

# Women Faculty Departures from a Striving Institution: Between a Rock and a Hard Place

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“In some ways, I think the university tries to do too much: try to be good at research, try to be good at teaching, all those elements,” reflected a woman faculty member about her former institution. “We were doing so much for so long that it started—I mean, when you’re asked to be really good in all areas I think it just wears on you after a while.” This quotation from a former faculty member illustrates the faculty experience in what can be typified as a “striving” institutional culture. O’Meara (2007) defined striving as “the pursuit of prestige within the academic hierarchy” (p. 123). Striving behaviors in higher education institutions result from a desire to emulate more successful institutions in an effort to gain more market advantage (Bess & Dee, 2008). Also referred to as “institutional isomorphism” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), these striving behaviors reflect a common occurrence in higher education in the United States (Dubrow, Moseley, & Dustin, 2006; Finnegan & Gamson,

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1996; O'Meara, 2007; O'Meara & Bloomgarden, 2011). Given the recent economic climate in this country for public higher education, institutions may be even more apt to participate in what has been termed "mission drift" or "academic drift" (Berdahl, 1985) in which "institutions drift away from their original missions toward norms of prestige and status typical of and established by more elite institutions" (Morphew & Huisman, 2002, p. 492). As a result, a lack of clarity in the institutional mission and in the faculty role can ensue—further elucidating the quotation of the faculty member above.

The literature related to institutional striving has pinpointed that particular institutional types are more prone to academic drift than others. Specifically, comprehensive institutions—or those public institutions that are characterized by an emphasis on teaching (Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006a)—are often those found in the "middle of the institutional hierarchy" (Clark, 1987, p. 126). Scholars have found that these institutions may be more apt to lean toward these striving behaviors (Finnegan & Gamson, 1996), particularly in times of declining resources or uncertain futures. Henderson and Kane (1991) aptly described these striving comprehensive institutions:

Rapid growth, an evolving mission, and changes in American higher education have left the comprehensive state colleges and universities caught in the middle. They cannot acquire the reputations of the major research universities. They do not have the resources of the research and doctorate-granting institutions. Neither do they have the traditions or orientation of the liberal arts colleges or specific mission of the community colleges. (p. 339)

Henderson and Kane are not alone in their critique of the striving institutional culture. Indeed, the negative outcomes of such striving behaviors have been well documented in the literature. For example, there has been considerable commentary about the negative influence of striving behaviors on the faculty experience at these institutions. In their study of faculty life at these striving comprehensive institutions, Wolf-Wendel and Ward (2005) commented that the "upward mobility the campus desires is often at the expense of faculty" (p. 8). An institution seeking to increase its prestige will often pressure its faculty to garner more research support (Brewer, Gates, & Goldman, 2001), thereby changing the institutional culture through a new set of behaviors and attitudes (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Tierney, 1988).

Relatively little empirical research exists about the faculty experience at these striving comprehensive institutions, however. Wolf-Wendel and Ward (2005, 2006b, 2006c) have found that these environments are often less friendly to women faculty, given the increasing demands on faculty time to produce scholarship and to maintain a high teaching load (Henderson & Kane, 1991) resulting in a lack of balance between work and family (O'Meara & Bloomgarden, 2011). As such, scholars have documented an increased sense of dissatisfaction of faculty working in these striving environments

(Dubrow, Moseley, & Dustin, 2006; O'Meara, 2007; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006a), which may ultimately result in faculty attrition (Hagedorn, 2000; O'Meara, 2007).

The purpose of this study was to understand how the organizational environment of one striving comprehensive institution affected the reasons for departure of 11 women faculty between 2004 and 2009. I begin this article with a further review of the literature related to striving institutions and women faculty, followed by the methods used to conduct the study. The findings and a discussion of these findings then follow, as well as implications for future research, policy, and practice.

### WOMEN FACULTY AND STRIVING INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

The retention and promotion of women faculty in academia has become an area of national concern. Women faculty are underrepresented across ranks in many fields, such as those in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines (Etzkowitz, Kemelgor, & Uzzi, 2000; National Science Foundation, 2006), as well as lower rates of promotion and tenure when compared to men (National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, & Institute of Medicine, 2007). Women are also paid less than their male counterparts (Umbach, 2006; Xu, 2008b). Further, individual women faculty may have disparate experiences based upon discipline (Xu, 2008a), the gender composition of their department (Tolbert, Simons, Andrews, & Rhee, 1995), and other variables respective of their context. Consequently, women faculty tend to be significantly more likely than men to express the intention to leave (Xu, 2008b; Zhou & Volkwein, 2004) and have higher rates of actual turnover (Johnsrud & Heck, 1994).

The reasons that faculty will depart from an institution of higher education are also gendered. For example, research has demonstrated that men faculty tend to leave due to salary and professional advancement issues. Although women faculty also cite salary issues, they list personal reasons and professional advancement opportunities as a close second (Amey, 1996). In studies of intent to leave, Rosser (2004) and Xu (2008b) found that female faculty members tend to be less satisfied with workloads in regard to courses and advising, their benefits, and salary when compared to their male peers. When viewed in tandem with the literature on women faculty, these findings are not surprising. Indeed, women faculty tend to spend more time on their teaching and have heavier teaching loads (Hurtado & DeAngelo, 2009; Misra, Lundquist, Holmes, & Agiomavritis, 2011), be given more service responsibilities (Kulis, Sicotte, & Collins, 2002; Misra et al., 2011; Rosser & O'Neil Lane, 2002), be excluded from important committees and decision-making (August & Waltman, 2004), and have their research trivialized (Johnsrud

& Wunsch, 1991; Rosser, 2004). As a result, women faculty are tenured and promoted less often (August & Waltman, 2004; Umbach, 2006), are paid less than their male colleagues (August & Waltman, 2004; Umbach, 2006), and therefore have higher rates of attrition both pre- and posttenure (Johnsrud & Heck, 1994; National Academy of Sciences et al., 2007).

In consideration of how these gender inequities play out in the context of striving institutions, the literature on women faculty is illuminating. Also referred to as “academic drift” (Berdahl, 1985), “upward drift” (Aldersley, 1995), and “institutional isomorphism” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), striving institutions exhibit several traits in relation to their faculty members. These traits include (a) a greater attempt to hire “faculty stars” with research emphasis; (b) a decrease in faculty teaching load, an increase in discretionary time, and a loosening of institutional ties with an increased emphasis on disciplinary ties; (c) an increase in expectations for research in tenure and promotion; and (d) a rise in expectations for grants, awards, and prestigious fellowships (O’Meara, 2007, p. 131).

The administrative decisions of striving institutions are also telling and have reverberations for their faculty. Symbols of such striving behaviors may include (a) using language, speeches, and websites to shape the external image of the institution as more prestigious and “on the move”; (b) shaping an internal, institutional narrative about striving and using this rhetoric to frame major decisions, goal statements, and directives; and (c) shifting resources from instruction to administrative support (O’Meara, 2007, p. 131).

It follows, then, that women faculty may be faced with particularly difficult circumstances in these striving institutions (Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2005; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006a). The faculty role is typically considered within the triumvirate of teaching, research, and service (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). Given the division of labor in academia in which teaching and service are considered “lesser” than the domain of research (Boyer, 1990) and women are often those who do more teaching and service (Kulis, Sicotte, & Collins, 2002; Misra et al., 2011; National Academy of Sciences et al., 2007), the gendered nature of a focus on research can become more apparent. Moreover, the reality of male-dominated disciplines that encourage more research than teaching or service (National Science Foundation, 2006) underscores this gendered division of academic labor (Kantola, 2008). Valian (1998) explained, “The more prestigious the institution, the more significant the research must be. Competence in teaching is demanded too, but is less important than research at the most prestigious universities” (p. 219). Perhaps this is why Wolf-Wendel and Ward (2005) referred to women faculty at these striving institutions as situated between a rock and a hard place.

Considering the relationship between prestige and research, and the reality of gendered academic labor, it is perhaps not surprising that women tend to be situated at much less prestigious institutions than men (Valian, 1998).

Such male-dominated disciplines and institutions may create challenges for women, particularly as “marriage and children are generally viewed by male faculty members as impediments to a scientific career” (Etzkowitz, Kemelgor, & Uzzi, 2000, p. 134). It is this gendered view of faculty work and organizations that may ultimately foster women faculty attrition.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: GENDERED ORGANIZATIONS

One lens through which to examine institutional striving and its effect on women faculty is that of gendered organizational theory (Acker, 1990, 2000; Alvesson & Billing, 2009; Britton, 2000). Viewing organizations as gendered is a way of “seeing organizational cultures in terms of masculine and feminine values, ideas, and meanings” (Alvesson & Billing, 2009, p. 5). Acker (1990) was one of the first to assert the gendered nature of organizations, and her conceptualization has remained the cornerstone of this developing field (Britton, 2000). The basis for a gendered view of organizations is often in the sexual division of labor as well as bureaucratic structures, which are viewed as inherently masculine (Alvesson & Billing, 2009; Britton, 2000).

It is my contention that the quest for status in academia results from the gendered view of institutional reputation and hierarchy. As such, I use Acker’s (1990) conceptual basis for this study, consisting of four dimensions: (a) the gendered division of labor, (b) gendered interaction, (c) gendered symbols, and (d) gendered interpretations of one’s position in the organization.

A gendered division of labor can be seen in the actual duties that are expected of women versus men (Acker, 1990). In academia, this perspective can be seen in the increased expectations for teaching and service for women (Kantola, 2008) as well as the pay differences consistently seen across higher education institutions in the United States (Umbach, 2006).

Gendered interaction is evidenced through the modes of communication that permeate the organization (Acker, 1990). The tacit knowledge is that academia rewards and perpetuates itself through informal networks and through mentoring relationships, which are often afforded more frequently to men than women (Rankin, Nielsen, & Stanley, 2007; Wasburn, 2007). Further, an analysis of discourse that is communicated through existing policies demonstrates that such policies are often biased in regard to gender (Allan, 2003; Wood, 1994). Language can also communicate the gendered nature of work in academia, as demonstrated through recent analyses of letters of recommendation and the verbiage used to describe men and women (Axelson, Solow, Ferguson, & Cohen, 2010).

Gendered symbols, images, and forms of consciousness also characterize gendered organizations (Acker, 1990). Examples of such items in academic settings might include how achievement is rewarded and valued. For instance, women faculty tend to publish and present at the same rate as men, but

existing gender bias in academia often recognizes men's achievement over women's and tends to see women's achievement as owing to something other than ability (Valian, 1998).

Finally, Acker (1990) emphasized gendered interpretations of organizational positionality in her schema. In universities, men still occupy more senior academic positions and senior ranks than women (Marschke, Laursen, McCarl Nielsen, & Rankin, 2007) and consequently have more power in the policy-making and practices that normalize faculty work (Acker, 1990; Bird, 2011; Etzkowitz, Kemelgor, & Uzzi, 2000; Valian, 1998). Similarly, certain disciplines tend to be gendered in terms of the kind of research that is conducted or the emphasis that is placed on teaching (Bird, 2011). How one perceives success in this context is gendered, according to Acker. As an illustration, men may believe their achievement is owing to hard work and dedication while women may be more apt to attribute success to luck or "being in the right place at the right time" (Valian, 1998); conversely, women academics may be more likely to blame themselves for a lack of success (Kantola, 2008).

Although Acker's (1990) work has been critiqued for its essentialist stance toward organizational structure without empirical basis (e.g., Britton, 2000), it has nevertheless remained an important framework through which to understand gender in organizational settings (Alvesson & Billing, 2009). While I do not imply that hierarchy necessarily creates oppression (e.g., Britton, 2000), one can view how the characteristics of a striving institutional environment (O'Meara, 2007) may coalesce with the characteristics of gendered organizations. Take the example of the gendered nature of hierarchies: In her analysis of gender in corporate organizations, Kanter (1977) acknowledged how hierarchy contributes to the discrimination and disempowerment of underrepresented groups. She stated, "When the model is hierarchical rather than collegial, there would appear to be real limits on the extent to which it is possible to expand anyone's power, other than for those people who already have the managerial monopoly" (p. 286). It is therefore fascinating to note that the history of many such striving institutions is also gendered in nature. Many comprehensive institutions with striving aspirations began as normal schools (Henderson & Kane, 1991; O'Meara, 2007). The movement toward more prestige in the academic hierarchy, which is accomplished through research and grant activity (O'Meara, 2007; Valian, 1998), is therefore a movement away from the less prestigious and more feminized work of teaching and service.

The research on women faculty experiences in these striving institutions point in particular to the gendered nature of labor in these organizational settings. For example, issues of work-life balance have been found to be more difficult for women faculty in these striving environments (Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2005). In Acker's (1990) theory, issues of work-family balance are particularly salient to seeing an organization in gendered terms. She argued,

“Sexuality, procreation, and emotions all intrude upon and disrupt the ideal functioning of the organization, which tries to control such interferences” (p. 152). Instead, most tend to view organizations as gender neutral, thereby “facilitat[ing] an individualistic view of relative success, influence, and power—the view that people succeed because of superior abilities, dedication, and performance” (Acker, 2000, p. 630). A gendered view of organizations, on the other hand, frames the lack of success and recognition for women as owing to gendered practices (Alvesson & Billing, 2009). Wolf-Wendel and Ward (2006) remarked on the “ratcheting up” effect of these striving environments on faculty relating to scholarly productivity and the unclear expectations that such a shifting mission may hold for mothers of young children in particular:

For faculty at striving comprehensive campuses that are upwardly mobile, combining work and family could be tenuous given never-ending demands to be all things to all people. Indeed, the tenure demands at these institutions seemed more intense than even at the research universities, as individuals were given mixed messages about what it takes to get tenure and most concluded that they needed to be equally productive in terms of teaching, research, and service. (p. 511)

The literature on higher education institutions also underscores striving institutions’ typically decentralized or loosely coupled nature, which can result in ambiguity for institutional actors (Bess & Dee, 2008). Combined with the drifting missions of these institutions, this ambiguity is even more acute (Bird, 2011; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006b).

Taken together, the literature on striving institutions and their effect on women faculty points to a growing issue of concern for those in higher education settings. And while some have begun to explore striving behaviors and their effects upon institutional constituencies (Finnegan & Gamson, 1996; Gardner, 2010; O’Meara, 2007; O’Meara & Bloomgarden, 2011), none has yet investigated how such behaviors ultimately influence faculty departure. Given the gendered nature of the academic organization (Bird, 2011) in particular, how these striving behaviors influence women faculty are of particular concern.

## METHODS

My study was guided by the question, “How did the striving aspirations of one comprehensive institution affect the departure decisions of women faculty?” In light of this focus, the chosen design for the study was qualitative in nature as it allowed for an exploration of “substantive areas about which little is known” as well as allowing me “to obtain the intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are dif-

ficult to extract or learn about” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 11). Specifically, I conducted in-depth interviews with 11 women faculty who left one striving institution (Land Grant University or LGU), to better understand their “lived experience and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 2006, p. 9).

LGU has been identified as a striving comprehensive institution through several means and therefore presented itself as a noteworthy case to investigate “the particular context within which the participants act, and the influence that this context has on their actions” (Maxwell, 1996, p. 17). For example, in its recent strategic plan regarding research and institutional goals, LGU expressed its desire to be ranked among the top 50 public institutions and top 100 research universities. LGU is firmly placed as the state’s land-grant institution and only doctoral-granting institution in its state. Its current classification, according to the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2010), is RU/H, or a Research University with High Research Activity. Nevertheless, even its own institutional research office places it among institutions with less research activity, given its history, and more closely aligns it with the previous Carnegie classification (2007) of Doctoral/Research Intensive, meaning that it produces far less research than peer institutions in the Doctoral/Research Extensive classification. In previous classifications, it was listed as a Research II, meaning that it had a decreased emphasis on research, brought in fewer external grant dollars, and produced fewer than 50 doctorates in a given year. Currently, on its *U.S. News and World Report* (2011) entry, LGU is classified as “a comprehensive institution that is growing in institutional stature” and is currently ranked below the top 150 of national universities. At the same time, the administration of LGU expressed a general concern and lack of understanding about what was perceived to be a high rate of attrition among its women faculty, although no institution-wide exit interviews had yet been conducted to determine the reasons for attrition. During the time of the women faculty members’ tenure at the institution, only one woman administrator was represented in the upper administration (i.e., positions ranking at the vice president level or similar), while nine or 10 individuals usually report directly to the president of the institution.

I contacted the study participants via email in the summer of 2009 after receiving a list of names of all women faculty who had left LGU in the previous five years from the Office of Human Resources. This list included a total of 36 women, including seven who had retired and four who had passed away. For the resulting 25 women, I was able to find email addresses for 19 through web searches, as LGU did not maintain records of employees after departure. Of those 19, 11 agreed to speak with me about their experiences via telephone with an additional two women sending me their general comments in email. After gaining consent, the interviews commenced with only

one substantive question guiding the discussion: "Why did you leave LGU?" Interviews lasted 60 to 120 minutes.

All 11 women were greatly concerned about the confidentiality of their interviews, and most would not agree to speak with me unless I was the only individual with access to the raw data and transcripts. As a result, I personally transcribed each interview verbatim, removing any personal identifiers. Due to the heightened concern about confidentiality, general rather than specific information about the 11 participants is provided in Table 1. These former LGU faculty represented a variety of disciplines as well as diverse ranks, including representation from science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields or STEM ( $N = 3$ ), social sciences ( $N = 3$ ), professional/applied fields ( $N = 4$ ), and the humanities ( $N = 1$ ). Participants were all tenure-stream while at LGU and had served an average of eight years before departing. Eight of the 11 held tenured positions at LGU. Four of the women held academic positions prior to coming to LGU, ranging from one year to 17 years—three of these four negotiated to bring this tenure status with them to LGU. It is important to note that none of the faculty left LGU due to an unfavorable tenure or promotion decision.

I analyzed the interviews utilizing the constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003), first using open-coding to understand the larger dynamics at work in the women's experiences while at LGU, resulting in a set of themes on which I conducted further coding to make explicit the connections between the themes that emerged that corresponded with the conceptual framework of gendered organizations (Acker, 1990). Specifically, I coded the transcripts looking for how the multiple layers of the organization of LGU, its gendered characteristics, and its striving behaviors influenced the women faculty during their tenure at LGU. Finally, a third round of coding allowed for a search of concepts that tied into the emic themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) that emerged from the participants' interviews.

I obtained trustworthiness of the data and subsequent analysis through peer debriefing (Maxwell, 1996), by giving a colleague access to the transcripts from which identifiers had been removed. This colleague analyzed and verified themes. I also employed member checking, asking the interviewees to review the themes that emerged from their interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Maxwell, 1996).

## FINDINGS

From the interviews of the 11 women faculty who left LGU between 2003 and 2009, several themes emerged that related to their perceptions of the striving behaviors of the institution and how these behaviors influenced their departure decisions. Described below, these themes include (a) competing

**TABLE I**  
**WOMEN FACULTY PARTICIPANTS**

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Disciplinary Area</i>	<i>Years at LGU</i>	<i>Ranks Held at LGU</i>
Lorna	Humanities	13	Asst., assoc., with tenure
Evelyn	Professional/applied	7	Asst., assoc., with tenure, full
Kaye	Professional/applied	7	Asst., assoc., with tenure
Teresa	STEM	12	Asst., assoc., with tenure
Sheila	Professional/applied	4	Asst.
Betty	Social science	13	Asst., assoc., with tenure
Nancy	Professional/applied	3	Asst.
Constance	Professional/applied	13	Asst., assoc., with tenure
Hazel	Social science	2	Asst.
Melanie	STEM	4	Asst.
Maria	STEM	9	Asst., assoc., with tenure

expectations, (b) an environment of ambiguity, (c) gendered practices, and (d) work-life balance.

### ***Competing Expectations***

Throughout the interviews with the women faculty who left LGU, one thing was clear: Expectations did not always match reality. For many, a major influence on their departure was the ratcheting up of expectations and a lack of infrastructure to support these expectations, echoing the findings of Wolf-Wendel and Ward (2005, 2006b) in regard to other striving comprehensive institutions. Many of these women had been recruited to focus on this newly enacted research mission and found a divide between what they saw as the “old way of doing things” and these new expectations. This divide was often the source of tension between the previous generation and this newer generation of faculty. Evelyn (all names are pseudonyms) remarked:

Everything seemed new to people around me when I would say, “What about this? What about that?” And they’d say, “Well, we’ve never done that,” or “I’ve never heard of that,” or “We don’t do that here.” I guess we’re sort of out here on the periphery. I get that. I like that. It gives me a lot of latitude—but why do I have to convince you that there are alternate views? That ought to be abundantly clear!

She sighed as she summarized, “I always found it saddening because there was so much good stuff and it was just being squandered by sort of the haze of fossilization creeping over things.” Kaye agreed, saying, “There was no respect for actual thinking, and there was no respect for any kind of innovation. They just wanted you to come in and do the same thing they’d been doing for a billion years.”

Resources were also a barrier for many of these faculty, particularly given the increasing expectations of scholarly productivity without a commensurate increase in resources to support this scholarship or a decrease in teaching load. Lorna said, “It’s a small university. There aren’t really enough faculty to do all the committee work that needs to be done.” Because of these unrealistic and often competing expectations, Betty explained:

I think people were just getting burned out. They were getting jaded, cynical. I really think it was just the fatigue level. I think we were doing so much for so long that it started—I mean, when you’re asked to be good in all areas, I think it just wears on you after a while. . . . LGU tries to do too much: try to be good at research, try to be good at teaching, all those elements. I think if they just focus on one or two areas, like research/teaching or service/teaching, instead of all three—so you’re not needing to be A+ in everything—they could focus a bit better in terms of what their priorities should be.

Nancy similarly emphasized:

[LGU has] to change their policies and their teaching load. They have to think that if they're going to talk about doing research that most research and Ph.D. programs are going to have resources to support it. They do not have anything right now, in my opinion, to support it. They're kidding themselves.

### *An Environment of Ambiguity*

In line with the organizational uncertainty that accompanies the loosely coupled nature of higher education institutions (Bess & Dee, 2008) and the particularly blurred lines of institutions drifting from one mission to another (Morphew & Huisman, 2002), the women faculty in this study pointed to many ways in which the ambiguous nature of LGU's striving environment inhibited their day-to-day work.

One characteristic of the ambiguous environment that all of the women discussed was the high rate of turnover experienced at LGU. Indeed, turnover has been discussed as an identifiable aspect of striving environments (Gardner, 2010), particularly given how expectations may change for faculty during their tenure at an institution. For example, during her seven-year tenure at LGU, Evelyn explained, "I had four college deans during the time I was here who were summarily fired. I never knew what to believe. What do you put your energy into? How do you target success? What would it look like?" She later stated, "I think part of the problem was the changing-over of the deans, that you didn't have any idea—you were always running for cover instead of working forward. No stability."

Given the lack of stable leadership and the resulting lack of stable and consistent policies, Evelyn described the ambiguity that surrounded day-to-day activities at LGU: "There are opportunities but you have to figure out how to make them work. There wasn't a lot of support. There was no trodden path." Instead, "there was sort of an undercurrent of not really problem-solving but back-door solutions . . . lots of work-around."

The environment of ambiguity was inherent in the mission drift that LGU was experiencing, moving from what had historically been a teaching-oriented institution to one more focused on the prestige to be garnered through research. At the same time, the women faculty discussed how these ambitions were not supported by resources or an infrastructure. Lorna explained this tension, saying, "LGU wants to think of itself as a residential liberal arts college but they also want to think of themselves as having the finest scholars in the country, so the place is always volleying this back and forth." This ambiguity resulted in tension for the women faculty, particularly for those in the associate professor rank, given the fact that associate-level faculty do not exist in a protected space like new assistant professors and professors (Neumann, 2009). Constance remarked:

We were drowning—the fact that our teaching levels were going up and up and our resource support was going down and down. We were all just ready

to tear our hair out. The associate professors were getting *shit* for support for travel because we were all trying to support the untenured people as much as we could. We were totally getting squeezed in the middle because of the fulls and assistants.

### ***Gendered Practices***

Acker (1990) discussed how organizations can be gendered in multiple spheres, including the gendered division of labor, gendered interactions, gendered symbols, and gendered interpretations of one's position in the organization. These spheres were also present in the accounts of the women faculty who had left LGU. Interestingly, however, while some of the women were resolute about the gendered nature of their negative experiences, others were more reticent. For example, when asked if she thought if any of her experiences were related to gender, Evelyn remarked:

Well, I really resist that. I mean, personally, I don't like having slack. Um, so, I'm a bad feminist. But, I have to say that I think if I had been a male asking, petitioning for these salary increases, there would have been a different outcome.

In this way, Evelyn distances herself from a gendered orientation while still acknowledging differential outcomes based on sex.

Issues of sexism were prevalent in the accounts of these former LGU faculty. This sexism ranged from attitudes that were bothersome to those like Betty, who shared, "There were these generational responses by men in the department. I think the older males had a very paternalistic view," to more blatantly appalling behavior as experienced by Kaye. She shared, "The worst thing was that I had a couple of colleagues, and one in particular, who were just raving misogynists. It was very difficult to work there."

An interesting twist to the gendered experiences was the extent to which several of the faculty discussed how other women contributed to this negative environment. Kaye explained:

I'm sure you recognize that women can contribute to a hostile work climate equally as much as men. Like one colleague in [my department]. I know she didn't *like* the things that were going on but she accepted them and refused to stand up in any way or even admit publicly that there was a problem. She would say it to me privately but never publicly.

When I asked if Kaye thought that kind of reaction was something that was influenced by the environment or if people with that kind of personality were attracted to the environment, she replied, "I think it's definitely something that the environment fostered. If you come to a place and it's clear that women are not going to be treated equally, then very few women will actually stand up say, 'This is not okay.'" Nancy was often appalled by what she saw as senior women who began to act like men. "It was just shocking

to discover that she [her female dean] was as much of a good old boy as the [prior male dean]. I mean, hello?"

This gendered environment wore on several of the women and ultimately prompted their departure. Kaye was particularly explicit about the connection:

It only got worse. I guess you read about the cumulative effect; I think that's really true. Toward the end I would be *so* tied up in knots coming to work that I was in tears by the time I made the drive from [where I lived] to the university.

Constance even expressed her dismay about my conducting a study such as this, given LGU's past history. She emphasized: "The university overall is hostile to women. It's like, we've had enough studies on the chilly climate for women and the, you know, the whole *Why So Slow* thing." She explained that when she received my email asking for an interview, she called a former colleague from LGU. She recapped their conversation, saying to her colleague, "What the hell is this again? And I'm like, 'Yeah, I know, they're doing it again.' It's like, here we go again. Studying the climate for women at LGU, blah, blah, blah." She explained:

It was really about sort of people's attitudes and the climate and the bullshit and the politics and the power plays and the constant lip-service to "We value diversity, we care about women, we care about diversity," all of this crap. I hate fake.

When I asked Constance if she thought her experience would have been the same if she had been male, she emphatically said, "Oh, God, no. No. No. No. No." Then she laughed and again remarked, "Totally not. No. No." She explained further:

I saw the guys sit around and sort of sneer at women's research and turn around and put out this stuff that's just complete fucking crap and just finding excuses for why this was good enough to get them tenure. You know, I've seen the jokes. I've seen the women who are driving ourselves crazy doing service, and advising, and committees, and running around doing all this service trying to improve the climate on campus while the guys do their own little thing and their one little committee and everybody jumps up and down about how wonderful they are.

### ***Work-Life Balance***

Acker (1990) contended, "Sexuality, procreation, and emotions all intrude upon and disrupt the ideal functioning of the organization, which tries to control such interferences" (p. 152). This aspect of gendered organizations came through loud and clear as participants related their experiences while at LGU—particularly participants at childbearing age. Lorna explained:

The general advice for the administration would be for them to recognize that women raising children, that their lifecycle is going to be more difficult. They are trying to have children and raise children at a time when there're also these amazing demands on their professional life.

On top of this, Lorna's partner could not find employment in the rural area of LGU, thereby requiring a five-hour commute between the nearest large city and the campus. She shared:

I was spending a lot of time doing research and writing from [the large city]. Before we had children, my husband and I essentially shared the commute so he would come up for a weekend and I would go down for a weekend and that worked fine. After we had children that [amount of travel] became obviously more difficult. My senior colleagues didn't like the fact that I was commuting.

She sighed and said, "For me it really became a question of being with my family or being [at LGU]. And, you know, my family won out at the end of the day." Lorna was explicitly told by her chair that "maternity leave and academic leaves were perceived as abusing the system." Melanie experienced similar issues in regard to employment for her spouse. She was teary as she said:

Another issue that I had while I was there is that I did have a child and that was the worst experience of my life. My husband didn't have a job so I couldn't take the 12 weeks of unpaid leave without losing my house.

Hazel summarized, "I definitely got the sense from LGU that it was one thing for you to be a parent but you have to do it on your own time."

## DISCUSSION

At first blush, one might view the negative experiences of the 11 women faculty who left LGU as owing to a poorly resourced institution. However, upon further examination within the framework of gendered organizations (Acker, 1990), more subtle issues emerge to explain how the institutional environment and its striving aspirations resulted in gendered organizational behaviors that negatively affected them. To reiterate, Acker described her theory of gendered organizations as consisting of four spheres: (a) a gendered division of labor, (b) gendered interactions, (c) gendered symbols, and (d) a gendered interpretation of one's position in the organization.

A striving institutional environment can be framed through a gendered organizational perspective as such a striving environment that seeks to gain prestige in the academic hierarchy; (O'Meara, 2007) and by definition, hierarchies function in a gendered perspective (Kanter, 1977). Moreover, given the fact that the research environments to which these striving institutions aspire can foster cultures that promote male-dominated social structures

(i.e., “the old boys’ network”) as well as an emphasis on self-advancement, competition, and a lack of transparency (Becher & Trowler, 2001), the quest for status in the academic hierarchy can further such a gendered perspective. Becher and Trowler discussed the patriarchal nature of higher education, stating that “the very experience of working in a patriarchal environment imposes pressures and constraints on women that men do not face” (p. 152). Similarly, they foregrounded how those institutions seeking to gain more prestige and reputation may be more troublesome in relation to the excessive work demands placed on their faculty (Becher & Trowler, 2001). Consequently, it was apparent that many of Acker’s (1990) elements of gendered organizations were at work in the women faculty’s experiences during their tenure at LGU that can be attributed to this striving environment.

The women discussed the gendered atmosphere at LGU along four lines. First, from many comments, it was clear that LGU has had a culture that has struggled with gender equity issues for a period of time and has remained somewhat antiquated in its treatment of these issues. Issues of salary discrepancies as well as disparities in hiring, promotion, and tenure between men and women were prevalent in the women’s accounts. While one could attribute a discriminatory environment to any organizational environment, these disparities could also point to Acker’s (1990) presupposition of a gendered interpretation of one’s position in the organization. If these women felt they were discriminated against in hiring, promotion, and departmental actions because of their gender, they perceive the organization as gendered. Utilizing Acker’s framework, one can also see elements of gendered interactions and gendered symbols through a lack of policies to support work-life balance. These gendered aspects of the culture resulted in explicit symbols and messages to the women that indicated an emphasis on one’s family was unacceptable in the workplace.

Second, the gendered division of labor (Acker, 1990) was also salient in these women’s experiences, which is perhaps not surprising as women may be less likely to be tenured, promoted, and recognized within research institutions (Becher & Trowler, 2001). It is therefore possible to posit that LGU, in its aspirations to gain more prestige, has taken on a gendered environment to further its goals, thereby emulating the gendered nature of hierarchical research universities. Such a division of labor also seemed salient in the comments that some of the women made about the generational differences in faculty. As the majority of those at the rank of professor are men and that a growing proportion of untenured faculty are women (U.S. Department of Education, 2008), this generational divide can also be interpreted as a gendered divide between those who are more senior to the institution versus those more recently hired. In turn, the power and status associated with senior faculty positions are therefore more often conferred on men than women, thereby contributing also to a gendering of positions.

Third, women also discussed the gendered interactions they experienced while at LGU. They discussed their perceptions that teaching and service loads, often higher for women than men (Kulis, Sicotte, & Collins, 2002; Rosser & O'Neil Lane, 2002), increased during these women's stay at LGU. An interesting phenomenon is therefore at work at LGU: While many striving institutions will seek to diminish the teaching load for faculty in order to increase their research output (O'Meara, 2007), LGU seems to have expected these women faculty both to produce more research and to continue with the higher teaching loads associated with the former institutional culture. The gendered division of labor, in this way, was pertinent in these women's experiences. These experiences could be owing not only to the lack of resources at this striving institution but also to the lack of women leaders at the institution during the time of study. Indeed, the presence of women in high-ranking positions can relate to higher levels of satisfaction for women working in those organizations (Miner-Rubino, Settles, & Stewart, 2009).

Finally, given these disparities, it was apparent that these women's low satisfaction levels with the LGU environment prompted their departure decisions. Faculty job satisfaction is a multi-faceted concept (Hagedorn, 2000); nevertheless, women faculty have generally been shown to be less satisfied than their male counterparts (Rosser, 2004b; Xu, 2008b) and therefore more likely to express an intention to leave (Xu, 2008b; Zhou & Volkwein, 2004), resulting in higher rates of turnover (Johnsrud & Heck, 1994). Interestingly, women faculty at these striving institutions are also apt to express the least amount of satisfaction when compared to women faculty at other institutional types (Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2005; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006a).

### IMPLICATIONS

While this study examined only one institution, LGU is not alone in its striving behaviors. Other institutions sharing these behaviors may be informed from this study's findings as they consider their own aspirations in light of their current realities. As such, several implications exist for both LGU's administration as well as for other striving institutions that may be similar to LGU. First, institutions with striving aspirations may often be resource-strapped (O'Meara, 2007); striving behaviors are seen as a way to garner more prestige through more students (i.e., tuition) and more faculty with an emphasis on research (i.e., external funding). At the same time, the expectations placed on the faculty in these striving environments may be unrealistic if the infrastructure is not put in place to support such a mission change. At LGU, the women discussed being expected to do more research while still maintaining a heavy teaching load. Institutions like LGU should consider how they are going to transition to a research emphasis in their mission and provide the resources necessary to support such a change, including

decreased teaching loads, a differentiated reward structure, and institutional infrastructure like sponsored-programs support.

Second, LGU and its peers should also consider conducting regular examinations of policies, procedures, and practices to determine how such a mission change is affecting the faculty. For example, salary discrepancies between men and women faculty as well as between majority and minority faculty are well documented and particularly prevalent at research institutions (Nettles, Perna, & Bradburn, 2000). And, while institutions like LGU are required to submit annual statistics on students and faculty demographics, more sophisticated analyses like salary studies may exceed the resources available at these striving campuses. Nevertheless, understanding the intended and unintended consequences of policy changes—such as a change in mission—may be vital to succeeding in such an endeavor. Similarly, an examination of the administration at institutions like LGU may also be warranted in order to determine how decision-making may privilege one group over another, particularly given the reality of a male-dominated administrative hierarchy in research institutions (Allan, 2011).

Third, it is often easier to consider policies and practices as a mechanism through which to create change in such environments; however, it is not enough. Kanter (1977) remarked, “Organizational reform is not enough” (p. 285); in fact, neither are policy changes in their own right. At the same time, the approach of “fixing the women,” which is often promulgated in these institutional settings (Valian, 1998), is misdirected. Projects such as the National Science Foundation’s ADVANCE program instead seek to create institutional transformation for women faculty through a multi-pronged approach (National Science Foundation, 2006). In considering the correction of such disparities and deficiencies, both institution-wide and individual-level foci are necessary. Institutions like LGU can benefit from programs such as professional development opportunities for department chairs, promotion and tenure committees, and deans to better understand issues like gender bias and work-life balance policies and procedures. At the same time, having a policy that is not understood or used is also problematic, particularly when women fear repercussions if they use these policies (Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006c).

Finally, while exit interviews are often a fruitful method for garnering information on employee turnover, particularly from women faculty (Amelink & Hyer, n.d.), the current study points to the sensitive nature of any kind of exit interview strategy for departed employees. Even though some of these women had left LGU five years prior to my interview, they were still very hesitant to speak with me, even though I held no administrative role and exercised no power in their current positions. While one might perceive this hesitancy as mere caution in light of their professional reputation, the overall climate and history of gender discrimination at LGU may also be the

culprit. Institutions with such a history of bias and discrimination must be particularly sensitive in their conduct of such exit interviews, including the choice of by whom, for what purposes, when, and how these interviews are conducted and how they will be used in the future.

Certainly, future research should continue to explore how individual institutional contexts, pressures, and procedures influence women faculty and their departure decisions. These studies could also consider how the striving process affects women over time. For example, what are faculty members' experiences in the early phases of such a striving effort versus those toward the latter end of such an endeavor? Moreover, what effect does rank and tenure status have on this experience? While race did not emerge as a salient issue for any of the faculty participants, race and ethnicity should also be considered in future studies as should other demographic categories such as men, international faculty, and faculty from other underrepresented groups. Finally, future studies could also interrogate how institutional control and type may influence the experiences of faculty through such a striving experience. Taken together, further studies will assist in understanding the causes and consequences of faculty life in these striving environments.

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