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New paid leave policy proposal gaining ground at WKU

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com
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Lauren McClain

Submitted

When Western Kentucky University faculty members welcome newborns or adopted children into their families, they could be allowed to effectively take up to a semester off under a new policy proposal that's gaining ground.

Last semester, WKU's Faculty Senate unanimously endorsed a universitywide paid parental leave policy. Lauren McClain, a sociology professor and the policy's chief backer, developed it with support from the senate's Faculty Welfare and Professional Responsibilities Committee and with help from Tony Glisson, WKU's director of human resources.

"I have not heard one negative thing about it," McClain said.

After it won the Faculty Senate's approval last semester, the policy was submitted to WKU's Council of Academic Deans for review. That group, which works with WKU's provost, has now submitted it back for senate authorization, which could happen next month. Once that takes place, it would need the deans council's approval before becoming official.

"From my understanding, they're ready to approve it," McClain said.

WKU Provost Cheryl Stevens was not immediately available Tuesday for comment. Asked for comment from the administration, WKU spokesman Bob Skipper wrote in an email that "any comment from the administration would come after the final wording is approved."

Under the policy, faculty members could take off up to one full semester or 16 consecutive semester weeks that cross terms (for example, if the birth or adoption happens in the middle of one semester). The request would have to be made at least 30 days in advance.

It would provide for work arrangements that allow the affected faculty member to be reassigned to a relevant job – such as research or administrative duties – if necessary.

Full-time faculty members would be automatically eligible for this benefit, while part-time faculty would have to be employed for one full semester (either spring or fall) to be eligible.

Following review by the deans council, the group requested that the 16-week leave be shared between married faculty members, rather than each individual getting 16 semester weeks off work.

“The concern is that in smaller departments ... that it would be sort of be an undue burden,” McClain said.

If ultimately approved by the university’s administration, McClain said WKU would be the first public university in Kentucky to have a one-semester paid parental leave policy. Since its preliminary approval by the Faculty Senate, McClain said representatives from universities inside and outside Kentucky have reached out to her hoping to adopt similar policies.

It’s also having a local impact on campus, McClain said. After recently explaining the proposed policy to a pregnant colleague, it drew an

emotional response.

“When she realized I was serious about it, she just started crying,” McClain said.

McClain said she hopes the change will boost faculty morale and keep talented faculty at WKU with an enticing benefit.

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WKU faculty approve new paid parental leave policy

Aaron Mudd

Education reporter. Covers education and related issues, focusing primarily on the Bowling Green and Warren County public school districts and Western Kentucky University.

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