

REPORT

Junior Women Faculty Focus Groups

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During the 2000-01 academic year, the Center for the Education of Women conducted a series of focus groups with junior women faculty members. The purpose of the groups was to investigate and increase awareness of the issues affecting tenure-track women faculty members at the University of Michigan. The meetings also served as follow-ups to similar information-gathering sessions CEW held ten years earlier. CEW investigators defined the participant pool to include women who had not yet achieved tenure at the University. Therefore, most of the participants have been at UM for five or fewer years.

Each focus group followed a similar format. The participants responded to a series of questions related to their experiences, needs, and perceptions. (Appendix A is a list of the questions). A total of 25 tenure-track women assistant professors took part in the five focus groups. The participants brought a rich variety of backgrounds to the discussions and represented a broad range of 12 different departments and professional schools. In the text below, all references to individuals, departments, and schools have been deleted in order to protect the identity of the participants.

The discussions revealed many similar experiences and perceptions among the junior women faculty members, although, at times, an issue applied to one person only. In some instances, faculty members praised individuals, departments, or the institution as a whole; in other cases, they reflected upon problematic practices and situations. On several occasions, the faculty women acknowledged that issues they raised were not necessarily gender-based but were, instead, general departmental and institutional problems.

The following summary of the focus group findings is based upon six recurring themes: (1) hiring/initial negotiation, (2) mentoring, (3) teaching, (4) tenure procedures and standards, (5) departmental/university environment, and (6) family/personal life issues. Part One of this report summarizes each theme and offers recommendations of what departmental and university-wide administrators can do to improve the level of career satisfaction and achievement for junior women faculty members. Part Two provides extensive quotations and paraphrases from individual participant responses, meant to illustrate and support the six themes.

PART ONE RECOMMENDATIONS

(1) Hiring/Negotiating. Those women who had good advice, or access to information about what they could negotiate for, felt positive about their hiring processes. Many women believed that seeking employment for a spouse or partner limited the amount of negotiating they could do for their own salary, research support, and other aspects of employment.

In terms of initial negotiation and hiring procedures, the participants in this study stressed the importance of administrators—

- Following equal employment laws, university policies, and courtesies in bringing candidates and spouses/partners for campus visits.
- Having, implementing, and following-up on reasonable policies and procedures related to finding employment for spouses/partners—both in academic and non-academic settings.
- Keeping spousal hiring negotiations separate from negotiations for other aspects of faculty members' employment, such as salary, resources and facilities, and teaching loads.
- Being flexible in negotiating terms for the first year of employment, including delays/reductions in teaching and timing the start of tenure clock.
- Providing a clear and complete list of resources and equipment available for new faculty members.
- Being equitable, honest, and ethical during hiring negotiations, offering full and accurate information (about such things as pre-tenure leaves, available funding, graduate student assistance, reasonable teaching loads and schedules, and standard resource equipment packages) and following through with negotiated agreements.

(2) Mentoring. The policies and procedures for mentoring vary by departments or colleges. Therefore, some women described extremely positive mentoring relationships while others felt they were unable to find individuals who would show them the way. The women consistently discussed a lack of standard policies when it came to feedback about their work.

In terms of mentoring, the participants in this study stressed the importance of administrators—

- Making mentors available.
- Assigning mentors who are committed to, conscientious about, and capable of providing sound advice, support, and advocacy.
- Encouraging mentors and departmental colleagues to read and provide critical feedback to junior women's research in progress.
- Establishing mentoring groups, including groups of junior faculty members, to offer each other support and guidance.

- Acknowledging and encouraging the role department chairs play in supporting junior faculty members by offering them reliable information and advice.

(3) Teaching. In terms of teaching, the participants in this study stressed the importance of administrators—

- Offering support and information about various aspects of teaching, including time demands and the expectations and attitudes of students toward women professors.
- Offering reasonable, manageable teaching loads to new faculty members.

(4) Tenure procedures and standards. The participants felt UM has extremely high expectations of the faculty. They described the pressure placed on faculty by ever-increasing standards and requirements for tenure. Many women believe older colleagues are out of touch with the pressures younger scholars face. The attitude towards tenure varied by department. Some participants know exactly what they are facing, having been effectively coached by a chair or a tenure review committee. For others, tenure remains a mysterious process.

In terms of tenure, the women participants in this study stressed the importance of administrators—

- Making the steps, procedures, and standards of the tenure process clear, well explained and well documented, and equitable.
- Conducting meaningful, consistent, specific, and constructive annual and, especially, third-year reviews.
- Giving more consideration to teaching, student advising, and service in the tenure process.
- Establishing reasonable standards for tenure and putting an end to the continually escalating norms.
- Making sure that junior faculty members are informed of their need to establish national reputations for themselves within their fields and their national organizations.
- Making sure that everyone knows about and is counseled about such University policies as stopping the tenure clock and modified duties.

(5) Departmental/University environment. Several women felt that their work was not valued by their departmental colleagues and administrators. A number of the participants also believed that their deans or department chairs did not understand their areas of research. Several women also perceived that they carry a large burden of teaching introductory or new courses. In addition they cited a lack of community atmosphere among fellow colleagues.

In terms of the environments within which they work, the women participants in this study stressed the importance of administrators—

- Integrating women and their research into the departmental community.
- Encouraging departmental colleagues to be familiar with each other's research interests.
- Making clear the complex structure of the University of Michigan academic system—its interdisciplinarity and its intersecting departments, centers, and institutes.
- Being sensitive to issues involved in collaborative research.
- Making sure that female faculty members are not burdened with more than their share of service commitments, such as student advising and committee assignments.
- Making the incredibly rich resources of UM available to all faculty members, male and female.
- Establishing a climate where sexual and other forms of harassment are not tolerated.

(6) Family and personal life issues. Primarily, the women were frustrated by the infringement of work on family and the lack of personal time. A majority of the women felt a large amount of guilt for neglecting themselves and their families for the sake of their work. A few other women perceived an unconscious policy of placing heavier demands on single women or those without children.

In terms of their personal lives, the participants in this study stressed the importance of administrators—

- Not scheduling meetings and events at times most likely to conflict with faculty members' family responsibilities.
- Being aware that women and men faculty members need flexibility in order to balance their personal and academic lives.
- Not establishing policies and procedures based upon the "male model" of having a spouse at home to take care of personal matters.

PART TWO

SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUP MEMBERS' RESPONSES

1) Hiring practices and negotiations

In terms of the initial hiring process, the women in this series of focus groups raised issues related to spousal employment and to negotiation strategies and outcomes.

A) Spousal Hiring

The fact that women are often part of dual career couples creates potential for their dissatisfaction. For example, one woman perceived a lack of commitment in the University's offer to help her spouse find employment in a non-academic setting. "It's one of those things that, before you sign on the dotted line, seems so promising. But then, once I signed on the dotted line, all the energy in that just really dropped.... For a solid year, he was really trying very hard to get a job, and I felt like people [at UM] were giving it lip service, but nothing ever happened."

In some cases, of course, the spousal hiring process has been a positive experience. One woman, who came to UM as a postdoctoral scholar, brought along her husband's CV. The dean put together a package for her that included a position for her husband—an arrangement that has worked out well for both of them. On the other hand, another woman, who came as the spouse of someone already hired in another department, initially felt that she was being offered a position only because "they were being forced to do it because the university expects them to." This uncomfortable message from her colleagues is not, she believes, "the way to recruit spouses."

Several other women who were part of dual career hiring situations believed their own job negotiations suffered as a result. In other words, wishing to accommodate "trailing spouses" meant applicants weakened their abilities to negotiate for their own academic needs. One woman did not initially think she was hired with her husband in mind, but she later found out that her departmental cohorts received higher salaries than she did. She is not sure if this is because she did not ask for enough, because she is female, or because the administrators knew that both she and her husband wanted to be at UM, and she would likely take whatever salary she could get. Another woman said her chair asked about a spouse, and the talk turned to how to help him. This conversation, however, put a damper on how much she could negotiate for herself because she was negotiating with her husband in mind. Yet another woman believed that, because her husband's department lobbied to get her hired, her department made her sense that she was "pushed on them." When she negotiated for her position, she didn't believe she could ask for more than a job and a computer package. She later found out she was offered \$10,000 less than another person hired at the same level that year.

B) Negotiation Issues

Equally distressing to the women in our focus groups was their perception that they were negotiating for their initial appointments “in the dark”—often not knowing what their rights and options were and aware that some new hires had built-in advantages over others. They wished fervently for an open, “above board” system that presented all available information fairly.

For one thing, the women were aware of and bothered by the leverage that a competing offer provides. One woman, among several others, believed she lost negotiating power for salary and other resources because—knowing she wanted the UM job—she did not seek the “bargaining chip” of another job offer. Involved here is an ethical question: one woman in particular spoke about being uncomfortable pursuing a job offer at another institution, without any intention of accepting it, simply to insure a better startup package at UM.

For another thing, many women in the focus groups believed that, without someone “on the inside” offering suggestions, a new hire is likely to be shortchanged. Several women attributed the fact that they negotiated well to the fact that they had suggestions from a knowledgeable insider. One woman said that her negotiating experience was good primarily because she “had a friend who was already here on the faculty [and] who basically told me what to ask for. I feel like, in a way, it was a very arbitrary thing. If he wasn’t my friend, there’s a million things I would not have thought of [to negotiate for].” Another woman said that her mentor had “a good friend in the department here so, when I got the initial contract, I immediately sent it to him, and he said, ‘You can ask for more money, about this much more.’ So he actually helped me tweak the terms....”

Sometimes the lack of information in the hiring process was attributed to the fact that the chair him/herself was not aware of relevant university policies and practices. In other cases, the women believed that women faculty members don’t ask for certain things because they do not know they can. According to one participant, women have less access to the “come here and let me tell you what you need to know” type of information. Thus, unless the person doing the hiring is very above board, a woman may lose out. As another woman described her hiring process, “It was a difficult experience, I would say, negotiating with someone who really knew what they were doing when I really didn’t.” The question these women raised is “Why are there not similar hiring practices across the university?”

In fact, those women who described their hiring process as positive often attributed it to the fact that they were able to negotiate agreements suited to their particular situations, such as a postponed starting date, postponed or reduced teaching duties, or delayed start to the tenure clock. Said one woman, “I was very happy with how they have accommodated [me].... I’ve had very good experiences.” Another

woman, faced with the prospect of no departmental research funds, praised the University Career Development Fund for helping her make up for the benefits she was not able to obtain in her initial negotiations.

Other positive comments about the hiring process came from a woman whose science department chair asks all new hires to draw up lists of equipment they need for their research. During this woman's negotiation meeting, the chair explained everything from the list that he was able to offer her.

In addition to the requests described above, such as postponed starting dates and postponed starts to the tenure clock, women described other issues they were not able to negotiate, including the terms of salary/use of grant money, equipment and other resources, research funds, student assistants, and travel money. To overcome this problem, one woman suggested that the University make research accounts available for each new hire, thereby reducing the disparity based on an individual's negotiation situation or savvy. Other women suggested that departments set aside a certain amount of funds to pay for student assistants.

Several women in the focus groups also reported that, once they had joined the UM faculty, departmental administrators reneged on or changed their negotiated terms of employment. For example, one woman said that the terms of her salary were changed, forcing her to use her grant to pay some of her salary. Another woman learned afterwards that she was being shifted to an interdisciplinary appointment. Yet another woman, who had initially negotiated to delay her teaching duties, was strongly pressured to teach a class. Only with the support of her new colleagues, who told her "Don't do it! Just wait," was she able to stand her ground—though she still worries about possible repercussions to her decision.

Emphasizing that campus visits be equitable and follow affirmative action guidelines, a lesbian faculty member described the reaction from an interviewer when he learned that her partner, whom he'd initially invited along for the visit, was a woman. "Oh, that would be awfully uncomfortable for her. She'd probably not want to come." Another woman called for more tact from interviewers, revealing that the chair of her department exposed some personal issues that she had wished to remain private.

2) Mentoring

Those women who have had mentoring of some kind within their departments or colleges have overwhelmingly found it very helpful. One woman praised her department chair and senior colleagues for going out of the way to nurture junior faculty members. She said that, with the mix of formal and informal mentoring, she felt she was not going to make a wrong step. Another faculty member spoke of a wonderful mentoring relationship with a colleague who reads her papers and helps her with networking opportunities. Other women mentioned such valuable activities as a departmental mentoring committee for each new faculty member, a college-sponsored faculty support group chaired by an associate dean, and a series of college-supported faculty luncheons.

Many other women, however, lamented the lack of such departmental/college mentors. Said one, “I did ask periodically if I had a mentor, and I was supposed to be assigned a mentor apparently, but I never was.... People are very supportive and, to a certain extent, offer advice, but...the bottom line is that they don’t take initiative.... It’s up to you to take initiative, and it’s exhausting to always take initiative. You don’t always know what to take initiative for.” According to another woman, “Mentoring is difficult. Our department chair doesn’t know how to mentor, period. When I first got there, my chair was my official mentor. And so I’d say, ‘Can we have a meeting to talk about things?’ The response was, ‘Well, you know, pretty much we just take care of ourselves because we’re all adults here.’” Said another woman, “[A mentor] is one of the things I definitely wish I’d had.... someone to sit down with me and give me a head start.... Just a bit of direction in the first year would have been really helpful.”

Of course, the departmental mentor must be someone who can provide the kinds of help the junior faculty member wants. One woman described a senior colleague who did take an interest in her work but who told her, “If I have to be on a committee that’s reviewing you, I’d not be your advocate. Don’t think of me that way.” Said this woman, “There’s no one who’s an advocate, and it might be nice if there was someone who was....” According to another woman, “Having people within the department or school designated as mentors has been completely unhelpful. Not because they have any bad will but just because they don’t have any real commitment to you, and they don’t know what they’re supposed to be doing, even if they like you. But the people whom you look for yourself, they have a commitment because otherwise they wouldn’t bother to take you on.”

In seeking such committed mentors, several women described going outside their departments to look for supportive individuals. In addition, several women mentioned CEW’s Junior Women Faculty Network as a source of support and information.

3) Teaching Issues

Some women expressed frustration with their teaching responsibilities. In part, they wished they had known how stressful and time consuming teaching would be and thus negotiated for lighter teaching loads. For example, one woman said she had been assigned to teach many of her department’s more difficult classes: She prepared and taught a class that she knew would never be taught again, and she had all new courses in her first two years. As a result, she was constantly learning new material and suffered with relatively low teaching evaluations.

Several other women commented about the difficulties they occasionally face in the classroom. According to one participant, the attitude students have toward her, as a woman professor, can be snide, too familiar, and bordering on disrespectful—or, according to another woman, very much more critical than the way students respond to male instructors. Yet another woman said she’d discovered that, in addition to these other attitudes, students “want you to answer in the same way they’d want their

mommies to answer.” In general, learning how to present the right amount of classroom authority was sometimes a problem for the participants. They wished for some guidance in helping them establish positive classroom environments.

4) **The Tenure Process**

In terms of tenure, the women in this series of focus groups expressed a desire for more thorough, constructive annual and third-year reviews; a more open and clearly explained tenure process; and a broader, more realistic set of tenure standards.

A) Annual/Third-Year Reviews

Most often, women commented upon the quality of their annual and/or third-year reviews, and the contrast between helpful and unhelpful reviews was very clear. According to one woman, as part of her review she was given a list of all the things she needed to do to receive tenure. The details were very clearly written, almost as a contract, so she felt she had a good model to follow. Another woman commended her college for setting up a rigorous “mid-term review process...a hard and fast review as opposed to a formative review.” The process included having external reviewers, support groups for junior faculty, and assistance in preparing statements and documents. Describing one of the departments with which she is affiliated, a third woman spoke of “a formal review process once a year.... It’s very formal. We [she and the department chair] have an hour-long, sit-down, fact-to-face discussion. He gets out my CV, and we go over everything.”

The one-on-one meeting this woman described contrasted markedly with the situation in her other department, where she never had a sense of whether she was “doing the right things [for tenure] because my division chief is one of these gregarious guys who pats you on the back and says, ‘Oh, don’t worry.’ [I’d ask], ‘Yeah, but what do I need to do?’ And he’d say, ‘Don’t worry!’ This lack of substantive, concrete advice was a theme expressed by others as well. One woman described her annual review as “a very sweet letter from the associate dean that says, ‘Dear So and So, we’re really happy you joined us.’ And he finds one nice thing to say, like ‘We’re especially happy that this year you did X. Your salary will be Y. If you have any questions, please come talk with me.’ So I feel more supported now, but not any better reviewed!”

A few women regretted that, during their review processes, no one informed them of such policies as stopping the tenure clock; or stressed to them the importance of making themselves known to leaders in their fields who could later endorse them for tenure. Another woman lamented that “one of my issues with the third year review was that the things they were telling me were things I could have done something about in my first year. But three years later, you’ve made a long set of choices. And it would have been nice to know things when you were making the choices.”

In a worst case scenario, two women described situations in which they never received any kind of official reviews. One of these women, after hearing some criticisms

about her teaching and service records, went to her chair, who said, “Well, I’ll write you a report and we’ll go from there.” “However,” said the woman, “I never received a written report. I e-mailed him, and he said he’d get it to me soon. Now when I e-mail, he never responds, and I’ve never gotten a written report to sign.” According to the other woman, “This thing called ‘third-year review,’ well we didn’t have it.” Uncertain about her future at UM, she considered applying for another job. Only a side comment from an administrative assistant who “sort of knew the skinny” informed her that she was indeed on track for reappointment and tenure.

B) The Tenure Process

Some women have gotten thorough, valuable advice and support for the tenure process. According to one such woman, the chair told her exactly what was expected of her: He went over her casebook, her CV, and her teaching portfolio, basically walking her through the entire process. Another woman commended her department for requiring junior faculty members to sit on the promotions and awards committee prior to receiving tenure, thus helping them to understand the whole process. For other women, however, the tenure process remains mysterious. One faculty woman, for example, said that she was never given consistent information about tenure procedures. Everyone gave her different answers to her questions. Another woman complained that messages about minimum requirements and standards are vaguely explained.

C) Tenure Standards

Several women complained about the ever-increasing standards for tenure. One woman said that, when she was hired, she was advised that—in order to assure her tenure—she should publish X number of articles. In the intervening four years, that number has increased three fold. According to another participant, “Look at everyone’s vitae.... I find it interesting that senior people can apply such standards that would not apply to them.... They all say, ‘Boy, if I were coming up for tenure now, I never would have gotten it.’ But that doesn’t seem to make them think, ‘Maybe we have to reconsider what it is we are doing here.’” The question another woman raised was, “Does everyone have to be a superstar, work 24/7, and lose their marriages to tenure? Why isn’t working hard and doing good research good enough?”

Another issue raised by the participants is the perceived imbalance in tenure standards, particularly related to teaching and service commitments. They complained that the university’s increased push for service is not reflected in the standards for tenure. Similarly they believed that teaching should count more for tenure. At present, they believed that, while they would like to spend more time on teaching, they do not do so because they know it is not valued.

5) Departmental/University Environment

The focus group participants had a number of positive comments about the university work environment. Several commended UM as an institution with amazingly

rich resources: release times, equipment, services, funding, research support, and so forth. Another woman expressed gratitude that her large department offered her a good combination of autonomy and freedom along with support and encouragement. “It [the department] being big is a plus because I have small children, and people don’t expect me to hang around for drinks...and in the summer they really don’t bother [me] a bit.” At the same time, she said, the department administrators support junior faculty in a number of ways: They limit service involvement, spell out policies very clearly, and offer support opportunities. Still another participant, a woman of color, expressed admiration for UM’s “top-level commitment to affirmative action.... It seems to have a trickle down effect in just how hospitable the institution seems to me.” This woman was also impressed by the number of women and faculty of color in her department.

On the other hand, the UM environment has also placed a great deal of stress and a very heavy workload on many faculty members. At least two women spoke of the extremely high standards and work ethic of UM faculty and administrators: “I do little but work” and “[I have felt] anxiety with the high expectations from the very beginning.” Another woman pointed out the problems inherent in UM’s complex structure. “Nobody understands the Michigan thing—you are involved in all these different centers and institutes and cross departments. I have never talked to anyone in any other university who quite gets it, the levels of complexity we have here. And so there was nobody to help [me] sort that out.”

Some of the women perceived that their workloads are greater than their male colleagues’. One woman observed that the women she knows are involved in many “arenas,” partly because “that’s just the way the university is set up, but also partly because that’s the way our gender is trained. We’re acculturated to do a million things, to be multi-tasked all the time.” She described feeling stressed and overworked, saying, “If you’re a woman, how many places can you stretch to?” Another woman reported being busier than her typical male colleagues because “they [administrators] want to showcase the woman.” A woman of color agreed, saying that minority faculty members are under the same stress, often with dual appointments and called upon to be the minority representatives on many committees.

While one woman commented that her departmental colleagues valued her work, she was clearly an exception. The general feeling of the junior women in these focus groups was that their research was not respected. Several women reported negative experiences working with male colleagues; others described department chairs who denigrated their research. Another woman said that she had received numerous national accolades that had never been acknowledged by her colleagues or dean. In committee meetings, reported one participant, the women in her department are not taken seriously. Questions are addressed to the men, even if a woman is the expert on the issue in question.

In a larger sense, some women lamented the general lack of community in their departments. Contrasting her experience at a former university, where she did feel part of a community, one woman described her UM colleagues as a “group of individual

entrepreneurs.” Another woman remarked that, in her school, tenured faculty members do not attend faculty meetings because they know that important matters take place in executive committees. Some women also expressed frustration with being left out of the community loop. Some participants said that, when their male colleagues go out for breakfast or drinks or to football games or to each other’s home, they are rarely invited.

Women had mixed feelings about collaborative research. Some believed that, while collaboration was neither encouraged nor discouraged by their administrators, it was not a good idea to have other, senior authors on their publications before they received tenure. Others saw collaboration as a “boys club”—women who should be included were not, or they were included only as “token women.”

6) Family and Personal Issues

A significant problem the women in these focus groups face is how to balance the demands of their jobs with their devotion and responsibilities to their children. One woman pointed out the conflicting message that academic women receive about whether and when to have children. She quoted Provost Nancy Cantor as saying that women faculty members can have children without destroying their careers but said that her female colleagues send a much less optimistic message. Another woman joked about the “book/child ratio—if you’re a female faculty member, you need to have more books than children in order to get tenure!”

Women talked about the impact of children on their careers. “I know that my work production has suffered. I don’t regret that. I used to work on weekends; I used to work in the evenings. That doesn’t happen any more. My work ends at six o’clock. That’s the bottom line.” Others spoke of the guilt they feel from missing dinner several times a week; from children complaining about not seeing them enough; and from the dual pressures to spend weekends with their work and with their family members. They spoke too of the anxiety raised by hearing how academic life leads to divorce.

The participants pointed out that, for the most part, women bear an inordinate share of the repercussions of having a family. One woman told of missing an afternoon seminar in order to take her child to the doctor. Later, a male colleague introduced her to the seminar speaker, saying, “It’s a shame you missed so-and-so’s seminar.” “I said, ‘Thanks a lot. But you know, I had to take my kid somewhere.’ It was awkward: I’m meeting this guy, but why wasn’t I at his seminar? I was taking my kid to an appointment, and that’s what I had to do!” For the most part, the women were frustrated by the feeling that the rising stars in their departments were the ones who have stay-at-home wives to take care of the children and household chores. While acknowledging that some of her male colleagues are actively involved in their children’s lives, one woman also said that “the only man I know who bore the brunt of the childrearing—because his wife had a very active professional career outside the university—did not get tenure.”

The stress of combining career and family, said some women, has occasionally been exacerbated by administrators' lack of knowledge about or commitment to family-oriented policies. One woman told of a personal crisis with her teenaged daughter and the complexity and confusion in trying to arrange a tenure clock stoppage. Another woman complained that, unlike some universities, UM allows a woman to stop the tenure clock only once for childbearing. Yet another woman complained of the difficulties of "working with my supervisor around the modified duties policy." Despite assurances of being released from teaching after the birth of her child, administrators tried to pressure her into teaching a course anyway. In her department, said another participant, administrators encourage tenure-track faculty members to take a one-year fellowship away from the university—something that requires the geographic mobility of men with stay-at-home wives.

Conclusion

The era that has brought record numbers of women into higher education coincides with a time of ever-increasing workload demands. Though the pressures of modern academic life befall both men and women, this report suggests many ways in which the burdens fall more heavily on women faculty members. As a result, some disciplines, such as engineering and the sciences, have difficulty recruiting and retaining the "best and the brightest" women graduate students and faculty. And, as the voices of the 25 women recorded here suggest, while life as a junior professor at the University of Michigan can be a joy, it is also a continual struggle. A number of institutional changes, such as those suggested in this report, would help both men and women faculty members to accommodate their whole life needs across the span of their careers.