

Stakeholders all across higher education share an emerging vision for future faculty (essay)

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A Shared Vision for Faculty

Key stakeholders all across higher education -- including boards, policy makers, administrators at all levels, faculty of all types, disciplinary societies, and unions -- increasingly have one. It's time to make it a reality, argues Adrianna Kezar.

March 17, 2016

By

[Adrianna Kezar](#)

For 30 years, critics have proclaimed that the tenure-track and adjunct models of faculty are broken. It is 2016, and we still have a crisis when it comes to how higher education should deal with faculty members and the roles faculty members should play.

Tenure-track faculty models overemphasize a very narrow definition of research and do not encourage or provide accountability for quality teaching or improvement of teaching. Studies demonstrate, for instance, that only 25 percent of faculty members excel at both research and teaching. Such models also hamstring institutions to paying wages beyond traditional retirement age to faculty members (who aren't required to retire at 65) and to supporting fields of study where enrollments may no longer exist.

Of course, the reality is that almost three-quarters of faculty members today are not on a tenure track. And a faculty workforce with a significant number of adjuncts provides no institutional stability for the teaching force, brings in droves of fluctuating employees with limited or no experience teaching for the institution, and leaves students without faculty members available for office hours and mentoring. In addition, adjunct faculty are left out of institutional discussions about learning goals, course assignments or textbook selection and are typically excluded from professional development, evaluation and feedback.

Meanwhile, the adjunct model clearly has human and moral costs. Such faculty members are often living on poverty wages, with no benefits, job security or career trajectory -- and all this after they've received a Ph.D. from a university that never told them about the low job prospects.

As part of [Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success](#), we have long highlighted the need to better

support faculty off the tenure track as a short-term solution to the larger faculty crisis. But that is indeed only a short-term solution -- one with increasing popularity but limited long-term utility. While it can eradicate some of the most egregious problems that have resulted from higher education's overreliance on adjunct and contingent faculty, we have to rethink faculty roles for the long run. The academy simply can no longer ignore this essential work.

What should the faculty look like in the future so we can overcome this crisis once and for all? To respond to that question, we recently surveyed key stakeholders across higher education -- including boards, policy makers, administrators at all levels, faculty of all types, disciplinary societies and unions -- to examine their perspectives on what the future for faculty should be.

One current stereotype is that faculty and administrative views of this issue are so diametrically opposed that discussions of future faculty roles are not possible: as faculty members (and unions) cling to tenure-track roles, administrators driven by neoliberalism want to deprofessionalize all faculty into adjuncts.

But the survey findings debunk that stereotype. We found many points of consensus among all those surveyed -- including unionized faculty members -- that seemed to indicate a shared vision and some clear ways forward for academe. Some of their key points of agreement included:

1. We need more full-time faculty. The academy needs to decrease its dependence on part-timers and have more full-time faculty, although not necessarily tenure-track faculty.
2. We need to professionalize the faculty. Institutions can do that through ensuring for faculty members academic freedom (potentially outside tenure systems), inclusion in shared governance, professional development, a fair and equitable system of promotion, and decision making related to curriculum and students. (Those surveyed saw these actions as vital for any type of faculty member, whether tenured or adjunct, full time or part time, senior or junior.)
3. Nontenured faculty members need longer contracts. Semester to semester and year to year is just too short. Those surveyed thought three-, five- or seven-year contracts (with longer ones given over time) were more reasonable.
4. We need more emphasis on teaching. Institutions must make that happen, whether through tenuring faculty members for teaching-only positions or hiring full-time faculty members on long-term contracts who focus on teaching.
5. All faculty members should have a scholarly role. Although that role typically would not involve conducting original research, it would include attending conferences and keeping up with developments in one's field.
6. Differentiation and customization of faculty roles are crucial. Not all faculty members need to teach, conduct research or perform service. Also, faculty members should not do the same thing their whole career. Perhaps they should focus on teaching for a while and then move more to service and administrative roles or to research.
7. Faculty members should have greater work flexibility. Such flexibility could include stop-the-clock policies, part-time tenure-track positions and job sharing. That kind of approach is vitally needed to accommodate families and create better working conditions.
8. Faculty roles should emphasize collaboration. Faculty members should work across departments, units and outside groups to foster student success and cross-disciplinary research and service.
9. Faculty members should focus on student learning as the most central activity. They should particularly work to support and ensure the success of first-generation and low-income students.

Our survey asked not only about potential faculty models or faculty roles in the future but also the feasibility of those features becoming part of the enterprise. Here those surveyed expressed pessimism: they doubted there would be adequate funding to support this vision for the faculty and believed bureaucratic complexities would hamper such

approaches. While difficulties in altering policies and contracts can certainly arise, I was surprised by these comments -- especially given the reality that some campuses are already doing this work.

In fact, for those institutions that have implemented new models, it has been fairly easy. I have spoken to senior administrators and faculty members at dozens of campuses and departments that are quietly revising their approach to faculty work to look much more like the emerging shared vision of those we surveyed.

But those same administrators have voiced a fear about being too far out in front of what those at other institutions are doing. Campuses do not embrace this work with a sense of pride -- as being leaders.

The time has come for institutions to stop being quiet and start seeing this work as one of the primary drivers for advancing the broad mission of student and institutional success. Ample evidence suggests that the future faculty model outlined above would be much better to support student success. There are national calls (see the [Aspen Institute Initiative-New College Leadership Project](#)) for campus leaders to make student success a primary focus, and championing these new faculty models would be clearly aligned with these efforts.

I hope that institutions will proudly promote their work to implement new faculty models that support student learning and outcomes and institutional goals. And I hope that foundations and policy groups will find ways to support this work by bringing it out of the shadows and demonstrating not only that it can be done but that it represents a high priority for the future of academe.

Bio

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