Benchmark Best Practices:

Interdisciplinary Work & Collaboration

collaborative on
academic careers
in higher education

HARVARD

GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF EDUCATION

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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	DEPARTMENTAL LEADERSHIP
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?

COLLABORATION

Satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with opportunities for collaboration with:

- Other members of your department
- Faculty outside your institution
- Within your institution, faculty outside your department

INTERDISCIPLINARY WORK

Agreement (or disagreement) with the following statements:

- Budget allocations encourage interdisciplinary work.
- Campus facilities (e.g. spaces, buildings, centers, labs) are conducive to interdisciplinary work.
- My department understands how to evaluate interdisciplinary work.
- Interdisciplinary work is rewarded in the merit process.
- Interdisciplinary work is rewarded in the promotion process.
- Interdisciplinary work is rewarded in the tenure process.

Why Support for Interdisciplinary Work and Collaboration Is Important

Interdisciplinary Work. First, universities (and also many liberal arts colleges) have seen widespread growth in research collaboration within and between institutions and with off-campus partners. Although not exclusively the province of the sciences, interdisciplinary research has become the predominant model there. Second, public and private funding for interdisciplinary research has increased. Third, there is a great deal of interest and intrinsic motivation for researchers to cross-fertilize; this type of work attracts many graduate students and early-career faculty. However, because the academy has not yet fully embraced interdisciplinary work, unchanged policies, structures and cultures are institutional disincentives, as they are still best-suited to narrower work within disciplines. This includes publication vehicles, multiple authors, peer review, and reward structures (for promotion and tenure; merit pay; incentives), to name a few.

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Interdisciplinary Work & Collaboration

Collaboration. Despite a popular perception of faculty as soloists, most faculty work requires collaboration—whether with students, peers, administrators, or other colleagues inside and outside of the institution, in the classroom or the lab, and with the broader community through service or outreach programs. Although many faculty members value the work they do independently, they also enjoy collaborative projects within and across their disciplines. In addition, many early career faculty members report an expectation for collaboration, having come to enjoy and expect such intellectual commerce during graduate school.

Getting Started

- Openly consider among faculty and administrative leaders the salience and importance of interdisciplinarity to your campus, including the variety of forms such work can take. These may include:
  - *cross-fertilization,* when individuals make cognitive connections among disciplines;
  - *team-collaboration,* when several individuals spanning different fields work together;
  - *field creation,* when existing research domains are bridged to form new disciplines or sub-disciplines at their intersection; and
  - *problem orientation,* when researchers from multiple disciplines work together to solve a 'real world' problem.

- If interdisciplinary work is important on your campus, discuss and potentially remove the barriers to its practice. The common obstacles to interdisciplinary work extend beyond the discpliplinary criteria for promotion and tenure to include also discipline-based budgets and environmental limitations such as space and facilities.

- Likewise, discuss the importance of teaching and research collaborations on your campus and the factors that enhance or inhibit it; then determine ways to remove the barriers.

What's Working

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

Hobart & William Smith Colleges

A requirement for graduation from HWS is the successful completion of one interdisciplinary concentration. Students have no trouble fulfilling this requirement since many courses are interdisciplinary or "bi-disciplinary," co-taught and administered by faculty across the college.

"I don't think that interdisciplinarity just happens… it is how we're set up, part of who we are. It is built into the structure and we pride ourselves on that. We've had a dance faculty teaching a course with physics…. They're not rare here. It's just the way we do it."

— Provost & Dean of Faculty

"Another example is Environmental Studies, which has faculty from 8 to 10 different departments that range from history to economics, English, the sciences, sociology…so we have a large cohort of individuals who are working on an interdisciplinary program, and we're always talking to one another, how to move that program forward, what classes are important, should we teach a class together… so we've had a physicist and an environmental studies person who is focused on China teach a class together on energy. It's really just in our DNA."

— Associate Provost

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

At UNC, events and projects such as the campus-wide research project, 'Water in Our World,' get faculty to share ideas and collaborate across disciplines on important issues. Faculty members are encouraged to collaborate with other local universities, too.

The Office of Research Development (ORD) provides consultation, facilitation in forming new research groups, exploration of promising funding leads, links to administrative support and agencies, review of proposals and drafts, coordination activities such as marketing and networking, collaboration in pan-university projects, and bringing faculty across the university together through retreats. In fact, a criterion for ORD support is the interdisciplinarity of a potential project.

"Early in 2013, we chose our first pan-campus theme called 'Water in Our World'. There are now hundreds of events and projects related to this theme; it's a great way to share ideas and work on issues. I thought everyone was going to come to the Steering Committee looking for funds. Instead, they are coming with ideas. The arts program even had an idea for commissioning water-related fine art and music pieces. The faculty are rolling up their sleeves and enjoying it."

— Executive Vice Provost & Chief Int'l Officer

Stonehill College

To support interdisciplinary work, Stonehill transformed its Martin Institute for Law and Society into a building primarily used for programs that tap into multiple departments.

A summer institute by the Office of Community-Based Learning (CBL) teams up faculty with a community partner and student leader to work closely with office staff in designing a new CBL course or to revamp an already existing one. Through this program, faculty members apply to attend and receive a small stipend for a workshop in the basics of CBL. The Provost's office hosted "Academic Development Day" for faculty to learn more about public scholarship and pedagogy. This event included several breakout sessions and keynote speakers on how to link the college to the community most effectively. Stonehill hosts at least two workshops each semester for community partners and faculty (and eventually, students) to listen and learn.

University of Saint Thomas (MN)

Putting real resources behind its values, St. Thomas encourages interdisciplinary work with faculty grants ranging from $1,000 to $3,000 for the development of a team taught or the revision of an existing one. The university's Aquinas Scholars Program, for example, is an interdisciplinary program for honors students taught by four faculty members.

"We have 'bridge courses' that span disciplines and many faculty members participate. A bridge course could result from a history and language professor getting together to develop a course. It's a learning experience for faculty… a booster shot really. We pay for team teaching the courses; this encourages the faculty to partner across disciplines and we think this benefits students. The students love to put together ideas and concepts from different disciplines and it broadens their depth and understanding."

- Executive Vice President & CAO

Christopher Newport University

CNU hosts forums throughout the year for faculty to talk about work with their colleagues. The Office of Sponsored Programs plays a key role in creating and fostering a collaborative environment for faculty researchers and sponsored programs.

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"Research is very important here, but we do stress teaching in the evaluations, and we look at that very seriously to make sure faculty members are developing. We all came here because we wanted to be good teacher-scholars, and if you come here with that mission focus, and if you share those values, then you'll be happy here, work together with your colleagues, and feel supported. It's a very collaborative and truly collegial environment but not because of policies… it's a matter of culture."

— Vice Provost

Hamilton College

Hamilton, through policy and practice, encourages team-taught interdisciplinary courses.

"Many junior faculty members join interdisciplinary programs upon their arrival, and some teach with more senior members in courses that are interdisciplinary; for example, History and English department members within the Medieval and Renaissance Studies interdisciplinary program. We have policies that enable such co-teaching and cross-listing of classes and we've been supportive in doing so."

— Dean of Faculty

Resources

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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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