



# Tailoring a Survey for Campus Change at the University of Denver

The University of Denver was changing on several fronts at the start of their partnership with the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE). A new vice chancellor for diversity, equity, and inclusion was coming on board, a new initiative on community and values needed information to guide it, and concerns about the departmental decision-making processes were awaiting a solution.

By adapting COACHE's *Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey* with carefully tailored custom questions, DU's leaders realized that one tool could in fact support many changes.

## ENGAGING INTENTIONALLY AT THE OUTSET

To make an efficient and effective case for the survey to faculty, Kate Willink, DU's vice provost for faculty affairs, emphasized the advantages of a small COACHE team. The team communicating to faculty about the survey included Willink (then the faculty director for the center for teaching and learning), the provost, and the faculty senate president. "The first time we presented this to faculty, we each spoke

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in our own voice about why we thought this was so important,” Willink said at the COACHE strategy workshop, which kicked off partnership for the 2020-21 cohort.

Leveraging his institutional memory before it was gone, the outgoing chief diversity officer crafted a module from COACHE’s custom question bank to help his successor. The survey team—which included Willink, faculty member Darrin Hicks, and DU’s director of institutional research—then met with COACHE’s Associate Director, Todd Benson, to design two qualitative items about how faculty make sense of DU’s community and values.

But how could COACHE be used to address faculty’s concerns surrounding departmental processes? Willink turned to one of DU’s own experts and survey team member, Darrin Hicks. An associate professor of communication studies, Hicks had developed the Process Quality Scale to measure stakeholders’ perceptions of their power to influence decision-making. “If we could improve decision-making at the department level,” Hicks said, “if we could figure out how meetings are run, how decisions are made in a department, that would actually have a contagion effect across the university” so people would expect and work toward better decision-making cultures across the board.

Hicks devised three questions to assess authenticity at the departmental, divisional, and university levels. These questions looked at whether faculty felt decisions were made in advance and simply confirmed by the formal decision-making process, whether some people’s merits were taken for granted in that process while others had to justify themselves, and whether outside strings were being pulled to influence decision-making.

## FROM INTERSECTING DATA TO CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Because they were embedded in the COACHE instrument, Hicks’ items revealed correlations in the data between faculty’s sense of authentic decision-making and their satisfaction with their departments, with leadership, with diversity and inclusion, and with their esteem for colleagues.

With this evidence, the survey team surmised that improving decision-making at the departmental level could lead to improvements in these other important areas. They grouped

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departments by their process quality and held follow-up conversations with deans and department chairs to identify deeper issues.

Three departments received targeted interventions around hiring, space allocation, and other difficult, long-stalled concerns. According to Hicks, the interventions have reduced toxicity, increased trust, and created new collaborative opportunities.

Meanwhile, all departments received a set of best practices for decision-making, which included guidance on breaking established norms of power, facilitating conversations, and creating post-meeting surveys to continue to monitor the decision-making process.

Departments also benefitted from a summer workshop on course assignments, applicable both to immediate decisions about who teaches online versus in-person during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to longer-term choices with consequences for tenure review.

## MOVING FORWARD COLLABORATIVELY

Though the University of Denver had previously used an internal faculty survey, partnering with COACHE improved faculty trust in the confidentiality of the data—and provided comparisons to national benchmarks. Most importantly, COACHE’s expectation for faculty engagement aligned with the values of DU’s leadership *about* leadership. “We wanted to distribute the leadership and maximize faculty expertise,” Willink said, “by having faculty help us... with data governance, with data analysis, and then with communicating to the campus as a whole.”

Taking inspiration for custom questions from ongoing issues at the university brought results: the University of Denver realized an extraordinary 65 percent survey response rate. Equipped with the ability to intersect local needs with broader issues, the university has a stronger foundation for onboarding new leadership, understanding its community, and trusting the machinery of governance.

For more of DU's work with COACHE, visit:  
<https://coache.du.edu>

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