & Rintalla, M. (2024). Exploring the relationship between career advancement, work–life balance, and corporate financial performance: A systematic review. *Atestasi: Jurnal Ilmiah Akuntansi*, 7(2), 1091–1110. <https://doi.org/10.57178/atestasi.v7i2.918>
- Shi, H. H., Westrup, A. M., O’Neal, C. M., Hendrix, M. C., Dunn, I. F., & Gernsback, J. E. (2021). Women in neurosurgery around the world: A systematic review and discussion of barriers, training, professional development, and solutions. *World Neurosurgery*, 154, 206–213.e18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2021.07.037>
- Smith, D. E. (2005). *Institutional ethnography: A sociology for people*. Rowman Altamira.
- Thomas, N., Bystydzienski, J., & Desai, A. (2014). Changing institutional culture through peer mentoring of women STEM faculty. *Innovative Higher Education*, 40(2), 143–157. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-014-9300-9>
- Valencia, E. (2022). Gender-biased evaluation or actual differences? Fairness in the evaluation of faculty teaching. *Higher Education*, 83(6), 1315–1333. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00744-1>
- Ward, L. W., & Hall, C. N. (2022). Seeking tenure while Black: Lawsuit composite counterstories of Black professors at historically white institutions. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 93(7), 1012–1036. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2022.2082760>
- Williams, J. C. (2014). Double jeopardy? An empirical study with implications for the debates over implicit bias and intersectionality. *Harvard Journal of Law & Gender*, 37, 185–248. https://repository.uclawsf.edu/faculty_scholarship/1278

- Wright-Mair, R. (2022). The costs of staying: Experiences of racially minoritized LGBTQ+ faculty in the field of higher education. *Innovative Higher Education*, 48(2), 329–350. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-022-09620-x>
- Xu, Y. J. (2008). Gender disparity in STEM disciplines: A study of faculty attrition and turnover intentions. *Research in Higher Education*, 49, 607–624. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-008-9097-4>
-

FREDRICKA R. SAUNDERS, M.Ed. is a PhD candidate in Education (Institutional Effectiveness) at North Dakota State University. Her research employs institutional ethnography and feminist standpoint theory to understand how students, faculty, and staff navigate and influence the structures of U.S. higher education. She supports research and practices that foster welcoming and responsive academic environments. Her work draws on personal narratives and everyday practices as a foundation for meaningful change in higher education institutions. Email: fredricka.saunders@ndsu.edu

LAURA J. PARSON, PhD is an Associate Professor of Educational and Organizational Leadership at North Dakota State University. Laura's research questions seek to understand how trans-local practices (institutional discourses, policies, practices, and procedures) coordinate the work of faculty and students in higher education. She explores those questions through institutional ethnography and critical discourse analysis. She is the author of the recent Routledge book, *Understanding and Supporting College Students with Empathy*. Email: laura.parson@ndsu.edu

EMILY C. S. JOHNSON, M.S. is a PhD candidate in Adult Education and Organizational Leadership at North Dakota State University. Emily's research focus is on understanding how work is socially organized. Her research focuses on leadership positions and how perceptions and discourses shape leadership work. Email: emily.johnson108@ndsu.edu

CAILIN M. SHOVKOPLYAS is a PhD candidate in Education, Organizational Learning and Leadership at North Dakota State University. Cailin's research questions aim to understand how professional communicators navigate the institutional complexities of advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within organizations that often hinder or obscure this work. She explores those questions through institutional ethnography. She is a communication manager for a Medicare administrative contractor and a qualitative researcher committed to amplifying the everyday experiences of practitioners whose labor is often made invisible by institutional structures. Email: cailin.shovkoplyas@ndsu.edu

LISA R. ARNOLD, PhD is an associate professor of rhetoric and writing in the department of English at North Dakota State University. She was the chair of the Commission on the Status of Women Faculty at NDSU for five years (2020-2025)

and is passionate about promoting equity through systemic change. Her research interests include faculty development, writing pedagogy, and writing program administration. Email: lisa.arnold@ndsu.edu

RAJANI GANESH PILLAI, PhD is a Professor of Marketing and Chair of the Department of Management and Marketing at North Dakota State University. Her research interests are in the areas of consumer decision making, innovative perceptions, and collaborating for innovations. In her leadership role, she is passionate about understanding how organizational structures and policies in higher education institutions affect faculty morale, belonging, and performance and is committed to these conversations at NDSU in the various capacities in which she serves. Email: rajani.pillai@ndsu.edu
