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Parental Leave at BSU – What We Have and What We Need

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Parental Leave at Bridgewater State – what we have and what we need

Martina Arndt, Laura Ramsey, Kimberly Fox, Pamela Russell, and Michael Young

Faculty, librarians, administrators and staff at Bridgewater State University utilize the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) for many reasons—for their own health (medical leave), to take care of family members (family leave), and to have, adopt, or foster a child (parental leave.) FMLA guarantees 12 weeks of unpaid leave, however BSU policy allows employees to apply accrued sick leave to pay for some or all of the leave. Full-time faculty and librarians on medical leave continue to earn pay after using part of their accrued sick leave because they can tap into the sick bank—but those on family or parental leave cannot. Those on parental leave are contractually granted 10 paid days, but those on family leave are not. We need to do better than this.

Since August 2014, the National Science Foundation ADVANCE program has funded (grant #HRD-1409348) our inquiry into the importance of work-place flexibility for faculty in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), and Social Sciences (SS) at BSU. A predominant challenge to workplace flexibility (as well as work/life integration) for all faculty, librarians, staff, and administrators is BSU’s lack of fully paid family and parental leave. BSU’s team of researchers surveyed and interviewed full- and part-time STEM and SS faculty to explore how they create workplace flexibility within the boundaries of institutional requirements and policies, including how they manage family and parental leave. This article focuses on the parental leave component of our work.

Researchers and policymakers have consistently identified paid parental leave as a “best practice” for a successful workforce (www.worklifelaw.org/pubs/worklife_academia_FINAL.pdf). Paid parental leave improves worker productivity, retention, loyalty and satisfaction (www.nationalpartnership.org/research-library/work-family/paid-leave/paid-leave-good-for-business.pdf). Because employee turnover is expensive, paid parental leave has either a neutral or positive effect on an institution’s finances (https://hbr.org/2011/01/paid-family-leave-pays-off-in/).

Some of us can anticipate when we need parental leave, but for most it is difficult to time pregnancies or know when an adopted or foster child might join the family. Even faculty who do not need parental leave can be affected by BSU’s policies and procedures. Department chairs often work with faculty to coordinate parental leave; other times, faculty may be asked to cover classes, advising, and committee work when a colleague is out; and part-time faculty are often hired to cover faculty on leave. As a result, parental leave is a campus-wide issue that concerns us all.

As part of our ADVANCE work we surveyed full-time faculty in our data pool and 74 colleagues responded to the following question: “To the best of your knowledge, without consulting sources, what is the family leave policy on campus?” Most respondents interpreted family leave as parental leave. Over half of the respondents (52%) had

Figure 1. Q: To the best of your knowledge, without consulting sources, what is the family leave policy on campus?
During their otherwise unpaid weeks, with some teaching online courses at the same time. None of these choices are ideal because none of the options described—accrued sick leave, the family and medical leave available or any precedent set by previous colleagues in their situation, and may worry about the impact a leave could have on the tenured process. Our conversations with faculty members revealed that vastly different options were presented to different faculty members facing the need for parental leave, raising questions of equity and social justice.

Consider this scenario. Jane is a full-time faculty member who has completed her third year at BSU and is going to have a baby next week. The baby will be assumed by her to have 35 days, or seven weeks, of sick leave (10 days per year for the first three years, after that, up to 60 days per year). Given a 14-week semester, she could work the first two weeks of the semester (assuming no early delivery or complications). Complications, or other issues that may lie in the kinds of parental leave that may be the employee’s per month in order to save that additional month. Jane may worry about the impact a leave could have on her job. Our qualitative interviews revealed that vastly different options were presented to different faculty members facing the need for parental leave, raising questions of equity and social justice.

Consider this scenario. Jane is a full-time faculty member who has completed her third year at BSU and is going to have a baby two weeks into the Spring semester of her fourth year. By this time, she has not had an opportunity to give birth to the baby, assuming she has not used any sick days, she will have accrued approximately 35 days, or seven weeks, of sick leave (10 days per year for the first three years, after that, up to 60 days per year). Given a 14-week semester, she could work the first two weeks of the semester (assuming no early delivery or complications). Complications, or other issues that may lie in the kinds of parental leave that may be the employee’s per month in order to save that additional month. Jane may worry about the impact a leave could have on her job. Our qualitative interviews revealed that vastly different options were presented to different faculty members facing the need for parental leave, raising questions of equity and social justice.

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While Jane is not a real BSU faculty member, her story is familiar to faculty on campus. Our qualitative interviews with 49 full-time faculty members showed the real-life impacts of the current parental leave policy. One faculty member who was considering single parenthood noted: “I didn’t find a way to have a child or stay in a child within the system that we have here.” Another emphasized the problems with changing professors partway through a course, saying: “it doesn’t serve the students well, to have two different instructors per class, it doesn’t serve the faculty well, it’s just … a bad experience … a bad experience categorically for everybody involved.”

Based on our ADVANCE research, it is clear that our parental leave policy is insufficient and even detrimental to our students and faculty. So what is the solution? What would be possible at a public institution, especially during difficult fiscal times? The answer to that question is just as important as parental leave on campus. An important aspect of our conversations is that paid parental leave should apply to everyone who utilizes FMLA—faculty, librarians, staff, and administrators. Faculty leave is just as important as parental leave, as caring for family members can affect any of us at any time. Research demonstrates there could be little financial impact on BSU with great benefit to the entire campus community. We could rally around an improved improved and parental leave policy. Movement on these issues is imperative and change can happen not just through a formal BSU policy that aligns with the contract but also through contract negotiations. We are eager to have your input and support as we work toward a positive and socially just change around parental and family leave.

Martina Andrés is Professor in the Physics Department. Lorna Ramsey is Assistant Professor in the Psychology Department. Kimberly Fox is Assistant Professor in the Sociology Department. Pamela Russell is Interim Associate Provost for Academic and Faculty Affairs. Michael Young is Associate Provost for Academic Planning and Administration.
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Based on our ADVANCE research, it is clear that our parental leave policy is insufficient and even detrimental to our students and faculty. So what is the solution? What would be possible at a public institution, especially during difficult fiscal times? The answer to that may lie in the kinds of paid parental leave our peer institutions and other state agencies provide.

While investigating policies of other state agencies in Massachusetts, we found that some provide paid leave without requiring employees to deplete their sick days. For example, as of May 11, 2015, the Massachusetts Attorney General’s Office offers 30 days of paid parental leave for its employees (www.mass.gov/ago/docs/hr/parental-leave-policy.pdf) and as of June 3, 2015, the Massachusetts Treasurer’s office offers up to 12 weeks of paid parental leave (www.mass.gov/treasury/about/media-pubs/teas-press-rel/2015/goldberg-announces-12-week-paid-parental-leave-policy.html). In addition, all tenure-track faculty at University of Massachusetts campuses at Amherst and Boston are granted an entire semester of paid parental leave (umassmsp.org/msp_contract; https://www.uml.edu/HR/Labor-Relations/Faculty-Labor.aspx). At UMass, faculty are also allowed to tap into the sick bank for parental leave, which our contract does not allow.

How can BSU do better and what do we need?

Imagine that we had a paid semester of parental leave at BSU. It would not solve every problem related to parental leave, but it would significantly reduce the burdens caused by our current policy. With the simple addition of allowing faculty to donate additional time to the sick bank and granting faculty access to the sick bank for parental leave, we could provide that option with little or no cost to the university. But we would also need to create a campus culture where faculty know all of their parental leave options and how to utilize them.

Department chairs who are knowledgeable about parental leave options are vital to this work, as they may be the first contact point for faculty members regarding parental leave needs. One benefit of parental leave in particular is that faculty often have several months to plan ahead for the leave. But even with that additional time, if faculty and administrators do not know what the options are, people in need may not know either. Montana State University has addressed this problem by supporting a faculty member to serve as a Family Advocate who helps all employees and students navigate their university’s policies and programs and serves as a first stop for questions about everything from where the nursing rooms are to “family and medical leave across the lifespan” (www.montana.edu/provost/family-advocates.html). BSU also needs to foster supportive departmental cultures and find ways to manage the advising and committee work of faculty on leave without overburdening their colleagues. Given that we have a talented pool of part-time faculty, perhaps they could be compensated not only to teach courses but also to take part in other departmental work, like advising or committee deliberations.

Can BSU do better with regard to parental leave? We hope so. The ADVANCE team has been working with various stakeholders on campus, including MSCA leadership, Human Resources, and President Clark, who are all in support of expanding paid parental leave on campus. An important aspect of our conversations is that paid parental leave should apply to everyone who utilizes FMLA—faculty, librarians, staff, and administrators. Family leave is just as important as parental leave, as caring for family members can affect any of us at any time. Research demonstrates there could be little financial impact on BSU with great benefit to the entire campus community. We should rally around an improved family and parental leave policy. Movement on these issues is imperative and change can happen not just through a formal BSU policy that aligns with the contract but also through contract negotiations. We are eager to have your input and support as we work toward a positive and socially just change around parental and family leave.

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