Closing the Implementation Gap at URI

Spring 2010 Administrators’ Breakfast Summary

Sponsored by the Vice President of Administration, the Provost’s Office, the Women’s Center, the Elsevier Foundation, and the Schmidt Labor Research Center

Overview
On May 18, 2010 the URI Work-Life Committee hosted a working breakfast for approximately 50 administrators to discuss issues dealing with workplace flexibility at URI and to explore ways to address the work-life needs of employees at URI. Following opening remarks by President Dooley and Vice President Weygand, brief presentations were given by Helen Mederer, Professor of Sociology and Barb Silver, Research Coordinator at the Schmidt Labor Research Center, dealing with the growing importance of flexible options in today’s workplace, and the increasing presence of flexibility in academic institutions nationally and at URI. Participants then worked in small groups to discuss how to move our institution forward. Below are summary remarks.

Question: What are some of the workplace flexibility issues that we should explore at URI? What is the most important thing we can do to address the needs of employees at URI?

Common themes that emerged from respondents included:
1. Provide Orientation and Training
2. Provide a Centralized Resource
3. Broadly Communicate Available Options
4. Conduct a Needs Assessment
5. Create Mechanisms for Coverage
6. Consider A Variety of Flexibility Options

Provide Orientation and Training
A clear priority among many respondents was the need for orientation and training on multiple levels. It was recommended that orientation and training for supervisors, administrators, and chairs be provided on the available work-life policies and practices at URI. Cross-training, whereby workers are trained in alternative work areas, was also emphasized. This would allow the workplace to more readily adapt to gaps and encourage a “culture of coverage” among employees.
Provide a Centralized Resource
Others expressed the need for a go-to person for information. Some mentioned a centralized resource within HR, and some suggested a trained person within each division or college who can help supervisors become familiar with policies and practices. One suggested that HR could take the lead on being able to test some of the “common ideas” within particular classifications/unions to better understand the impact. Many expressed the need to determine the chain of information flow (from deans to chairs, etc.) about policies and procedure and identify how it would regularly occur.

Broadly Communicate Available Options
There were many comments regarding the need to broadly communicate available options to the entire URI community. There are numerous unions at the University and many employees do not know of the benefits they are provided. The Work-Life Committee should produce information, such as a matrix, to clarify options and educate union members about specific contractual limits and opportunities. Also, many recognize the need to work toward more consistency and coordination of work-life policies across departments and union contracts. One suggested moving all classified unions under the jurisdiction of the Board of Governors. Orientation of new employees, including new supervisors and new chairs was mentioned.

Conduct a Needs Assessment
Some suggested the need for a standardized survey of the employees’ work-life issues, including their needs and their concerns. This can provide much information that could be union-specific, enabling more informed bargaining during contract negotiations, and with the administration concerning basic rights, such as parental leave, sick banks, etc.

Create Mechanisms for Coverage
Concerns were identified about how work would be covered when employees are out on leave, or reduce their work hours, especially given the current scarcity of University resources. Suggestions to address this issue included work sharing, creating emergency “back-up” employee lists, establishing a funding pool and more flexibility for hiring interim or short-term employees, guaranteed compensation for fill-in employees who take over the tasks of those on leave, and retaining existing positions for others to replace those going on phased retirement or part-time status.

Consider A Variety of Flexibility Options
A variety of interesting and important flexibility suggestions were offered. Some emphasized the importance of thinking of creative means to provide flexibility for classified staff. There were many general comments urging supervisors to be supportive, to foster a “culture of coverage” in their units, and to embrace open-minded, creative solutions, thinking “outside the box.” As before, training for supervisors was encouraged so they would more readily consider creative options. Specific ideas included:

- Seasonal flexibility
- Phase-out retirement plans for all employees
- Telecommuting (working from home)
- Cross-training
- Shortened work weeks during down times (e.g., summer, intersession)
- Regular work day “stress relievers” (yoga breaks, walking, etc.)
- Professional development time for every employee (e.g., 1 hour/month)
- Expanded day care, including University sponsorship, for children and adults
- Sick leave donation from one union to another
- University-based, not union-based, sick leave bank for all employees
- Opt-out tenure-clock stop policy for faculty taking leaves
- Proactively address dual-career hire situations

**Question:** What can YOU do as an administrator/supervisor to promote workplace flexibility for your employees? How will you follow up?

Many identified the need to educate themselves on the policies and practices in place at URI to promote workplace flexibility for employees, and to be open and well-informed. Again, many noted the need to identify a go-to person in certain instances, as well as the need for orientation of supervisors and administrators on practices and policies. There was also a theme of promoting respect for employees, treat people as professionals, and create a supportive work climate that allows people to excel. One example of this is to continue to support stoppage of tenure clock for all faculty who are eligible due to home issues. Some suggested they will summarize the offerings of the union contracts to notify employees of what is available and what is not. Another suggestion was to communicate to prospective job applicants what is available.