Building Community Understanding of Institutional Compensation Systems: An ADVANCE Partnership Project

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The wage gap between men and women persists in the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2018 women earned $0.82 for every $1.00 earned by men (averaging across all races) [1, 2]. Institutional structures and systems of power influence salary outcomes and pay practices, which in turn are closely related to the quality of work life, informing our knowledge of what (and who) is important to the organization [3]. Even when controlling for a wide range of demographic and background variables, women earn less than men [4, 5, 6]. For women of color, the wage gap is even wider and not likely to improve soon. The COVID-19 pandemic has had an economic toll that compounds existing inequities through shrinking industries that have been traditionally dominated by women (e.g. retail and travel) and the domestic responsibilities continuing to predominantly burden women [7]. Wage gaps in post-secondary education persist among faculty, particularly at institutions with the highest levels of research [8].

Salary equity for women faculty in higher education has been long recognized and written about in terms of legal challenges [9] and statistical methodology [10, 11, 12]. Snyder, Hyer, and McLaughlin [13] addressed these issues and also emphasized the importance of implementation. As they state, "Involving and educating key university personnel in the selection of models and strategies is critical to acceptance and validation of the process and to minimizing negative reaction internal or external to the campus" (page 1).

This paper describes the salary equity study activities conducted at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) which are developed through several NSF ADVANCE past and current funded projects (IT-Catalyst Award No. 0811076, Institutional Transformation Award No. 1209115, and Partnership Award No. 2121930). In our unique approach, a cross-RIT committee was created to oversee the salary equity study and its dissemination, addressing this sensitive topic through Bolman & Deal's four organizational frames [14].

- **Structural Frame**: The committee was comprised of administrators and faculty with expertise in statistical analysis, faculty hiring and evaluation processes, institutional data, and gender equity considerations.
- **Political Frame**: The formal nature of the committee and the process it established made it safe for RIT to include faculty in the salary study process.
- **Human Resources Frame**: Committee members developed a more comprehensive knowledge of compensation analysis; upper administration became more informed about the institution's compensation structure.
- **Symbolic Frame**: Dissemination of the study's process and results across campus demonstrated transparency and openness to the faculty.

This approach combines involvement of key personnel [13] with a framework that emphasizes collaboration and transparency

Background

Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) is the third largest technical institution of higher education in the United States. RIT offers a broad array of programs in its nine colleges, one of which is the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID). Over 70% of incoming students

typically enroll in a STEM major and undergraduates comprise over 80% of the student population. Roughly 17% of RIT students self-report as African American, Latino American or Native American (AALANA) and the ratio of men to women students is approximately 2:1, illustrating an ongoing challenge of gender diversity on the campus. Currently over 1,100 deaf and hard-of-hearing (DHH) students enrich the community in unique ways, the majority enrolled within NTID.

The 2008 NSF ADVANCE Institutional Transformation (IT) Catalyst award, "Establishing the Foundation for Future Organizational Reform at RIT" (EFFORT@RIT, #0811076), aimed to identify career advancement barriers for RIT women faculty. A faculty climate survey [15] conducted as part of the project, in conjunction with objective data review and benchmarking, identified barriers in career navigation, climate, and flexibility in work/life management balance [16, 17]. The NSF ADVANCE Institutional Transformation project awarded in 2012, "Creating Opportunity Networks for Engagement and Collective Transformation: Increasing the Representation and Advancement of Women Faculty @ RIT" (AdvanceRIT, #1209115), sought to increase representation, retention, and career advancement of women faculty [18, 19]. This initiative also examined the unique challenges experienced by women faculty of color and DHH women faculty and refined interventions to address the needs of these key sub-populations. A high level of institutional collaboration was significant to this project, resulting in new institutional practices, such as faculty exit interviews; COACHE climate survey; dual career program, gender-equity salary study; and NSF Indicator data [18, 20-23].

RIT employs pay for performance, pay to market, and pay equity strategies in its efforts to compensate faculty appropriately and ensure that salaries are "internally equitable and externally competitive" [24]. RIT's merit increase program (pay for performance) for faculty is rooted in governance: the Annual Review of Faculty policy was first approved in 1996 to establish guidelines for evaluating faculty performance with regard to established RIT criteria [25]. Faculty review is intended to encourage and foster continued professional development and inform annual merit increments. To address pay to market, past RIT President Al Simone created the Compensation Advisory Committee (CAC) in 1993 to compare RIT compensation levels with those of competing universities. The CAC developed a list of 29 benchmark schools [26]. Over the intervening years, this list has been revisited a number of times. The current list of benchmark schools was implemented in 2021.

Pay Equity Efforts

Equity studies on faculty compensation by gender and other factors have been conducted at RIT for over a decade. NSF ADVANCE funded research efforts informed this practice from its inception. As part of the NSF ADVANCE IT-Catalyst funded project, the 2008 faculty climate survey [15] found that with regard to compensation, 62% of women respondents believe that men in their departments receive preferential treatment, while 9% of men respondents believe that women receive preferential treatment. Informed by these internal findings which revealed significant differences in perception regarding salary equity by gender, the upper administration supported RIT Human Resources (HR) and Institutional Research and Policy Studies (IR) to begin conducting annual salary equity studies by gender, rank, discipline for faculty for internal use starting in 2009. The EFFORT@RIT IT-Catalyst project saw the launch of the faculty salary

study conducted by RIT HR and IR that included controls such as department, degree earned, years in rank, terminal degree, gender, and ethnicity. It was found that gender-based average salary gaps existed at each faculty rank within RIT, with women earning about 5% less than their male colleagues [27, 28]. Large differences between actual salary and predicted salary were identified and investigated, and salary adjustments began in 2010 to correct for compression and gender-related salary issues [17].

The proposal for the AdvanceRIT grant, funded in 2012, included annual faculty salary studies, in which a faculty co-PI on the grant would collaborate with IR and HR to establish a systematic procedure for conducting annual faculty salary studies by gender, college, department, rank, and race/ethnicity. Around the time of the grant award, the upper administration which included new leadership within HR moved to hire a third-party to conduct the annual salary equity studies. A faculty member from statistics, who was also a co-PI on the AdvanceRIT effort, began working closely with HR and IR on review of the third-party's salary equity model and results. Clearly, there were people in place with the expertise to conduct an analysis. Yet, this arrangement was fraught with difficulties. Questions arose that could cause defensiveness and possibly derail the efforts. What type of data validation or cleaning was conducted? Why did the model include multiple inputs that were likely to be closely associated? A common understanding of the objectives and expected outcomes was needed.

It would take more than convening the right stakeholders to conduct a meaningful salary equity analysis. After much discussion, the AdvanceRIT team proposed the creation of a faculty-administrative committee which included membership from HR, IR, Academic Affairs, proxies for the president and the provost, and AdvanceRIT team members. The committee's aim would be the creation of a systematic approach to the salary equity model's creation with the intent that findings would be disseminated to the faculty and administration. The administration agreed to the proposed plan and the cross-RIT Resource Allocation Committee (RAC) was created. Composed of administrators and faculty with expertise in statistical analysis, faculty hiring and evaluation processes, institutional data, and gender equity, the RAC created a gender-equity salary study process designed to instill among stakeholders a high-level of confidence in the results.

As the RAC evolved, it became evident that members needed to intentionally work towards building trust and a safe place to collaboratively refine existing salary-equity practices at RIT. The faculty and administrators providing input had multiple and sometimes competing viewpoints, objectives and goals [29, 30]. Through the collaboration, an inclusive framework was formed within the RAC, further motivating and supporting internal dissemination of the salary equity study's methodology and results. In 2016, the Provost introduced the executive summary [31] of the study via an all-faculty email. Presentations during two college-wide meetings and a campus open forum soon followed.

Faculty salary-equity studies continued annually using the same collaborative process. As these studies became regular, campus leaders grew more comfortable with the salary study process and dissemination. As a result, several unique aspects of the faculty salary study approach became institutionalized as listed below.

- Salary-related information was released on a secure website, including benchmark data for faculty salary (by discipline and rank), the set of benchmark schools, and the documentation of compensation processes. This information prompted questions to HR from faculty and academic leaders and ultimately strengthened HR's reputation as a campus resource for questions related to faculty compensation.
- HR introduced the "compa-ratio" term to help people better understand faculty salary as measured against benchmark data. A faculty member's compa-ratio is computed as actual salary divided by the appropriate benchmark salary for that discipline and rank.
- RAC members developed an interactive workshop for full-time faculty on understanding RIT's compensation philosophy and salary practices. A subset of RAC members from HR and the AdvanceRIT team led the first workshop in spring 2018, in which participants learned about available salary-related resources and explored how to shape future thinking and discussions regarding salary. These workshops continue to be offered on a regular basis.
- In 2019 a workshop for academic department heads and associate deans was launched, with time built-in for discussions. Participants appreciated the opportunity to compare salary practices between colleges, which included some units who "calibrated" faculty ratings across departments. HR benefited from learning that in some colleges decisions related to external "market" and "exceptional performance" increases are determined by the dean, rather than the department manager who typically fields faculty questions regarding these topics. Recently, the Council of Chairs invited HR to provide an overview of compensation practices at RIT.
- The success of the highly collaborative RAC led to the formation of an ad-hoc faculty governance compensation committee in 2019 - another collaborative faculty and administrator initiative - charged by Academic Senate with investigating updates to the list of salary benchmark schools and faculty promotion raises.

Through collaborative efforts such as the RAC, the perceived and actual risks associated with studying and talking about salary can be mitigated. The RAC's cross-functional model increased communication, trust, knowledge, understanding and collaboration among units across the campus [32]. Long used as a strategy to reduce risk for individuals ("strength in numbers"), collaboration can stimulate enhancements to an institution's compensation system while improving the community's understanding of it.

Partnership Project

Salaries are used to attract, engage, and retain employees. Indeed, an organization's compensation system is integral to its culture [33]. Effective and high performance work environments can be supported by compensation strategies such as pay for performance, pay to market, and pay equity. However, reasonable explanations of pay are needed, as well as compensation system reforms to establish reasonable pay (aligned with the organization's financial health and development) and consistent evaluation of positions, employee performance, and markets [34].

The newly awarded NSF ADVANCE Partnership project draws on experiences gained through developing a multi-faceted salary equity initiative with its many unique features listed above. As

lead institution, RIT guides a cohort of partners in a similar initiative with the goal of empowering stakeholders to effect systemic change within their compensation systems. A key objective is to improve institutional understanding and influence actions regarding pay equity through broader understanding of the institutions' compensation structures. The project involves collaborations with three university partners (Drexel, Gallaudet, and Villanova), and several national networks - the American Association of RIT Women (AAUW) and two NSF INCLUDES National Network projects - Coordination Hub and Aspire Alliance which are described in more depth in the Next Steps section of this paper.

Each partner university is a private institution strategically committed to gender equity initiatives. As a 2018 NSF ADVANCE IT grant awardee (#1824237), Villanova established the Villanova Initiative to Support Inclusiveness and Build Leaders. For 25 years, Drexel has offered the highly successful Executive Leadership in Academic Medicine (ELAM) [35] program for women. In 2012, Drexel launched ELATE (now ELATES), a similar leadership program for senior faculty in STEM [36]. Gallaudet University was an early recipient of an ADVANCE Leadership Award (#0123454), supporting the creation of a workshop for prospective and current women faculty from across the country.

Conceptual Framework

Through systemic change within faculty compensation systems, the project goals are to:
1. Promote an inclusive academic work environment and an informed faculty community that understands their RIT's financial model with regard to compensation including how each person fits into this model and contributes to the institution's well-being. An inclusive academic work environment and informed faculty will attract and retain women faculty in STEM and beyond while improving levels of satisfaction with compensation and career.
2. Align RIT resources with institutional values, resulting in enhanced equity for STEM faculty.
3. Support systemic, sustainable change through institutionalization of compensation interventions.
4. Adapt and implement evidence-based systemic change strategy to expand equity efforts across the academic profession and beyond, through collaboration with AAUW and NSF INCLUDES projects.

In this effort, we will explore multiple dimensions of justice with our partners based on the premise that the level of justice within an organization is directly linked to its level of inclusion [37, 38]. In past salary-related activities on the ADVANCE IT project, we used four dimensions of justice – distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational – to better understand the value of the various aspects of the salary work. Distributive justice frames the question "are salaries fair and equitable, on average?" In our context, distributive justice is achieved when salary is allocated according to the principle that people consider appropriate for the situation [39, 40]. In our past and current work, this principle is equity. Procedural justice examines if the process used in determining equity is fair and considers equity to be achieved when the processes that determine outcomes are unbiased over time and independent of the person doing the determination, and when the processes are created and revised through democratic discourse [41]. Interpersonal justice is achieved when people feel trusted and respected, rather than neglected and disrespected. Finally, informational justice is obtained when communications are

clear, thorough (include pertinent info), and timely [42]. In salary-related workshops, we use the justice dimensions to explain the significance and implications of aspects of the work. For example, adding greater transparency and clarity within the faculty compensation system increases trust between pay decision-makers and their direct reports, increases levels of organizational commitment and accountability, and strengthens perceptions of organization's distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice which in turns strengthens the level of inclusion within the organization [37, 38].

In addition to dimensions of justice, the AdvanceRIT project also incorporates a multi-frame organizational analysis approach [14] in the evaluation process to understand the impact of our interventions. This approach integrates structural, human resource, political, and symbolic aspects of organizational theory, suggesting each be used as a "frame" or "lens" for viewing the organization [21, 43]. In the current project we continue using this approach, for evaluation and to better understand our partner's organizations.

Objectives and Activities

The current partnership project has six objectives:
1. Improve institutional understanding and influence actions regarding pay equity through broader understanding of the compensation structures of the institution.
2. Engage appropriate administrative units (HR, Institutional Research, Diversity & Inclusion, Legal, and Academic Affairs) in a highly collaborative relationship with the endorsement and support of university top leadership.
3. Enhance pay decision-makers' understanding of and basis for pay decisions, and their ability to communicate to individuals how their pay is determined.
4. Increase faculty knowledge of institutional pay practices while emphasizing the importance of inclusion and institutional values.
5. Expand the broader community's knowledge of best practices within faculty compensation that is inclusive of all faculty members, while recognizing unique faculty needs of women of color and deaf and hard-of-hearing women faculty.
6. Incorporate an intersectional approach in creating and executing the project's strategies in recognition that gender, race, and ethnicity do not exist in isolation from each other and from other categories of social identity.

Project activities include interactive workshops for the partner cohort, individual coaching sessions, development of organizational action plans (OAP), and ongoing formative assessment. Interactive workshops, conducted through Zoom sessions, employ a *train-the-trainer* method and include preparatory tasks, a collaborative google doc for each partner institution to complete action tasks and document work, and follow-up work. Coaching is conducted individually for partner schools over Zoom and through occasional site visits from members of the project leadership team. Each partner institution will develop a dynamic OAP, which will be woven into our interactive workshops and supported in coaching sessions. A Women of Color (WOC) Council and a DHH Women Council have been established within the project and will provide input and feedback to inform workshops and materials. Each council has established terms of reference, a dynamic document created with project leadership that sets expectations and responsibilities for the council and for project leadership.

In future papers, we will report on project activities, outcomes, impacts, and reflections from key project personnel.

Next Steps

The roll-out plan for the project includes working with the NSF INCLUDES National Alliance for Inclusive and Diverse STEM Faculty [44] (#1834518, #1834522, #1834510, #1834513, #1834526, #1834521), or Aspire, to beta-test elements of the project with a cohort of predominantly public universities. Aspire's overarching strategy is to effect national change by aligning and reinforcing efforts to develop inclusive and diverse STEM faculty through a social equity-based collective impact process. Our effort will engage their Institutional Change (IChange) Network to disseminate and receive feedback on tools and workshops developed for the three partnering universities through a new offering, the Compensation Analysis Sprint for IChange Network Institutions (IPay). Housed at the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU), the IChange Network engages institutions in a community of transformation committed to advancing Aspire's strategic goals [45]. IChange engages teams from participating universities in a three-year self-assessment and action planning process to support the universities in changing institutional policies and practices to create a more diverse and inclusive STEM faculty.

The project will also partner with the NSF INCLUDES Coordination Hub (#1818635), which leads the NSF INCLUDES National Network [46]. The Hub uses online community, webinars, and related events to strengthen a common vision among Network members while building connections across education, industry, government, and philanthropy groups. The project will leverage the Hub for dissemination of tools and resources to its members.

In addition to our NSF INCLUDES partners, we work closely with AAUW in the development of our tools and resources and in dissemination. This mutually beneficial partnership results naturally from alignment of the project's goals with AAUW mission and values focused on gender equity, economic security, and removal of barriers and biases. In 2020, AAUW trained over 180,000 women in their salary negotiation workshops through Work Smart and Start Smarts programs. The Start Smart training is hosted by 142 colleges and universities, including 29 minority-serving institutions, eighteen of which are HBCU [47]. AAUW plans to incorporate ideas and resources developed through this project into current and future offerings including the newly created Equity Network.

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