

The Collaborative on Academic Careers in Education (COACHE): 2016 Survey of Faculty Satisfaction at the University of Pittsburgh

The quality of an academic institution depends heavily on its faculty. As teachers, scholars, participants in shared governance, and the purveyors of institutional culture and history, faculty are at the heart of the best work being done in higher education today. For over ten years the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education has surveyed faculty members at over 250 colleges and universities to understand the themes associated with faculty satisfaction. The University of Pittsburgh partnered with COACHE and administered their Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey in the spring of 2016.

Almost half (n=1307) of Pitt's non-clinical, full-time tenured, tenure stream, and non-tenure stream faculty members completed the on-line survey administered by COACHE. Pitt's 45% response rate, which included 507 tenured, 192 tenure stream, and 608 non-tenure stream faculty members, approached the overall 47% response rate for faculty from all 88 institutions that participated in the 2016 survey. More than 52% of Pitt's tenure stream faculty responded. One of the virtues of COACHE is the ability to compare Pitt findings with those from a specific set of institutions. We were asked to choose five of these institutions as peers, and COACHE provided separate analyses that compared Pitt to these peers and to all institutions that participated in the study in the last academic year.¹

Highest levels of satisfaction relative to peers

On the whole, faculty at Pitt expressed favorable views of the institution. When asked "if a candidate for a faculty position at your rank asked you about your department as a place to work," 94% said they would recommend or strongly recommend their department. When asked if they had it to do over, would they recommend Pitt as a place to work, nearly three fourths (74%) agreed or strongly agreed that they would recommend Pitt. When asked to identify two and only two "best aspects" of working at Pitt, the quality of colleagues and cost of living topped the list.

Pitt faculty were more favorable about the research and service environment than faculty at other institutions. In terms of research, Pitt faculty were especially positive about the amount of time spent on research, support for engaging undergraduates, support for research travel, and the availability of course release for research relative to faculty at other institutions. In terms of service, Pitt faculty were especially positive about the amount of time spent on service, support for leadership roles, and the number and type of committee assignments relative to faculty at other institutions. In addition, Pitt faculty were more favorable about opportunities to collaborate and mentoring than faculty at other institutions. Pitt associate professors, however, were less satisfied with mentoring than Pitt full professors.

Pitt faculty also were more favorable about health and retirement benefits as well as personal and family policies than faculty at other institutions. Pitt faculty are more satisfied with tuition benefits, housing benefits, work-life balance, eldercare, medical leave, and flexible workloads than faculty at other institutions. Pitt faculty of color, however, were slightly less satisfied with health and retirement benefits compared to white Pitt faculty.²

¹ For purposes of this report, peers were considered the Indiana University – Bloomington, University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill, Purdue University, University of Minnesota – Twin Cities, and the University of Virginia.

² Faculty of color were defined by COACHE as American Indian or Native American, Asian, Asian-American or Pacific Islander, Black or African-American, Hispanic or Latino, and Multiracial.

Pitt faculty also felt more favorable about the appreciation and recognition they received than faculty at other institutions. Although Pitt faculty ranked highly compared to other institutions with respect to recognition from colleagues, the provost, and dean, Pitt faculty were in the middle of the pack of institutions with respect to recognition by their department chair.

Pitt faculty were more favorable about senior leadership than faculty at other institutions, particularly with respect to the stated priorities of the chancellor and provost. However, tenure stream faculty at Pitt had a more negative opinion of senior leadership than tenure stream faculty at peer institutions. Pitt faculty were also more favorable with respect to all aspects of governance, including trust, shared sense of purpose, understanding the issues, adaptability, and productivity than faculty at peer institutions.

Pitt faculty also evidenced fairly high satisfaction levels with teaching as indicated by mean scores, but so did the faculty at other institutions. Pitt faculty were most satisfied with the time spent on teaching, the level of courses taught, the discretion over course content, and their teaching schedule. They were least satisfied with the perceived equity of teaching load distribution and the quality of graduate students to support teaching.

Lowest levels of satisfaction

This study also identified aspects of our workplace that deserve more careful scrutiny and improvement. Pitt faculty were less satisfied about the clarity of tenure policies, the clarity of tenure expectations, and the process of being promoted to full professor than faculty at peer institutions. Across almost all of the metrics related to tenure and promotion, Pitt faculty scored lower than faculty at other institutions. Pitt female faculty were less satisfied across almost all of these metrics, compared to Pitt male faculty, especially for the promotion to full metrics. In terms of satisfaction with the process of being promoted to full professor, Pitt associate professors were significantly less satisfied than Pitt full professors.

So while faculty in this first COACHE survey evidenced greater levels of satisfaction than peers in terms of research support, service responsibilities, personal and family policies, health and retirement benefits, opportunities for collaboration, mentorship, senior leadership, the five governance metrics, and appreciation/recognition, they were significantly less satisfied than peers with the clarity of tenure policies, the clarity of tenure expectations, and the process of being promoted to full professor. When asked to identify two and only two “worst aspects” of working at Pitt, support for research/creative work and compensation topped the list.

Moving Forward

These findings present a roadmap for programmatic improvements at all levels. While there is a good deal to celebrate in terms of the work environment for Pitt faculty, senior leadership is engaged with the COACHE project to make more informed decisions about how to improve faculty worklife. One issue that has clearly emerged as needing attention is around tenure and promotion policies and expectations. Over the last ten years of the COACHE survey, the single strongest predictor of pre-tenure satisfaction and success is clarity in the tenure process. Based on these findings, the Office of the Provost is engaged with the Council of Deans to find ways to improve the clarity of tenure and promotion processes across academic units. Clarifying tenure and promotion expectations and processes should also be a central goal for Pitt department chairs and other academic leaders. Additional efforts are underway at the University to support faculty career progression. This includes participation as a partner university in the Case Western-led effort to seed and institutionalize gender equity transformation. This is a 4-year initiative funded by the National Science Foundation, and the focus of Pitt’s effort is to support the professional development and career progression of mid-career women faculty. The COACHE results also suggest a need for additional mentoring programs, and, with

the input and support of a faculty advisory group, a Center for Mentoring will be launched in the coming months.

It is evident from the COACHE data that there is a need to strengthen communications so that all faculty are aware of resources, programs, and opportunities. It is also important for those in leadership positions to communicate priorities, expectations, and opportunities; to focus on collegiality and intellectual vitality; and to appreciate and recognize the many contributions of faculty across the University of Pittsburgh.