
Memo

To: President Leibowitz, Provost Fierke, Dean Hodgson, Dean Graddy, Dean Weil, VP Switzer, Interim VP Rosansky, Interim VP-DEI Fryson

Re: Findings and Recommendations from Targeted Faculty Focus Groups

Date: July 22, 2021

From: Faculty Senate Council

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Summary

This past Spring the Faculty Senate hosted six faculty focus groups. The goal was to gain a fuller understanding of issues that surface regularly in our annual Faculty Senate Surveys and that resurfaced in Faculty Senate Council office hours.¹

This memo provides an outline of our findings and a list of potential action items. Discussion is limited to concerns that were articulated by multiple participants. We are confident that these concerns are widely shared across campus because many of these concerns were already familiar and because the focus groups comprised the full spectrum of faculty disciplines and employment categories.

The administration has already made progress on many of the emergent themes, such as the need to improve career support for faculty outside the tenure structure. The focus groups highlighted logical ways to extend that progress, many of which might be straightforward to implement. Other emergent themes, such as the need to improve the assessment of teaching quality, reflect known gaps between Brandeis' current policies and best practices. Though these gaps may not be addressed quickly, the focus groups provide further impetus to address them forthrightly.

We look forward to our collaboration on these issues, knowing that our administration, from the President on down, cares deeply about equity and well-being on campus. Through shared governance and deliberate action we can ensure that Brandeis fulfills its values as a fair and responsive place for all faculty. This, in turn, will advance the Framework for our Future and ongoing initiatives to promote a respectful campus.

Before providing detailed findings we list the five emergent themes together with a few potential quick-action items. We request, and also recommend, that a small number of quick-action items be implemented within a few months.

1. Career development for tenure-line faculty

- Quick? Expand the existing mentoring system to ensure that departments and schools provide clarity and mentoring with regard to promotion from Associate to Full Professor.[1]

2. Career development for research faculty, professors of the practice, contract faculty, adjunct faculty, and any other faculty outside the tenure structure (OTS faculty)

¹ Background information on the focus groups is provided at the end of this memo.

- Quick? Clarify which groups of OTS faculty should fill out faculty activity reports.
 - Quick? Ensure that chairs and deans are familiar with University's standards and procedures for promotion and contract renewal for OTS faculty.[2]
 - Quick? Ensure that departments and schools recognize their obligation to provide equal support for the career development of all faculty.
 - Quick? Have departments and schools expand faculty mentorship programs to cover OTS faculty.
3. *Adopting best practices in the evaluation of teaching*
 4. *Valuing University service and leadership*
 5. *Enhancing DEI and cultural competency.*
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Faculty concerns in detail

This section of our memo describes the concerns of tenure-line faculty and then OTS faculty. The final section provides a comprehensive list of potential action items.

Concerns of tenure-line faculty

- Low transparency about the steps and standards for promotion from Associate to Full professor.
- The inequitable distribution of University service burdens and lack of reward for such contributions.
- Exclusive reliance on teaching evaluations. Immediate feedback is not considered highly reliable for personnel decisions.[3] Among other shortcomings, they tend to be biased against historically marginalized groups and could unreasonably impede our efforts to diversify the faculty.
- Unclear communications, variation of standards from department to school, and unprofessional behavior on the part of academic supervisors. This frustration, combined with a lack of transparency, has fostered fear and suspicion in several departments.
- Some tenured faculty expressed concern about the treatment of OTS faculty.

Concerns of OTS faculty

OTS faculty were generally more concerned about working conditions than tenure-line faculty. They communicated in many ways their aspiration for fair and equitable treatment.

- There is confusion among OTS faculty about faculty activity reports (FARs). Some OTS faculty members are requested to submit these, others are not. If the career development of individual OTS faculty members is important to the University, it would seem necessary to have FARs from all.
- There is widespread confusion and frustration among OTS faculty about possible paths for career development within Brandeis, and the standards for contract renewal and promotion. Efforts to gather this information from departmental leadership are often, though not always, met with ignorance and disinterest.

- There is confusion among OTS faculty about University service. Is it obligatory or optional? If obligatory, how much is required?
- There is a general sense among OTS faculty that their excellence is not fully recognized and their concerns are of secondary importance. This is signaled, for example, when tenure line faculty are provided with mentors and informational sessions, but OTS faculty are not.

Concerns of many faculty

An ongoing concern is the inconsistent valuation of faculty labor across disciplines and across employment categories. We acknowledge that the university is partially constrained by structural issues, but the consequences of inconsistent valuation should not be ignored. Valuing certain faculty groups below others has a profound impact on faculty lives and careers, it may stifle innovation, and it undermines community cohesion.

Recommended/requested action items

1. *Career development for tenure-line faculty*

- Quick? Increase transparency for promotion from Associate to Full Professor.
- Expand promotion criteria to give substantial weight to exceptional contributions in service, teaching, and leadership

2. *Career development for faculty outside the tenure structure.*

- Quick? Clarify which groups of OTS faculty should fill out faculty activity reports.
- Quick? Ensure that chairs and deans are familiar with University's standards and procedures for promotion and contract renewal for OTS faculty.[4]
- Quick? Ensure that departments and schools recognize their obligation to provide equal support for the career development of all faculty.
- Quick? Have departments and schools expand faculty mentorship programs to cover OTS faculty.
- Clarify the extent of service expected for OTS faculty and the rewards for contributing beyond that expectation.

3. *Adopting best practices in the evaluation of teaching*

- Create a working group to identify and adopt best practices in our evaluation of teaching.

4. *Valuing University service and leadership*

- Create guidelines, structures, and training to ensure equity in service distribution.
- Ensure that dedicated service and leadership are given substantial weight in annual reviews and in promotion decisions.
 - Note: In addition to promoting equity, these suggestions will help generate a deep bench of faculty with administrative skills.

5. *DEI Enhancing DEI and cultural competency*

- Implement initiatives to promote a culture of mutual respect. Unlike explicit bias training, which usually backfires, this type of training would help reduce the extent to which

faculty members are at risk of belittling, disempowering, intimidating, humiliating, or offensive behavior.

- Provide greater support and guidance for antiracist efforts, with top-level administrators leading by example.
 - Increase workplace safety by establishing clear and fair policies that prevent workplace bullying and, when it arises, identify it reliably and protect targets.
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Focus groups: Background information

Conversations focused on these topics:

1. Equity and transparency in ranks and promotion
2. Concerns about support for career, in research and teaching
3. Concerns about culture and mutual respect at Brandeis
4. Discussion of work conditions during and after Covid

Different focus groups represented these categories of faculty:

1. Early career contract and contingent faculty (under 5 years of experience)
2. Mid-late career contract and contingent faculty
3. Early career TT faculty
4. Tenured faculty with 5 or more years of experience at Brandeis
5. A group of campus 'leaders': department and program chairs, etc.

[1] A good model for this is in place at IBS.

[2] <https://www.brandeis.edu/provost/faculty-resources/current/pdfs/contract-faculty-guidelines.pdf>

[3] The AAUP recommends that student evaluations of teaching be complemented by other sources of information in evaluating teaching quality. Further, their 2015 survey of 9,000 faculty showed that the vast majority of professors would prefer a more rigorous and balanced approach to the evaluation of teaching. See:

Flaherty, Colleen (2015). Flawed Evaluations. Inside Higher Ed (10 June).

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/06/10/aaup-committee-survey-data-raise-questions-effectiveness-student-teaching>

_____ (2018). Teaching Eval Shake-Up. Inside Higher Ed (22 May).

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/05/22/most-institutions-say-they-value-teaching-how-they-assess-it-tells-different-story>.

[4] <https://www.brandeis.edu/provost/faculty-resources/current/pdfs/contract-faculty-guidelines.pdf>