

## **Making Time for Faculty**

A report submitted by the  
Faculty Committee on the Quality of Academic Life  
Convened Autumn 2010  
Concluded Winter 2012

## Faculty Committee on the Quality of Academic Life

### 1. Committee Charge and Process

In Autumn 2010, the Provost convened a university-wide committee to examine the quality of academic life at the University of Chicago and provided the following charge:

“For years, the University of Chicago stood out from its peers as *the* destination for faculty. This was largely because of our compelling intellectual environment -- a feature that we have mostly retained -- but also because of the accoutrements of academic life in an institution that imposed few responsibilities beyond research on its faculty. It is not possible to make this latter claim today. We have more students, more compliance pressures, less relative wealth. ... This committee will work to identify the issues that most challenge us and recommend improvements for consideration.”

Chaired by Theo van den Hout (Humanities), the committee members: Catherine Brekus (Divinity), Nancy Cox (BSD), Ayelet Fishbach (Booth), Michael Hopkins (PSD), William Howell (Harris), Omar McRoberts (SSD), Harold Pollack (SSA) and Lior Strahilevitz (Law) engaged in this effort throughout the 2010-2011 academic year and into the next.

To provide an opportunity for all faculty to share their thoughts and to insure representative input, the committee used a variety of mechanisms to solicit feedback. We began with a campus-wide email requesting that faculty share their experience of academic life on campus and highlight concerns they might have. We received an abundance of information from the responses. Committee members then canvassed their divisions and schools to collect further information and to explore issues raised in the email communications. Each member spoke with local chairs or program directors, and to their dean to collect information that might have been missed via the other mechanisms and to understand from a leadership perspective what factors are believed to impact the quality of academic life on campus. This report is informed extensively by the email responses and various conversations; though we refrain from directly quoting texts and conversations to preserve the anonymity and maintain the confidentiality of our colleagues. Finally, two interim reports were presented to the Committee of the Council and the Council of the University Senate in the Fall 2010 and Winter 2011 quarters respectively. A final report to both bodies was made in Winter 2012.

### 2. Overview

University of Chicago faculty genuinely care about this university, are generally happy, and are proud to work at a prime research institution where rigorous intellectual pursuit is *sine qua non* for success. It was reported to us that some of our colleagues believe this to be “very close to being the ideal university for serious active scholars anywhere in the world” with a culture that is more stimulating and more openly cooperative and engaged than that of any of our peers. We gleaned from our conversations with faculty that the quality of academic life is directly related to two factors: (1) the amount of time available to conduct research and to teach high quality students - at all levels - in a deeply engaged and meaningful manner, as well as (2) the retention of current high-quality colleagues and the recruitment of new high-caliber individuals to our faculty. Quality of research is the driving force behind everything we are, do, and teach. We are a research university. Faculty are hired first and foremost because of research, and are renewed, tenured and promoted largely because of research. When faculty time for rigorous intellectual pursuit is threatened or significantly reduced, the quality of academic life declines. When colleagues leave or do not accept offers of appointment, the quality of academic life declines.

We learned that the current demand on faculty time for matters other than research and teaching is often considered unacceptably high. These demands seem also to be growing. We have therefore focused our efforts to identify both the greatest threats to faculty time and to recommend the actions most likely to ameliorate the issues.

We also learned that there are obstacles to retention and recruitment that impact the quality of academic life. Some faculty do not feel sufficiently appreciated for their research or service; we address this below as well. Finally, we detected a theme across topics and divisions, schools and departments. We note that often there is need for more effective communication. Sometimes the University makes well-intentioned decisions with unintended local consequences and that locally, faculty act with good intentions but without the most complete information available. Where appropriate, we provide examples of this and offer recommendations that would help.

Given varied character and culture across four academic divisions and five professional schools, it was difficult to find unanimity among the specific impingements on faculty time. Below we discuss only the factors that are relevant across the majority of divisions and schools or have an intensity (even if only across a few areas) that warrants attention. Concerns about faculty time and the quality of current and future colleagues were expressed across all divisions and schools.

Finally, our work immediately identified that divisional masters programs are issues of particular note for the Humanities and Social Sciences faculty. The Provost created a second committee, chaired by David Wellbery (Germanic Studies) and composed of faculty only from the relevant divisions, to focus exclusively on this matter and to explore this issue in depth. The findings from that committee are available on the Provost's website.

### **3. Findings**

Time impingements can be characterized as follows: (3.1) administrative impingements that impact the day-to-day lives of faculty, and could be completed by staff; (3.2) administrative duties that require immediate attention and cannot be completed by staff because they are related directly to research and teaching responsibilities, but would benefit from streamlining or other thoughtful considerations and (3.3) issues that require careful attention because they impact the long-term careers of our faculty.

#### **3.1 General Administrative Intrusions**

Faculty across the University report that they have insufficient administrative support. They find themselves increasingly responsible for administrative tasks (e.g., expense/travel report processing and workshop or job talk planning), because almost all departments and divisions have reduced the number of administrative assistants employed. At the same time, however, the University has implemented new systems, for example, GEMS and UChicago Time (an electronic timecard of sorts) that increase the effort required of faculty to complete such tasks and are thus not very cost-effective strategies. In large part, these systems are counterproductive because they shift tasks from clerical staff onto faculty.

While we appreciate that the issues surrounding GEMS and other such systems are examined routinely, and that considerable attempts have been made to reduce the burden on faculty, there remain substantial burdens that additional support staff could ameliorate.

At the level of central administration, policy development often appears guided by a desire to achieve uniform institution-wide classifications that are broadly imposed, rather than policies that are flexible enough to accommodate the significant variations in timelines, research practices, and cultures of different areas. New rules are introduced with little input from the faculty who are affected by them. New policies surrounding the

hiring of postdoctoral researchers and other academic appointees illustrate this pattern. These rules often add unnecessary complexity around sometimes already highly-regulated and usually time-sensitive research activities, and consume support-staff time that could be used more productively to assist faculty and their research.

Likewise, there is further concern that the centrally offered services (e.g., Facilities, ITS, Human Resources, Purchasing, Local Business Centers), whether university-wide or local to the divisions and schools, are often understaffed or staffed by individuals whose skills have not evolved with the demands of research, technology, or newly-implemented systems. Independent of staffing levels, there is also the sense that in some units there is not a sufficient culture of “customer service.” Due to these factors and sometimes an interaction among them, staff are often slow to respond or insufficient in their response and therefore of little assistance (or sometimes a hindrance) to faculty.

#### Recommendations:

- Establish a formal and relatively low-burden process for faculty to vet policy decisions that relate to faculty.
- Establish a formal and relatively low-burden process for faculty to provide feedback to centrally provided services; a faculty customer service/quality assurance phone line or a dedicated and frequently checked email address might work nicely.
- Conduct a survey of staff to determine whether there is efficiency of practices. We are hesitant to recommend that more staff need to be hired until it is determined that current staff are being employed as efficiently as possible. Such a survey could also check for appropriate alignment of employee skills and employee responsibilities and provide data to calculate a faculty/staff ratio to determine if sufficient staff support exists where the need is greatest.

### **3.2 Research- and Teaching-related Issues**

Faculty expressed concerns regarding the administrative and centrally staffed resources that support teaching and research. These concerns ranged from the difficulties related to hiring specially trained research professionals, to policies affecting the number of available course assistants, to the state of teaching-related IT infrastructure and services, and to the sometimes inflexible financial management system and counterintuitive shared core facilities networks that faculty must navigate in order to conduct their research.

First and foremost was disquiet around policies regarding non-faculty appointments of individuals (e. g., visitors, senior scientists, research associates, lecturers, postdoctoral fellows and scholars) who play an integral role in the success of both research and teaching efforts campus-wide. Many faculty across divisions and schools offered diverse examples of how our practices resulted in the loss of excellent job candidates, how they insulted visitors, or ended in lost opportunities to build collaborations. Colleagues described our practices as “not conducive to the creativity needed to attract the best people.”

Also related to research, particularly in the sciences, faculty indicated that as research becomes both more technical and more collaborative, the administrative, compliance and infrastructure demands have simultaneously become more nuanced and more unforgiving. Often, at Chicago, the administrative staff do not have the skills required to keep pace with these demands. Faculty have no choice but to assume the responsibilities simply so that their research may proceed. This pushback onto the faculty is often exceedingly time consuming and detracts from research itself. Layered upon this already complex organization is a financial system that is both complicated and limited. We understand that alternative systems are being explored via other mechanisms and stress here that faculty involvement in the process will be required in order to find a system that appropriately relieves this burden.

Furthermore, the committee notes that shared research infrastructure is not centrally inventoried and advertised, which impedes research and the efficient use of these facilities. Ironically, the “core” facilities are

often too dispersed to navigate with ease and resources are sometimes under-utilized because researchers do not know they exist. These same researchers then use, unnecessarily, time and grant funding to secure services elsewhere that exist across the street or at an affiliated institution (e.g., Argonne National Laboratory, Field Museum). The committee notes too, that seed funding for research that is too preliminary to take to major external funders should be managed and advertised more effectively to support both the development of shared core facilities and the most promising early stage research projects. It is unclear to faculty to what extent these programs employ metrics for evaluating the outcomes of seed funding and, thus, the efficacy of their criteria for allocating resources.

Finally, faculty expressed concerns about the role of local Institutional Review Boards (IRB). All human research must be approved by an IRB, which is an internal committee governed by national guidelines and compliance considerations. These guidelines, we are told, are applied uniformly by our IRBs regardless of the nature of the research. As a result clinicians who want to conduct unfunded chart reviews are subject to the same hurdles as clinicians who hope to conduct large clinical trials. We are also told that numerous other practices related to campus IRBs impact researchers with smaller projects disproportionately. Though we did not delve into this issue, we raise it as a concern of note so that the appropriate office may explore practices and protocols as necessary and with hopes that they keep such considerations in mind when exploring future changes.

Faculty also raised concerns of an increased teaching burden, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Faculty members are teaching larger courses and have less time to devote to graduate students. Some worry that the university no longer sees itself primarily as a research university with an elite liberal arts college embedded therein. The prevailing sentiment is that the current announced faculty expansion of three percent is not enough to address the growing burdens. Of significant additional concern was the increased size of the divisional masters programs. The magnitude of this concern resulted in a special committee of humanities and social sciences faculty charged to explore this issue in depth. As we note in the overview, the results of that committee's work may be found on the Provost's website.

Some concerns, in departments with larger undergraduate majors, were raised about the diminished size of the graduate program and the burdens that then default to faculty who do not have enough teaching support. The Graduate Aid Initiative (GAI) of 2008 is generally a welcome and much appreciated program about to reach maturity in AY12 (fifth entering cohort; first cohort to enter advanced residency). Given this milestone, the committee should like to mention that there are general concerns regarding the GAI teaching requirement and the series of unintended consequences associated with how courses are distributed to graduate students at various points in their residency. The details of these processes vary from department to department and are beyond the purview of this report. However, we raise the issue as one that warrants attention before the next round of GAI students matriculates.

Finally, faculty indicated that the state of the instructional technologies, the caliber of the staff to support high-tech infrastructure as well as the more transactional posting and communications software to interact with students around course materials is wanting. There were concerns expressed about the current iteration of **CHALK**, Blackboard, and various components of the Registrar's grading system. Equally worrisome is that faculty often indicated that their colleagues at peer institutions, as well as personal experiences elsewhere draw into sharp focus how behind we are in this arena. It was noted also that visitors notice this and find their teaching experience here limited in unexpected ways.

#### Recommendations:

- With regard to the appointment processes surrounding non-faculty research personnel, the affected units should be consulted for an explication of the issues involved and to establish a process whereby divisions and the central offices create mutually beneficial processes and procedures for timely and clear hiring. This is essential to the vitality of the University's research program.

- Where research support staff skills are lacking, perhaps the efficiency survey mentioned above can be conducted. An assessment of the degree to which an individual's skill set matches the tasks he or she is asked to do would also go a long way to ensuring the vitality of the University's research program. With such an assessment we could better match people to positions.
- The committee received the suggestion to create the position of "Faculty Concierge," and recommends that the University explore this concept and consider establishing it in order to serve the divisions and schools. Such a position would likely be well-utilized.
- Consider establishing a process roll-out method during which critical school, divisional, and departmental individuals (a checklist of sorts) are routinely consulted prior to the implementation of any new technology or procedures related to research or teaching.
- Consider establishing seed grant or mid-career grants to bolster faculty research efforts. It is rare to find external funding for unproven or career-shifting research programs. With reasonable investments in faculty risk-taking, there will likely be great return to both the individual and the institution (large federal funds, even more revolutionary research findings, etc.)
- Develop and disseminate a database of shared research facilities

### 3.3 Longer-term Considerations

Faculty indicate that the retention and recruitment of high caliber colleagues impacts the quality of academic life. These efforts bring into high relief a variety of complicated issues: spousal and partner hiring, child care, health care delivery, Laboratory Schools admissions and services, salary, mentoring, lack of a consistent sabbatical policy, and more. To maintain and improve our strengths and our excellence, faculty do their best to retain and recruit colleagues. However, when faculty direct time from their research and teaching to complicated retention and recruitment issues that ultimately fail, the quality of academic life decreases. This is especially true of hires and retentions that increasingly involve an academic partner or spouse. Although the Provost's Office works hard to provide all assistance possible, both material and intangible, to departments and schools, it remains very difficult to overcome reluctance in units that are to accept the partner or spouse.

The committee received many complaints regarding: lack of services for faculty recruits who bring with them an academic partner or spouse; the lack of certainty regarding whether slots at the Laboratory Schools will be available for the children of lateral recruits in the next academic year; the challenges that the Laboratory Schools admissions timetable poses for lateral recruiting of faculty; the lack of clarity regarding the faculty priority system within Laboratory Schools admissions; other Laboratory Schools concerns (including lack of formal transportation to and from Schools); lack of child care facilities on campus; low salaries relative to others in the discipline (whether here or elsewhere); and lack of sabbatical policies comparable to those elsewhere.

Other themes that arose during these conversations indicate that faculty in some divisions believe they are not adequately compensated and/or appreciated for the teaching, research and service they provide. To the extent that this impacts our ability to retain our colleagues, and concerns mount as departments move aggressively to hire, we believe it an important factor to consider. In some divisions and schools requests for salary raises have been met with the advice to obtain an outside offer to demonstrate what the market will bear. Our committee learned that faculty object to being encouraged to obtain outside offers on several grounds: it weakens faculty attachment to the University; it forces faculty members to apply for jobs at other universities that they ultimately do not want (and thus sometimes damages relationships with esteemed peers at those universities); and it discriminates against those who cannot relocate easily (e.g., those whose partners are other academics, those who have families).

We have also encountered an acute nuance here: There were many reports of salary compression within departments, such that new entering assistant professors have salaries on par with more senior assistant professors, some tenured faculty and even full professors in the same department. Another common concern among junior faculty or newly promoted faculty is the often small increase in salary when one is tenured. This

pay increment is sometimes completely offset by the loss of junior faculty housing subsidy and thus leads to a very limited, or sometimes no, increase in real income after tenure.

When asked to provide suggestions for improvement, colleagues often mentioned the desirability of merit increases for major scholarly achievements beyond the annual standard raise. Further, less tangible acknowledgements were also mentioned as lacking (literally, recognition that the work had been done and was appreciated).

Here again, of special concern is the Laboratory Schools. Most often, faculty report that because Laboratory Schools tuition rises faster than faculty salaries, tuition costs can quickly become a real problem for junior faculty and for faculty in schools or departments with more limited compensation. Also, current university policies often do not effectively address students with special needs or those who, for various reasons, are a poor fit with Laboratory Schools services. In such cases, families must forego the University tuition benefit for their elementary- and secondary-school children and pay more for tuition or special services, sometimes treating children within the same household differently in order to provide the most appropriate educational experiences for each child.

Interestingly, we see reports in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* indicating that our faculty are among the highest paid in the nation. Reconciling our faculty reports with such news accounts requires a more extensive exploration than could be provided by this committee. The Provost has charged a separate committee to review compensation practices and we expect there will be a separate report submitted on this topic.

Similar comments surfaced with regard to the search for sabbatical support in divisions and schools without a sabbatical policy in place. Thus if faculty wish to have time away from daily responsibilities, they must sacrifice the time due those responsibilities in order to secure sabbatical funding for the future.

Turning to the logistics of daily life, faculty reiterated that the lack of structured transportation to and from Laboratory Schools at times appropriate for both younger and older students as well as the need or desire to obtain routine medical care off campus also intrudes upon the time available for research and teaching. Given the prestige of the University of Chicago Medical Center and the resources of the Laboratory Schools, faculty wonder why these basic features, found on campuses nationwide, are missing here.

Finally, there is a perception that there is growth at the level of the central administration and there is little sense of transparency on the faculty side of how this expansion benefits the university community. In our work, we have learned that this growth is not as large as it appears. However, the perception remains and it might be alleviated by better communication that directly addresses the University's organizational structure, how it has evolved in recent years and articulates what benefits accrue to the University and its faculty.

#### Recommendations:

- Sabbatical leave is regularized in only the Social Sciences and Humanities divisions, though not uniform across the two divisions. We recommend that all schools and divisions establish formal sabbatical policies best suited to their faculty.
- The University should strongly encourage the Laboratory Schools to move deposits deadlines for the next academic year to a much earlier date, so that the Provost's office can get an earlier indication of whether slots for the children of high-priority recruits will become available in the coming year. More fundamentally, the University should make sufficient financial resources available to the Laboratory Schools to ensure that excess capacity is preserved over the next several years, as the Laboratory Schools expands. If the Laboratory Schools immediately fill to capacity after expanding, a unique recruiting opportunity for the university will have been squandered.
- It is beyond the scope of this committee to make recommendations with regard to the provision of faculty salaries, medical care, child education services and the like. We offer these observations

because all were raised with a frequency and intensity that compel us to include them in our report. These issues, we believe, adversely impact the faculty experience on campus and improvements should be made where possible.

- With regard to the sundry other issues noted above, we recommend that the university review its communication strategies, and at the very least centralize and magnify the visibility of the services that this committee learned are already provided but known to all faculty.

#### 4. Conclusion

Not long before President Roosevelt asked him to be the next American ambassador in Berlin William Dodd, history professor at the University of Chicago, pleaded in October 1931 with his employer

"for heat in his office on Sundays so he could have at least one day to devote to uninterrupted writing. (...) Staff departures and financial pressures within the university associated with the Depression had left him working just as hard as ever, dealing with university officials, preparing lectures, and confronting the engulfing needs of graduate students" (Erik Larson, *In the Garden of Beasts: Love, Terror, and an American Family in Hitler's Berlin* [Crown, New York 2011], p. 10).

In light of such anecdotes, we appreciate that another generation of scholars struggled with impingements on the time they could devote to their core mission: research and teaching. To some extent or another, every faculty generation must defend its core mission in order to uphold the quality of its work, work that establishes the quality of our university. We believe that we face a moment in our history when such impingements must be addressed in order to maintain the quality of the institution. We believe that changes recommended here, combined with the faculty expansion and other strategic initiatives underway, should once again bring to the fore the compelling intellectual environment that makes this institution both a destination and a longtime home for the very best scholars.

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