



# What key considerations should guide redesigning the academic workforce?

The COVID-19 pandemic has led U.S. colleges and universities to extraordinary, expensive efforts to protect the health and safety of their communities and maintain academic continuity. At the same time, their major revenue streams—tuition and fees, state and federal funding, auxiliary services, endowment earnings, and philanthropy—have been put at risk.

The pandemic also has brought into sharper relief two longstanding concerns about U.S. postsecondary education: how to promote student engagement that leads to lives of purpose and meaning, including good jobs; and how to structure the faculty workforce more equitably, such that it fosters the desired level of student engagement.

Early reports portray college students as unhappy with entirely remote learning and longing for in-person academic and social engagement. They actively value their in-person college connections. Early reports also suggest that many institutions will revisit their largest budget expense—faculty and staff compensation, about 60% of the total—and will likely cut faculty positions.

Research suggests that colleges and universities should proceed carefully as they contemplate these measures. Among all members of a college community, the most important bond a student has is with a faculty member. Students' faculty connections affect timely degree completion, future career satisfaction, and alumni engagement. For those relationships to persist over time, faculty members need to be there over time. How an institution structures its faculty workforce may be more important now than ever before.

Between 2011 and 2015, the University of Denver undertook a redesign of its faculty workforce. Driven not by crisis but by its schedule for revising faculty guidelines, the university converted one-year faculty appointments to multiyear, renewable positions. It instituted performance-based promotion in rank and different job titles for the 33% of appointed faculty not in the tenure-line series. Lecturers became assistant, associate, or full professors of teaching and professors of the practice, with salaries pegged at 70% of tenure-line salaries at similar rank, and received contracts of one, three, five or seven years. The redesign process was lengthy and intentional.

Responsibility for the redesign lay with the faculty senate, which had always welcomed non-tenure-line faculty members into its ranks. Faculty leaders of the redesign were respected by their peers and made clear that this was a faculty-driven process. They took pains to communicate the importance of shared deliberation, governance, and different stakeholder roles. They met with faculty and academic leaders across campus, incorporating dozens of their suggestions into multiple drafts of the new guidelines. They engaged trustees from the educational affairs committee as knowledgeable collaborators whose input was crucial for the initiative's success. After four years of work, the redesign proposal was approved by 89% of the University of Denver's voting faculty members and quickly adopted by the board of trustees.



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The University embarked on the redesign in a very different context from where we are today. The expense affiliated with it, however, was relatively minimal: \$290,000 in base budget additions the first year, and roughly \$200,000 annually since then.

After the implementation, in 2016, the university's new professors of teaching and practice reported a stronger sense of belonging and institutional engagement than their tenure-line colleagues. After the pandemic, we need students to feel that same sense of belonging and engagement. In the long term, key actors for achieving that are faculty members whose employment makes it possible.

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