

Faculty Engagement: Lessons Learned from Three Institutions

Career Tools | by Kelly A. Cherwin
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The success of any college or university depends in large part on the effectiveness of its teaching community. As the front line in delivering quality education, faculty members are a key determinant in whether or not an institution lives up to the needs and expectations of its students.

Accordingly, faculty members need to feel that they're an essential, integrated element in the institution at which they work. That, however, isn't always as simple or straightforward as it may seem. The goal of greater faculty engagement is made more challenging by a number of today's trends and realities, particularly an increased reliance on non-tenured faculty.

At the recent [American Council on Education conference \(ACE\)](#) in San Francisco, panelists Arthur Jones, Monica Rodriguez, and April Mason shared strategies on how each of their campuses have successfully engaged their faculty. Although it wasn't a quick or easy process, these campus leaders took the time to understand concerns and were focused on making faculty voices heard.

[Arthur Jones](#), clinical professor of Culture and Psychology, associate dean and president, University of Denver Faculty Senate Colorado Women's College, University of Denver, stated DU was dedicated to faculty engagement by taking a bottom-up approach, which started with asking faculty how leadership can help them develop and improve. DU surveyed non-tenure faculty members and three top themes were discovered.

- Length of contracts: Faculty weren't happy with the length of their contracts, often times having to be renewed every year, resulting in a feeling of instability. To solve this, DU has begun offering a multi-year contract, with renewal of three years and then after that point, eligibility for an assistant professorship.
- Titles: The title of "lecturer" was not liked, since faculty felt it didn't properly capture their role and contributions. To shift this, every faculty member received the title of "professor." There were no longer "lecturers," but instead "teaching professors." As admitted by Jones, this was the biggest pushback from the tenure faculty group because some thought it lessened their own status. But it was instituted with the hopes of building a strong sense of faculty community.
- Evaluation/promotion process: Faculty were frustrated that the overall evaluation process and the road to promotion was unclear and "fuzzy." To make things more clear, DU incorporated a process that instituted a three-, five-, and seven-year approach, in which assistant professors could be considered for promotion after three years, associate professors after five, and full professors after seven.

[Monica Rodriguez](#), associate dean of Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences at Northwestern University, met individually and in groups for more than three years to discuss faculty concerns and engage them in the improvement process. She shared that her university had similar results upon surveying non-tenured faculty.

- Titles: Northwestern faculty members also shared a dislike of the term "lecturers" because of the perceived lack of respect associated with the title. The term "lecturer" has been replaced with assistant, associate, or full professor of instruction.
- Evaluation/promotion process: Similar to DU, Northwestern reconfigured terms of promotion and length of contracts, making teaching-track appointments longer. They understood the importance of an effective review process, so a committee was created to evaluate promotions and re-appointments, and evaluate merit-based pay increases for teaching faculty.

The committee had two goals during the evaluation process, which were to determine: 1) what is best for the faculty and 2) what is best for the student. The review process is holistic, with many factors being considered, such as peer evaluations, teaching statements, student evaluations, and a survey of randomly selected students.

Northwestern has also learned that it's important to acknowledge faculty outside of the number of articles published, and also consider community engagement and cross-disciplinary engagement. This review process is more feasible now that longer contracts are in place and there wasn't a backlog of reviews.

[April Mason](#), provost and senior vice president of Kansas State University, echoed the similarities between the private and public institutions

in regards to faculty concerns and the importance of engagement. She's learned through her experiences in academia that it is important that leaders not only "make sure everyone is on the same page, but all are reading the same words."

Mason regularly attends faculty senate meetings and meets with key contacts on campus in order to know what issues and concerns exist, and sometimes hear what rumors may be going around so she can perhaps dispel them. Mason approved the creation and implementation of a campus climate survey. She was aware that there were some reservations about a survey like this, but the university community ended up liking the ability to participate and share their thoughts.

Although some of the results were difficult to hear, it helped her and her team create a strategic plan with goals and implementation strategies, along with responsibilities for members of the campus community. She admits it has been a learning process; although there isn't a "secret ingredient," there are key components to help build engagement and drive change.

Her methods reflect common themes among those who seek greater faculty engagement: Be transparent, open, and honest. Have patience and humor. And know that it may take a little bit of trial and error, but developing engagement on campus is possible.

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