

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

# Benchmark Best Practices: Departmental Leadership

collaborative on  
academic careers  
in higher education



This series of white papers is offered freely to member institutions as part of our project's three-year support and engagement plan.

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# Benchmark Best Practices: Departmental Leadership

## COACHE Benchmarks

Our surveys of college faculty produce data that are both (a) salient to full-time college faculty, and (b) actionable by academic leaders. The survey items are aggregated into 20 benchmarks representing the general thrust of faculty satisfaction along key themes.

The COACHE benchmarks are:

NATURE OF WORK: TEACHING	TENURE CLARITY	DIVISIONAL LEADERSHIP
NATURE OF WORK: RESEARCH	TENURE REASONABLENESS	<b>DEPARTMENTAL LEADERSHIP</b>
NATURE OF WORK: SERVICE	PROMOTION	DEPARTMENTAL COLLEGIALITY
INTERDISCIPLINARY WORK	FACILITIES & WORK RESOURCES	DEPARTMENTAL ENGAGEMENT
COLLABORATION	PERSONAL & FAMILY POLICIES	DEPARTMENTAL QUALITY
MENTORING	HEALTH & RETIREMENT BENEFITS	APPRECIATION & RECOGNITION
TENURE POLICIES	SENIOR LEADERSHIP	

## What is measured in this benchmark?

### DEPARTMENTAL LEADERSHIP

Satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with my department head's or chair's:

- Pace of decision making
- Stated priorities
- Communication of priorities to faculty
- Ensuring opportunities for faculty to have input into departmental policy decisions
- Fairness in evaluating my work

## Why Support for Departmental Leadership Is Important

Academic leaders—especially the provost, dean, and department chair—play critical roles in shaping the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of faculty members. COACHE's 2010 pilot study of tenured faculty found that faculty desire from the administration a clearly-articulated institutional mission and vision that do not change in ways that adversely affect faculty work (e.g., focus on research over teaching or vice versa; expectations for generating funding from outside grants). Faculty also wish for clear and consistent expectations for the mix of research, teaching, and service or outreach; support for research (pre- and post-award) and teaching; and a sense that their work is valued.

Deans and department chairs (or heads) can improve faculty morale through honest communication, and particularly by involving faculty in meaningful decisions that affect them. Deans and chairs are also responsible for ensuring opportunities for faculty input and supporting faculty in adapting to any changes to mission and institutional priorities. Equity and fairness in faculty evaluation are also important factors when assessing department head or chair leadership.

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### Getting Started

- Ensure that resources are allocated effectively to support changes in faculty work.
- Be careful not to let tenure-track faculty get caught unaware, unsuspecting, or unprepared for shifts in priorities. For example, guidelines for tenure and promotion should not be changed midstream; commitments should be honored.
- Allow senior faculty members grace periods to adjust to new expectations.
- Be transparent: it is almost impossible to over-communicate with faculty about changes to mission, institutional priorities, and resource allocation.
- Consistent messaging is pivotal to strong leadership: work diligently to ensure that senior, divisional, and departmental leaders are hearing and communicating the same message about institutional priorities.
- Priorities must be communicated via multiple channels, media, and venues. A blanket email or a website update does not adequately ensure broad communication of institutional priorities. Develop a communication plan that considers how the faculty everywhere—even the hard-to-reach—get information.
- Provide management training and periodic educational sessions for department chairs. Offer them a “Chair Handbook” and a web portal with “one stop shopping” for chairs on mentoring approaches, career mapping tools, and access to advice from peers.
- Create opportunities for chairs to convene—perhaps without a dean or provost present—to discuss best practices, innovations, and shared struggles. Then, invite them to share their take-aways with the deans’ council or other senior administrators.

### What’s Working

COACHE researchers interviewed leaders from member institutions whose faculty rated items in this theme exceptionally well compared to faculty at other participating campuses.

#### Hamilton College

In Hamilton’s annual review process, every faculty member meets with his or her department chair to discuss accomplishments over the past year. In the dean’s guidelines for chairs, departmental leadership is described as more than just day-to-day management of resource and personnel issues; the role also involves “acting as a facilitator working for the collective good of the Department and the College.” Chairs, who rotate every three or four years, are encouraged “in discussion with colleagues” to establish a three-to-five-year plan to guide the department’s decisions” (page 3). These instructions are part of a collaborative culture where chairs see their role as “developing a team.” The Dean of Faculty explained, “There’s variability here, but generally there is a sense that everyone takes their turn.” He went on, “The chairs are advocates for their faculty...they tell me about their faculty members’ successes. I think that has validated the chair’s role.”

#### Hobart & William Smith Colleges

At Hobart & William Smith Colleges, department chairs rotate every three years; each faculty member knows that he or she will have a turn. “The faculty members decide among themselves who will be the next chair, so they have this very collegial understanding of that role,” explained the Provost and Dean of the Faculty. She continued, “All of the departments are really egalitarian. Chairs don’t exercise a lot of authority... departments tend to run by consensus.” In departments or programs with more than five tenured faculty members, the chair gets one course relief during the academic year; in smaller departments, chairs earn a stipend instead. The faculty handbook outlines explicit policy regarding how new tenure-track faculty should be made aware of department review standards and criteria, and how the department or program chair is involved in the faculty member’s first year on campus. The handbook (page 77) states:

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*“It is the responsibility of department and program chairs to generate and sustain an environment where mentoring and support for all faculty can take place. Faculty development and advisement are meant to transcend traditional notions of the junior-senior faculty relationship. The idea of mutual mentoring is encouraged, wherein tenured and non-tenured professors, new faculty and senior colleagues, generate opportunities to learn from one another to grow as scholars and teachers”*

These guidelines exist on a campus with a history of strong faculty voice in governance. “We’re a faculty-governed institution,” an Associate Provost noted, “so the faculty drive everything we do here including the curriculum and the bylaws. The governance structure is very important, so faculty make sure they participate and take their turn.”

### **College of the Holy Cross**

At Holy Cross, the Dean’s Office has not traditionally been a seat of centralized authority, which frees the chair to run his or her department in a manner best for its faculty. As the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean put it, “We invest a lot of time and effort in selecting department chairs, and it’s nice to know that that is recognized and appreciated. The department chairs by long tradition are quite autonomous.”

### **Stonehill College**

Stonehill’s Council of Academic Chairs meets monthly with the Provost to discuss persistent and emerging issues in a discussion that afford the chairs an opportunity to co-create the policies and practices that will affect their departments. Chair Workshops, meanwhile, are offered throughout the year. “We have a one day chairs’ institute in the summer that is informational,” the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs revealed. “We talk about some of the issues ahead of us, for instance, student evaluations: Should we move them online? What’s the downside? What’s the upside? We’ve talked about program assessment and how to do it in a meaningful way.” A diversity hiring workshop would take what chairs and other could do better to recruit diversity candidates. While Stonehill’s leaders try to select topics that align with their strategic plan, they also invite chairs to suggest topics.

### **Tulane University**

Some schools at Tulane also offer training for chairs on how to conduct faculty searches, risk management, and legal issues; topics vary from school to school, so the content is salient to the local audience. All chairs at Tulane receive a course release—typically two courses, but this varies by school—and a stipend. They are exhorted as “essential in the design and implementation of mentoring approaches for faculty,” an area requiring “departmental leadership... informed by experience and scholarship.”

### **University of St. Thomas**

The University of St. Thomas Faculty Handbook outlines the hiring process and duties of the department chair along five responsibilities: administration, curriculum, personnel (including encouraging faculty development and conducting summative review), departmental vision, and “miscellaneous,” which ranges from coordinating publicity for the department to encouraging scholarship in pedagogy and the discipline. To nurture skills in these areas, St. Thomas avails itself of the convening and coordinating power of a regional consortium, the Associated Colleges of the Twin Cities (ACTC), which conducts workshops for chairs among its member institutions. Such extramural development options allow the chairs of St. Thomas to compare their experiences to others’ and to express their opinions freely. According to the Executive Vice President and Chief Academic Officer, the strength of chairs hinges on engaging faculty in the process for appointing and renewing them:

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*“The typical process is that every faculty member has an interview with the dean to determine who would be best suited for the chair position. There has to be consensus among the faculty before a chair is selected. It’s the same process for renewal. There are meetings with the dean and the faculty to determine if they think the chair should be renewed or if they recommend someone else. This way, the faculty have ownership; it’s a very participatory process.”*

### Resources

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## COACHE Benchmarks

This benchmark report is part of a series of white papers available through COACHE. The complete list of white papers includes:

APPRECIATION & RECOGNITION

DEPARTMENTAL ENGAGEMENT,  
QUALITY & COLLEGIALITY

**DEPARTMENTAL LEADERSHIP**

INTERDISCIPLINARY WORK &  
COLLABORATION

MENTORING

NATURE OF WORK: RESEARCH

NATURE OF WORK: SERVICE

NATURE OF WORK: TEACHING

TENURE & PROMOTION

## About COACHE

The Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) 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. Founded in 2002 with support from the Ford Foundation and Atlantic Philanthropies, COACHE is based at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and is now supported by its members.

Designed to generate not simply “interesting” data, but actionable diagnoses, COACHE’s suite of faculty job satisfaction surveys have been tested and continuously improved across multiple administration sites and cycles. Institutional reports and executive dashboards provide college leaders with a lever to increase the quality of work-life for their faculty; to advance a reputation as a great place for faculty to work; to provoke better questions from and more informed decisions by prospective faculty; and to generate ideas and initiatives from faculty that enrich and expand the range of possible improvements.

COACHE also brings academic leaders together to advance our mutual goals of maximizing the impact of the data, with many opportunities to meet with counterparts from peer institutions and to discuss COACHE findings on faculty affairs.

Call (617) 495-5285 to request your invitation to participate.

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