

A WHITE PAPER FROM
THE COLLABORATIVE ON
ACADEMIC CAREERS IN
HIGHER EDUCATION (COACHE)

Perspectives on Midcareer Faculty and Advice for Supporting Them

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collaborative on
academic careers
in higher education



Support for COACHE white papers is provided by institutions participating in the Collaborative. They are offered freely to members as part of our project's three-year support and engagement plan. After an embargo period, they are released to the general public.

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Suggested citation:

Mathews, K. R. (2014). Perspectives on midcareer faculty and advice for supporting them. Cambridge, MA: The Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education.

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Perspectives on Midcareer Faculty and Advice for Supporting Them

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Introduction: The Problem

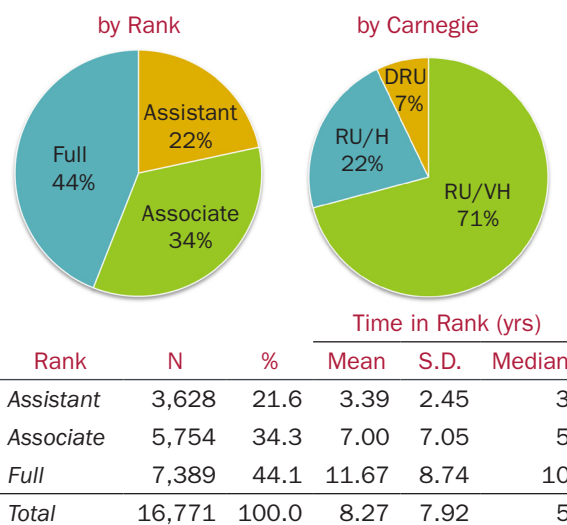
COACHE began as the Study of New Scholars, a project with a mission to understand and support pre-tenure faculty. Our survey and three-year support model focused on *recruitment* and *retention*. But since COACHE broadened its focus to include associate and full professors, we have learned that colleges' greater needs at these career stages are *engagement*, *vitality*, and *productivity*. As Kaminsky and Geisler (2012) reported, departure rates are higher in the first 10 years of the academic career; post-tenure faculty leave at much lower rates than pre-tenure faculty.

Since embarking on this research, we have learned that the feeling of relief at becoming a tenured associate professor cedes quickly into a "let-down." Along with tenure comes an increased teaching load, greater expectations for service and advising, a more competitive market for grants, and the disappearance of mentoring programs that supported them as early-career faculty. In light of recent attention on "student success," these faculty are now being asked to add to their expectations for research excellence the new requirements to track student progression course by course, even week by week.

The toll of these obligations is heavier on women and faculty of color who, given their fewer numbers at this rank (in many disciplines), are asked to serve more, advise more, show up more--and not just for their department and the university, but for their discipline, too. These populations are also less privy to informal networks that provide support and clarity on promotion processes and criteria.

COACHE Snapshots of Midcareer Faculty

The data described in this review are derived from COACHE survey responses from full-time, tenure-stream faculty at public research universities that participated in our project in three cycles (2011-12, 2012-13, and 2013-14). Information about the ranks, time in rank, and institutional settings of the faculty in this analytic sample appear below.



With rare exceptions across the 20 themes in the COACHE survey, tenured associate professors, on average, rate their satisfaction and experiences lower than do assistant and full professors. The COACHE results on the following page consider associate professors in two groups separated by the median time in rank. From this perspective, the pattern of dissatisfaction is especially pronounced for those at the associate rank for 6 years or longer.

The longer professors remains at the associate rank, the more likely they are to be dissatisfied with many aspects of their work, their colleagues, their leaders, and the recognition they receive (rather, do not receive) for what they do.

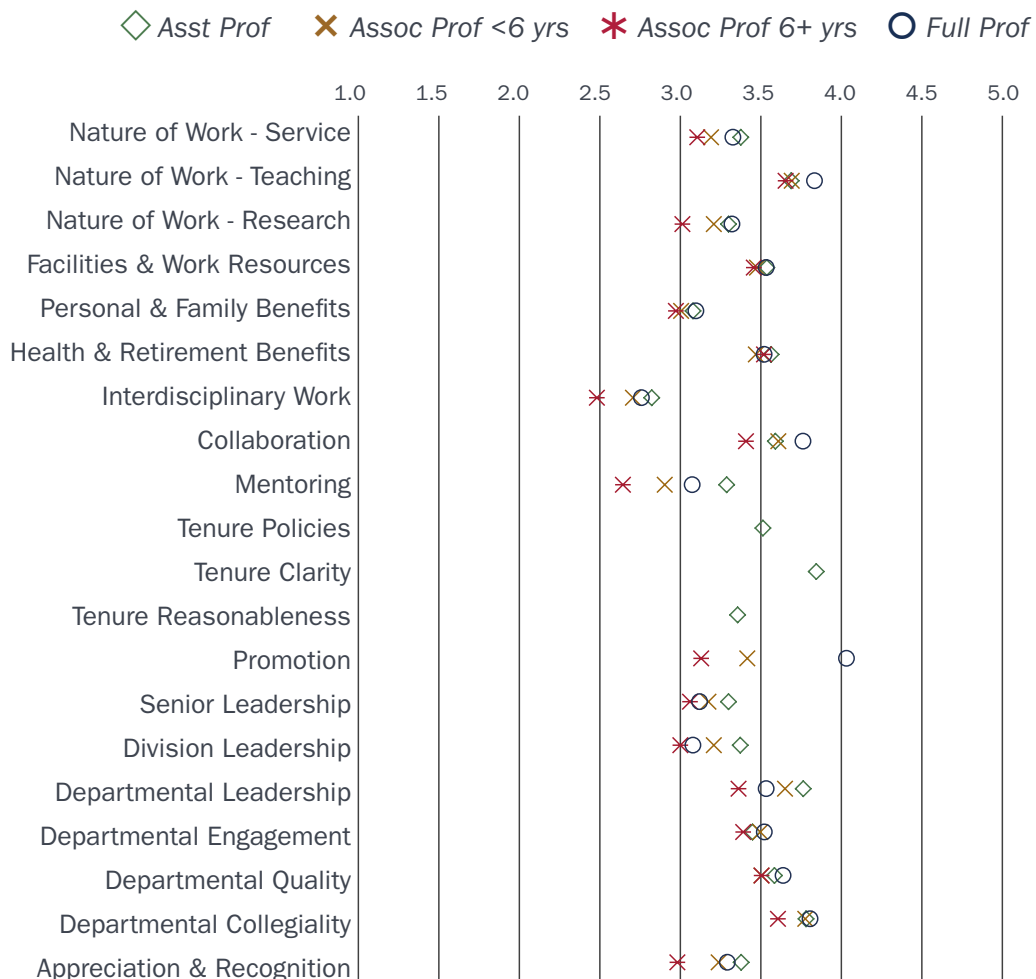
“U-shaped.” With several thousand respondents in our data set, COACHE can organize the results to examine satisfaction by rank while controlling for the proverbial mid-life crisis; when we do, we also detect a middle-age slump.

Is this phenomenon merely the reflection of a mid-life malaise evident in all industries? That is, to what extent is the associate professor “slump” a product of survey respondents’ age? COACHE examined research in other industries that suggests the trajectory of overall job satisfaction—controlling for many other variables—is, in fact,

Looking just at rank and time in rank (i.e., not accounting for age), we find that associate professors who are in the first few years after tenure are more satisfied with their institutions than assistant professors in the later years of their rank. Similarly, recently-promoted full professors are more satisfied with their institutions than are

Associate professors – especially long-term associates – are the least satisfied faculty, on average, among the ladder ranks.

COACHE survey ratings, by theme and by rank (and years-in-rank for Associate Professors)



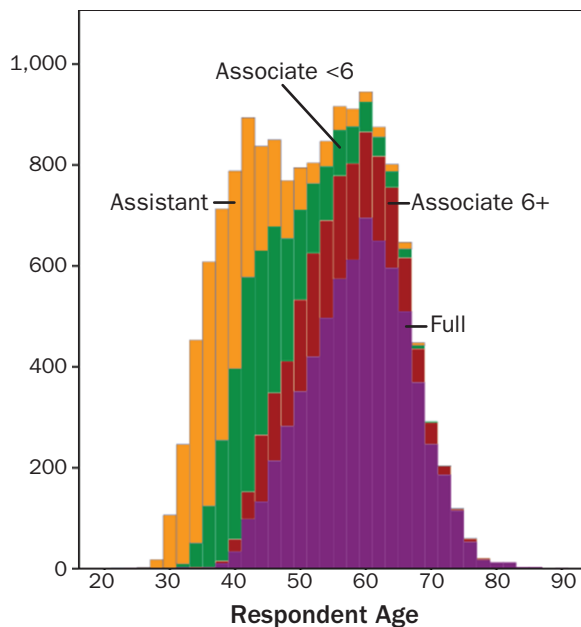
associate professors who have been in that rank for more than five years. Yet, the longer assistant and associate professors stay in their rank, the more dissatisfied they become.

When considering both time-in-rank and that U-shaped trend in age and satisfaction, COACHE finds that the “experienced” associate professor (at that rank for more than 5 years) is by and large less satisfied with his or her institution and department than is the recently tenured associate professor.

The advantages that other industries have in

With a median age of 38, assistant professors should not be assumed to be “young” faculty.

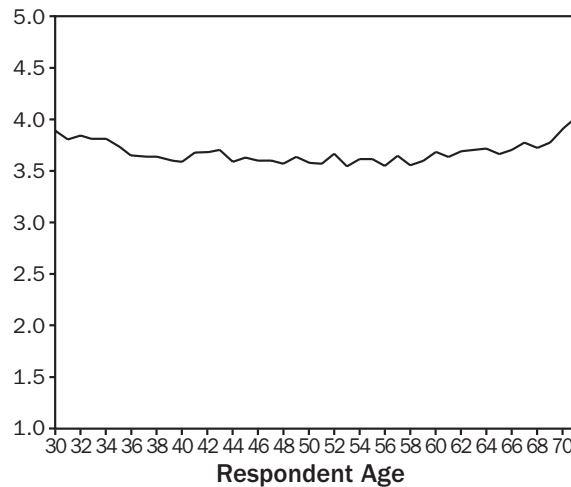
Distribution of COACHE survey respondents by age, rank, and for associates, year in rank



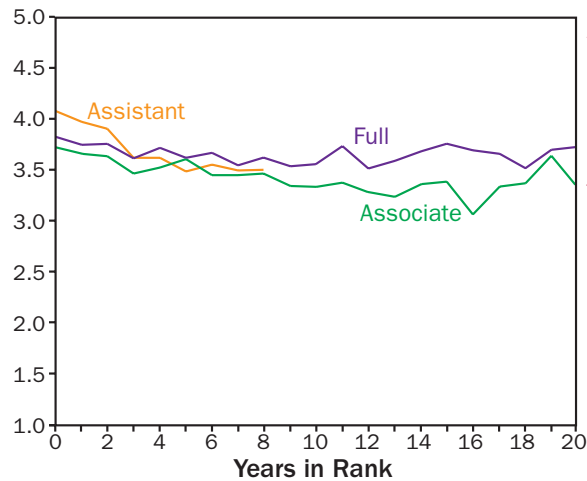
Rank	N	Mean	S.D.
Assistant	3,247	39.5	7.06
Associate <6 years	2,859	45.1	6.83
Associate 6+ years	2,197	55.0	7.62
Full	6,704	58.5	7.97

Satisfaction with institution as a place to work

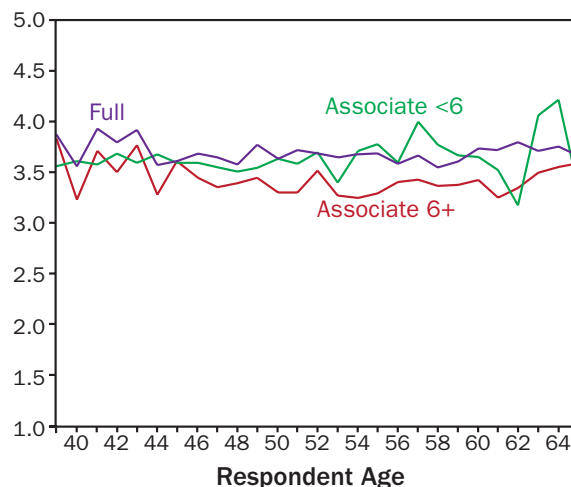
5=Very satisfied, 1 = Very dissatisfied



Like employees in other industries, overall workplace satisfaction among university faculty is U-shaped by age.

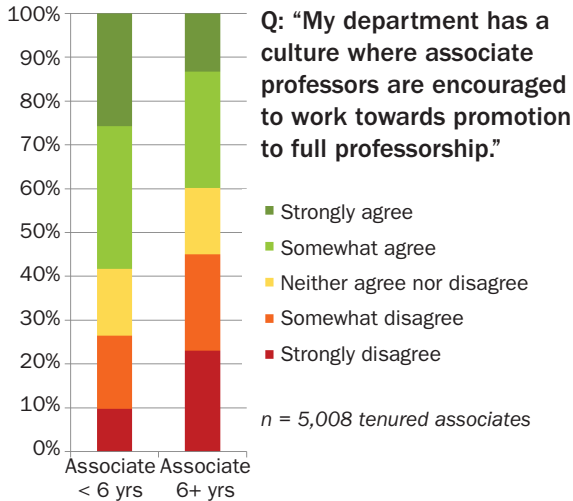


Assistant and associate professors appear to grow less satisfied with their institutions the longer they stay in rank.



Controlling for age, associate professors who are in that rank 6 years or longer tend to be less satisfied than full and recently-tenured professors.

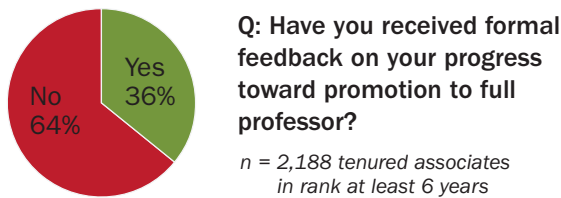
Departmental cultures do not reflect CAOs' expectations that all associate professors should be encouraged to work toward promotion.



improving satisfaction over time are, like adrenaline shots for the career, their more articulated opportunities for promotion. Unfortunately for the academy, there are typically only two promotion opportunities—to associate and to full—available for faculty who wish to remain members of the faculty. Yet, the one opportunity for tenured professors to be promoted in rank often goes unrealized.

At a recent meeting of public university provosts, the sentiment was unanimous: every associate professor is expected to work towards promotion to full professor. Yet, according to COACHE results, departmental cultures do not reflect these expectations. Nearly 45% of experienced associates disagree that there is a culture of promotion in their departments. (Even in the first five years at that rank, only about 3 in 5 associate professors agree that a culture of promotion exists.) Nearly 2 out of 3 experienced associates say they have never received formal feedback on their progress toward promotion. They are more than two times more likely than recently-tenured associates to report that they have no plans to submit their dossier for promotion. In fact, nearly 20% say they intend never to come up for full professor.

Even after 6 years in rank, most associate professors have never received formal feedback on their progress toward promotion.

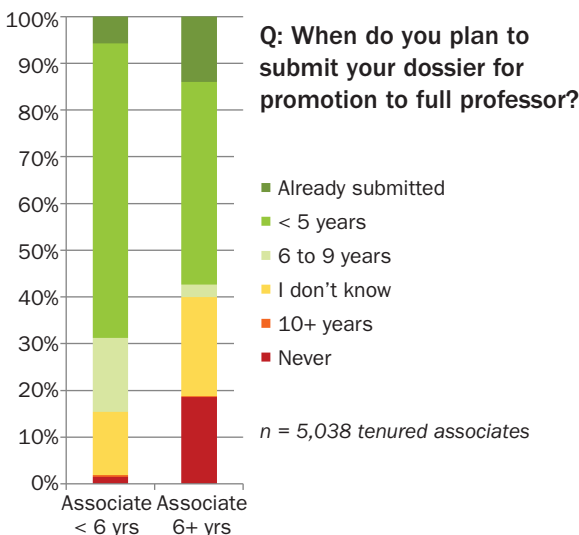


Defining Success for the Associate Professor

Consistent with this gap between provostial expectations and faculty perceptions, studies of midcareer faculty have revealed bimodal attitudes about promotion. Should promotion to full at the university be reserved for only for an elite class of researchers, while others retire at the rank of associate? Or are faculty hired and tenured on the assumption that they all have the professional and academic potential to achieve full professorship? Diverging opinions exist not just between institutions, but even between departments, and worse, within them.

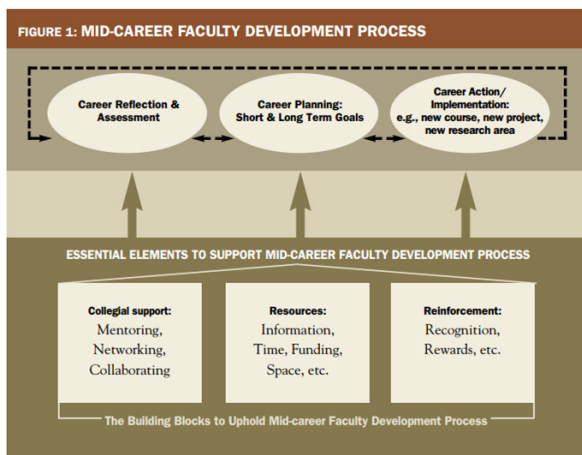
Roger Baldwin and colleagues (2008) identified this and other "contested topics" concerning Michigan State University faculty at midcareer. These topics and example attitudes within each are adapted in the following table.

So, it should come as little surprise that 40% of these long-term associate professors have no plans to come up for promotion to full.



Contested Topic	Example
Midcareer faculty need and deserve support	“Given <i>early</i> career faculty needs, shouldn’t <i>midcareer</i> faculty get less because they deserve less?”
Expectations for promotion/merit increases should be broadened and differentiated	“At a research university, research productivity should be the primary criterion for promotion.”
Expectations for promotion should be very specific	“Are specific criteria clear/fair, or narrow/inflexible?”
Chairs should not reveal anything about the deliberations for tenure and promotion.	“Should we tell them they barely made tenure?”
All faculty should receive the same type of annual review, regardless of career stage.	“Are annual reviews too much at this stage?”
It is appropriate for a chair to advise a faculty member to change his/her specialization or field of study.	“Can we ask them to redirect research to department, college, institutional needs, or would that threaten their academic freedom?”

Adapted from Baldwin et al. (2008)



Source: Baldwin & Chang (2006)

Underlying these often unstated opinions are questions about what success looks like: Is promotion to full the only definition of success for the associate professor? If so, is research excellence the only path to get there?

In our experience, what is often written off as faculty disengagement or more cruelly, “tenure’s mistakes,” is in fact the observers’ inability to consider the institution’s culpability for the roadblocks to faculty progression. In addition, universities fail to measure—much less, reward—all of the important things that associate professors are quite engaged in doing, such as teaching, advising, and mentoring; performing service and leadership in the department, discipline, and university; and improving the institution’s profile through outreach and community engagement.

Frameworks

Fortunately, other scholars and COACHE’s own experiences working with administrators in the trenches are creating models and collecting promising examples of career interventions for faculty in the associate professor stage. Baldwin and Chang (2006) created a diagram (at left) describing three possible stages of a midcareer faculty development process: from career reflection and assessment; to career planning; to career action and implementation. These processes tend to include some combination of interventions along several categories. Many institutions are already performing a few of these activities; some, even, can point to versions of most of them. Few, however, are coordinating them, and rare is the example of rigorous evaluation and assessment to determine which interventions work best for an institution’s particular faculty culture.

The range of interventions outlined by Baldwin and his Michigan State colleagues (2008) include:

- Midcareer awareness/information resources (e.g., online resources)
- Programs for career planning, development, and renewal (e.g., visioning exercises)
- Mentoring and networking

- Teaching support
- Research support
- Awards and recognition
- Midcareer faculty support available at consortia and national organizations

Detailed explanations of these categories are available in Baldwins' works cited at the end of this report.

Recommendations from the field

Through our research and work with practitioners, COACHE has identified several promising practices. This is by no means an exhaustive list; for example, department chair leadership development and periodic, written reviews are, by now, considered routine best practices.

Frame the issue with data. Before mounting any new program to support and advance your midcareer faculty, seek first to understand the nature and extent of the midcareer challenges on your campus. What data do you already have about your faculty? Start with the “frozen” data: what are the numbers of associates, what is their time in rank, by department, by gender, by race/ethnicity? Then, look at the transactional data at your disposal: research productivity, teaching loads (courses and enrollments), and other faculty activities you track. You might find, for example, that women and faculty of color are disproportionately stalled at the associate rank, and they are bearing a disproportionate service or teaching load. You are likely to find at least a few associate professors who are qualified, or nearly so, to come up for full.

Partner with your faculty. As you undertake this project, pose it as a researchable proposition to your faculty. Engage them in the work, perhaps by inviting them to lead an ad hoc committee on midcareer faculty. Look also to former department chairs, emeritus faculty or the recently retired to inform and, even, to provide much-needed leadership on this work. If it is determined that better mentorship of midcareer faculty is required,

consider forming a council of mentors to make recommendations on possible improvements to mentoring and the recognition of those who do the mentoring.

Design orientations for the entire academic career.

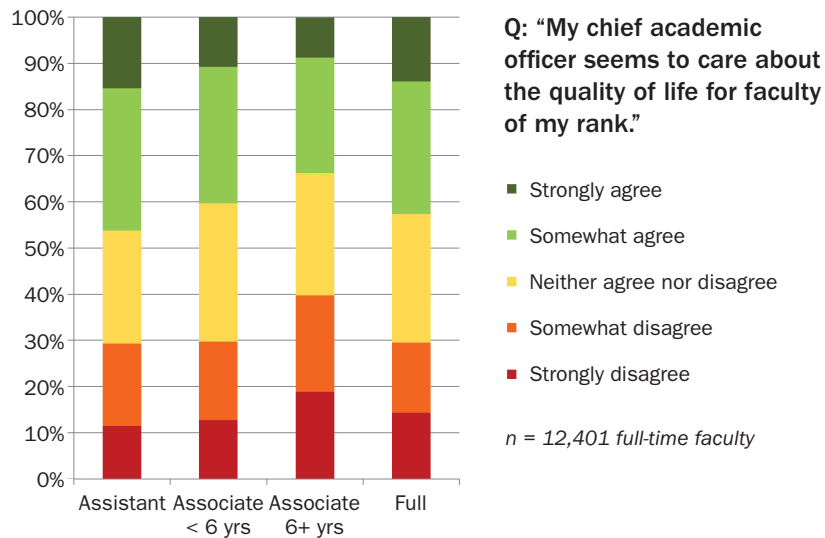
At new faculty orientations, describe the life cycle, including a description of the realities of the newly tenured, and the various possibilities of what success looks like at associate. Providing such “anticipatory guidance” helps faculty contextualize and endure their career satisfaction troughs when they arrive. Then provide another orientation program for newly-tenured faculty; workshops over the course of a year might include titles such as “Getting to full,” “Running a committee,” and “Difficult conversations.” At this stage, ask faculty: What do you want said about you at your retirement party? How can you set the next stage of your career along that path?

Implement a career re-visioning program. At the University of Missouri - Kansas City, one dean conducted a series of visioning exercises, with annual updates, in which faculty discussed their passionate interests, determined what excited them about being a faculty member, and built their reflections into revitalized career plans. The dean exhorts faculty that if they do what they most enjoy doing—and do it well—he will advocate for their promotion. If that fails, he promises his recognition in other ways. In any event, the exercise ensures that faculty are doing the work they love. Versions of career redevelopment activities can be found also at James Madison University and the University at Albany.

Open doors to re-engagement through tenure and promotion reform.

For associate professors who cannot produce the body of evidence required for promotion, change the body of evidence required for promotion. Virginia Tech limits the “look-back” period of promotion to five years, giving faculty who have been off-track to get back on course without penalty. Virginia Commonwealth University and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte revised their guidelines to institutionalize community engagement (teaching and scholarship)

About 2 out of 5 long-term associate professors believe that their CAO doesn't seem to care about their quality of life.



as a meaningful part of the review and promotion process. This change opens a path to promotion for faculty who feel it has been blocked. Combined with a re-visioning program as described above, academic leaders committed to a broader definition of midcareer excellence can give faculty an opportunity to pivot toward meaningful work.

Require departmental plans for mentoring associate professors. Present chairs and their faculty with two or three models (e.g., for a small or large department) and allow them either to adopt the best fit or craft their own that will reach the same goals (with review and approval by the dean or provost). Do not rely on the classical, paternalistic, all-eggs-in-one-basket model of mentoring, but ask instead, "What problems are we trying to solve for which mentoring is the solution?" The answers will lead faculty to consider a range of activities and policies that promote a matrix of mentors both within and beyond one's own institution.

Recognize that there is no "capital F" Faculty, but many faculties. In the course of 65 meetings over two years at Virginia Tech, the provost and two associate provosts met with every academic department. After a short introductory speech from the provost about the issues faced by the university at the time, the meeting was directed

by faculty with an extensive question-and-answer period. Notes were compiled, summarized around common themes, and used to improve programs for faculty across the ranks, including many at Virginia Tech that support professors at midcareer. At West Virginia University, the provost started a Women's Leadership Institute that engages, invigorates, and empowers women through leadership coaching. Faculty and former faculty comprise the steering committee for the institute, which convenes not just faculty, but senior staff and administrators, as well.

When all else fails... Be circumspect by engaging faculty in addressing those few professors whose behavior is causing problems for their colleagues and departments. One COACHE member found in their survey results confirmation of suspected problems in four departments. Senior administrators stepped in, conducted candid discussions with faculty in those departments, and initiated steps to relieve pressures—in one case, by facilitating an early retirement, and in others by mediation and reassignment of space and responsibilities. These steps may elsewhere be taken in tandem with routinely conducting the formative assessment necessary to build evidence for a separating action.

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About COACHE

The Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE), based at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, is a consortium of more than 200 colleges and universities across North America committed to making the academic workplace more attractive and equitable for faculty.

Senior leaders in academic affairs are invited to contact us to request an invitation to join their peers in the Collaborative.

Press/Media

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