The Collaborative on Academic Careers in Education (COACHE): 2011-12 Survey of Faculty Satisfaction at Purdue University

After eight years of surveying more than 15,000 pre-tenure faculty members at over 200 colleges and universities, the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education reports that the strongest predictors of faculty satisfaction and success are promotion and tenure processes, work-life integration, support for research and teaching, a positive and supportive culture and climate, and engaged leaders at every level. COACHE researchers concluded that “tenured faculty shape nearly every facet of campus life” from governance and mentoring to tenure and promotion, departmental quality, collegiality and engagement. Thus they expanded their focus, and in 2011-12, Purdue University was among the first group of universities to gauge satisfaction levels of faculty at all ranks. Purdue also piloted the first survey to include non-tenure track faculty. Reports from this group are forthcoming. The findings below only pertain to tenured and tenure-track faculty.

Almost half (n=778) of Purdue’s tenure and tenure track faculty members completed the on-line survey administered by COACHE. Even though COACHE noted that response rates tend to be lower on campuses with larger numbers of STEM faculty, Purdue’s 47% response rate, which included 163 pre-tenure and 615 tenured faculty members, approached the overall 49% response rate for faculty from all 76 institutions that participated in the 2011-2012 survey. More than 52% of Purdue’s pre-tenure faculty responded. One of the virtues of COACHE is the ability to compare Purdue findings with those from institutions that participated in the same year. We were asked to choose five of these institutions as peers, and COACHE provided separate analyses that compared Purdue to the peers and to all institutions that participated in the study in the last academic year.1

Highest levels of satisfaction

On the whole, faculty at Purdue University 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,” 88% said they would recommend or strongly recommend their department. When asked if they had it to do over, would they recommend Purdue as a place to work, nearly two thirds (64%) agreed or strongly agreed that they would recommend Purdue. When asked to identify two and only two “best aspects” of working at Purdue, the quality of colleagues and cost of living topped the list.

Compared to all others in the study, Purdue faculty voiced the strongest positive views about the research environment, especially support for obtaining grants, quality of graduate students to engage in research and support for engaging undergraduates. Faculty of color were slightly more satisfied with research support than white faculty.2

Compared to faculty at all of the other institutions, Purdue faculty were most satisfied with interdisciplinary activities on campus and opportunities to collaborate. On the whole, satisfaction in these two areas was significantly higher than the average ratings from all the other COACHE institutions and compared favorably to those in the peer group for this study. Results suggest comparatively high levels of satisfaction with budgets, facilities and rewards for interdisciplinary work and opportunities to collaborate outside one’s department, but they compared less favorably in terms of collaborative opportunities in one’s department.

Purdue faculty also were more favorable about health and retirement benefits than faculty at other institutions. Rated the highest among benefit options were retirement benefits, phased retirement options and salary. Purdue faculty satisfaction levels with personal and family policies also were at or near the

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1 For purposes of this report, peers were considered the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill, North Carolina State University, the University of Kansas, Kansas State University, and the University of Tennessee. In subsequent analyses, we will be provided with comparison data for our CIC peers who have participated in earlier surveys of pre-tenure faculty only.

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. In subsequent analyses, we will be able to examine underrepresented domestic minorities as a separate group.
top relative to our COACHE peers. In this category, Purdue faculty are most satisfied with housing benefits, tuition waivers, and dual career assistance programs. Faculty of color, however were slightly less satisfied than the all-campus average with personal and family policies and health and retirement benefits.

Purdue faculty also evidenced fairly high satisfaction levels for teaching as indicated by mean scores, but so did the faculty at other peer and cohort institutions. Purdue faculty were most satisfied with the time spent on teaching, the number and level of courses taught, the discretion over course content and the number of students in their classes. They were least satisfied with the perceived equity of teaching load distribution. Overall, there was a large effect of rank on satisfaction with teaching. Associate professors were less satisfied with the teaching aspect of their work than either professors or assistant professors. Similar to the findings described in The Chronicle, associate professors overall were the least satisfied faculty (http://chronicle.com/article/Why-Are-Associate-Professors/132071/).

**Lowest levels of satisfaction**

This study also identified aspects of our workplace that deserve more careful scrutiny and improvement. The faculty at Purdue gave comparatively low marks to mentoring and expressed concerns about the lack of clarity regarding the process, criteria and standards as well as the reasonableness of expectations for both tenure and promotion. Differences in perceptions of effective mentoring exhibited rather large effect sizes with associate professors indicating the least satisfaction with mentoring, and pre-tenure faculty evidencing slighting higher levels of satisfaction than professors. In terms of tenure, faculty of color were more satisfied with tenure policies, tenure clarity and the reasonableness of tenure expectations than white faculty. Associate Professors, however, were less satisfied with promotion (expectations, encouragement, clarity of criteria, the process and standards) than professors.

Finally, it is important to note that the faculty expressed the least satisfaction with campus leadership, from the highest levels down to department heads. They expressed rather large misgivings about the pace of decision-making and the communication of priorities for the university. Tenured professors were considerably less satisfied with leadership in general, and this is especially true in terms of their perceptions of senior leadership. Pretenure faculty were more satisfied with their deans and department heads and more satisfied with leadership overall than tenured faculty.

So while faculty in this first COACHE survey evidenced greater levels of satisfaction than peers in terms of research support, opportunities for collaboration and interdisciplinary work, health and retirement benefits, and personal and family policies, they were significantly less satisfied than peers or the sample as a whole with the amount and equitability of service, the clarity of the tenure process, departmental collegiality and quality, mentoring, levels of appreciation and recognition, and leadership at all levels. When asked to identify two and only two “worst aspects” of working at Purdue, geographic location and compensation topped the list.

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 Purdue faculty, senior leadership engaged in the COACHE project to make more informed decisions about how to improve faculty worklife. The Provost’s Task Force on Promotion and Tenure was formed last winter to address some of the very issues highlighted in this study. Their charge was to focus on a number of specific issues including the length of the tenure “clock,” post-tenure review, collegiality and the recognition of interdisciplinary activities when being considered for tenure and/or promotion. The survey findings indicated that such discussions are timely and necessary. Suggested action items from this task force can now be guided by a more fine-grained view as represented in these findings. Over the last eight years of the COACHE survey, the single strongest predictor of pre-tenure satisfaction and success is clarity in the tenure process. Clarifying these steps should be a central goal for Purdue department heads, deans, the provost and president. The Task Force on Childcare that was also constituted last spring is another effort to examine issues of importance to faculty worklife. Based on these findings, the committee may want to expand their review to take into account faculty responsibilities for both child and elder care.

It is evident from these data that those in leadership positions need to focus more on collegiality, intellectual vitality, avenues for addressing sub-standard performance and opportunities for appreciation
and recognition. During this time of transition, it is also vitally important for leaders to focus on the pace of decision making and the communication of priorities.\footnote{For a complete set of means and frequencies for each of the survey indices and individual items, see \url{https://sp2010.itap.purdue.edu/provost/COACHE/}.}