

URI/AAUP NEWS DECEMBER 2007
Work-Life Balance at URI
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In 2001, AAUP's Statement of Principles on Family Responsibilities and Academic Work was adopted as Association policy:

. . . Transforming the academic workplace into one that supports family life requires substantial changes in policy and, more significantly, changes in academic culture. These changes require a thorough commitment from the leaders of educational institutions as well as from the faculty. No template of policies fits every institution, but it is essential that the priorities, workloads, rewards structure, and values of the academy permit and support an integration of family and work. . . . Because of the unique characteristics of academic life, . . . tremendous potential exists for achieving a healthy work-family integration. At the same time, academic culture poses a special challenge. The lack of a clear boundary in academic lives between work and family has . . . meant that work has been all pervasive, often to the detriment of family. . .

Achieving work-life balance increasingly is recognized as essential in meeting the diverse needs of a rapidly changing workforce. In 2003, the United States Senate designated October as National Work and Family Month. In doing so, they concurred with research and the business community that "supporting a balance between work and personal life is in the best interest of national worker productivity," and that "reducing the conflict between work and family life should be a national priority" (<http://www.awlp.org>).

Family-friendly and work-life balance initiatives are being introduced at universities nationwide. At URI, work-life issues are included in the URI AAUP contract through the provision of a 6-week paid parental leave policy, the ability to use sick leave for family care, and other work-life balance strategies. These issues are also part of our present negotiations, and we hope to clarify and modestly extend these practices to promote the flexibility needed to fit career-long caregiving issues that faculty encounter.

Why is this issue so important to our society?

Today, 85% of all workers have long periods of daily caregiving responsibilities sometime during their work careers. The old division of labor, where some people are full-time caregivers and some are full-time workers, does not exist anymore—more than 60% of all women and 75% of all men are employed, and for the past 25 years time spent at work has been increasing. As a society, we need to recognize the economic and moral value of re-conceptualizing caregiving as vital work. Caregiving provides human capital by producing the next generation of workers and assuring their survival, and providing present workers with the replenishment that is necessary for them to go back into the workplace and continue to be productive (that's why employed women joke that they need a wife!). Moreover, caregiving also accomplishes the social contract with past workers by caring for them after they are no longer in the workforce. Finally, caregiving also provides a market for manufactured household products, thus helping to keep the economy strong.

Among all employees, caregivers and others, there is growing consensus that we are all too tightly scheduled, and work is dominating our lives. This issue of work taking precedence over caregiving and our personal lives off the jobs is happening world wide, but U.S. culture is fairly unique in our uneasiness in acknowledging our right to lives outside of work. As a culture, we don't talk much about this, yet this situation serves none of us well.

Thus, on October 17, a group of 39 URI administrators and other community members gathered at the Women's Center to discuss how to create a work environment that is conducive to employee wellbeing, low stress, and continued high productivity. As President Carothers noted that morning, it is important for URI to be engaged in these efforts, as strong families and life-balanced workers are good for the economy and for social sustainability.

It was clear from the energy and ideas displayed during this forum that members of the URI community are concerned about work-life integration. Participants mentioned issues around work scheduling and work design, affordable housing, community supports, elder care, spousal accommodation, and child care. Moreover, the connection between providing work-life balance and recruitment and retention were well recognized by all those present. Discussed also was the inefficiency of not responding or responding on an informal, case-by-case basis, as this approach creates excess and redundant burdens on the institution, results in unfair or discriminatory practices, and sends a message to employees that their needs are not a priority to the University.

Several campus initiatives are working to develop an increased campus awareness of the importance of responding to work-life balance issues. The NSF ADVANCE project has provided a rationale and resources, and is working with the President's Commission on the Status of Women, the URI Women's Center and other equity committees across campus to create work-life balance guidelines and policies. URI's ad hoc Work-Life Committee has been in existence for four years, and its membership includes the expertise of ADVANCE, PCOSW, EE/AAO, and the URI Women's Center. The Work-Life committee has worked on issues including parental leave provisions, dual career guidelines, lactation space, child care facilities, and informational media to promote climate and structural changes within URI. A summary of campus initiatives can be found at www.uri.edu/ADVANCE/work-life-support.html. The committee also created a "virtual work-life office" that can be found online at www.uri.edu/wlfc. This portal website functions as an information and referral resource, and we hope that it is a first step in creating a permanent work-life office at URI.

From late February throughout early April 2008, the Work-Life Committee has planned a series of events about work-life needs and priorities. Watch for our flyers and e-mails that will announce a legislative event, speakers, panel discussions, films, and discussion lunches, all aimed at informing the URI community about these issues and beginning the work towards changing the culture and practices that will help employees achieve greater balance between work and non-work lives. Like the AAUP's Statement of Principles, we are convinced that tremendous potential exists within URI to achieve healthy work-life integration.

References: AAUP. Alliance for Work-Life Progress (www.awlp.org), Fortune Magazine

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