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**Work-Life at URI: A newsletter from the URI Work-Life Committee for Winter 2013**

URI Work-Life Committee

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most likely to lose their jobs for taking time off to care for sick family members, or to not have as much access to family and friends participation is increasing. Both are seeking jobs that have some flexibility in how, when, and where their work gets done. Women’s career trajectories can be significantly challenged by competing work and caregiving responsibilities, and need work schedules and leave policies to enable them to do both well. Research shows that women caregivers drop out of demanding jobs, such as tenure-track science and engineering faculty jobs, for example, at a much higher rate than do men. Both men and women faculty are increasingly looking for positions for partners, and more effective dual career hiring solutions are also needed. Work-life is also an issue of RACE/ETHNICITY. White people are less likely (19% in one AARP survey) to care for an elderly relative than are Asians (42%), Latinos (34%), and African Americans (28%). Cultural and socioeconomic differences play a role in how much family and friends participate in caregiving. Work-life is an AGE issue. As our workforce ages, valuable older workers need and/or want to remain in the workforce and will benefit from part-time and creative phased retirement options, job sharing, and other flexible work arrangements. Flexible work arrangements also benefit those who are differently abled, making work-life a DISABILITY issue. Finally, work-life is a SEXUAL ORIENTATION issue as we seek to include same sex couples in our leave and benefits policies.

In order to recruit and retain a diverse workforce, and promote an equitable workplace, work-life policies and practices must be a top priority. These practices include mechanisms for diverse employees, whom of may experience isolation or lack of support, to find that support through networking and mentoring opportunities. As Joan Williams, Distinguished Professor of Law, and UC Hastings Director of the Center for Work Law, says, “A diversity program without a work-life component just won’t work.”
Implementing new policies and practices to help employees better balance competing life, family, and work responsibilities can be complicated in an institution comprised of nine labor unions with nine separate collective bargaining agreements. But the flexibility model developed in the URI Controller’s Office is testament to the impact that creative determination can have, and offers an excellent example of how one URI office took the initiative to formally offer creative flexibility solutions to its approximately 62 employees across 5 departments and 3 labor unions.

Because of the nature of the work, the Controller’s Office is one place where flex hours and compressed work weeks are feasible options. At least as long as nine years ago, the office made flexible starting times informally available. In 2007, Sharon Bell, Controller, and Trish Casey, Associate Controller, with input from Human Resources, implemented a comprehensive Voluntary Flexible Schedule program. This thoughtfully developed program offers basic flex options, while emphasizing the need to ensure business continues to be conducted efficiently. As stated in the program description, it “offers the staff the option to work a flexible schedule based on [the] department’s needs as well as ensuring supervisory input, customer service, overall department responsibilities and deadlines, etc., are covered.”

The program offers five flex options to staff and managers alike. Both are available for 6-month terms, and approval for either is granted depending on seniority, the department’s workload, and other factors. The ‘flexible day-off’ schedule offers essentially a compressed work week, in which an employee may take one day off during a work period, working still a 35-hour work week. This second option is a “non-standard hours schedule,” in which an employee may design a 7-hour workday, but still working a 35-hour work week. Some managers talk about mirror national findings that flexibility reaps increases in job satisfaction, productivity, morale, and more. “People are able to be productive both at work and at home, and some employees say they are more productive during their flex weeks than their non-flex weeks,” she added. Bell agreed. “Things are going very well. There is no diminishment in productivity or workload. Employees opting for the flexible ‘day-off’ schedule get on a roll, they put in the extra time during a day, and don’t have to stop what they are doing. They know they have to get what they need to get done and have things in order for the day they are going to be out.”

At first, Bell and Casey shared concerns echoed by others hesitant to implement flex at all. “We were worried about abuse. The first time, we worried whether we set the rules too high.” said Bell. Departments within the Controller’s Office must develop plans that address issues relating to overall department operations. After 6 months and a positive assessment, employees may re-new or modify their contract, or return to their regular work schedule.