Committed but Concerned

How faculty view their work, their profession, and the leadership of colleges
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Cover: Travis Dove
Professors are working in higher education during an era of change and anxiety. College budgets have been constrained, more parents and students question both the cost and value of a degree, and politicians have challenged the role and direction of higher education.

Despite these points of concern for educators, the vast majority of faculty respondents to a survey commissioned by The Chronicle of Higher Education report high levels of engagement and satisfaction with their jobs.

The findings generally bridge all higher-education distinctions when it comes to who is enjoying job satisfaction. The survey, which featured faculty respondents from public and private institutions, two- and four-year colleges, and instructors, adjuncts, and tenured and tenure-track professors, found that faculty overall are very satisfied with their career choice and the work they do.

Not surprisingly, adjuncts or instructors show less exuberance overall about their work than do tenured or tenure-track professors, saying that they are less likely than professors to stay in the profession. A strong majority of non-tenured faculty say they receive inadequate pay and benefits, while less than half of tenured professors say the same thing. The survey also found concerns among faculty about the attitudes of today’s students and how institutions are being managed.

This report examines the results of the survey and cites past studies on faculty job satisfaction. In addition, The Chronicle interviewed more than a dozen experts and faculty members and has included some of their thoughts in the report.

The survey was commissioned by The Chronicle with support from TIAA. Maguire Associates conducted the survey in July and August 2018 and garnered almost 1,000 responses from around the nation.

Respondents tend to be older — 57 percent are 50 or above, with only 17 percent under 40. A substantial portion appears to be in senior positions: More than 4 in 10 say they have been at their current job for more than 10 years, and 56 percent label themselves as professors (33 percent of the total) or associate professors (23 percent), as compared with part-time instructors or adjuncts (22 percent).

As a group, respondents are also whiter (81 percent) than the national population of college educators (78 percent).
A Job Worth Having
Faculty report having particularly high levels of satisfaction from teaching and mentoring students, say they find their jobs challenging and exciting, and state that if they had to do it all over again, they would still work in higher education.

Faculty Frustrations
The survey reflected faculty frustration about the changing attitudes of students, as well as educators’ relations with their institutions’ leaders. In many instances, a majority of faculty members say they lack support from their institutions.

The Public and the Profession
Faculty members say their community and the American public respect their profession. At a time when higher education can sometimes seem to be under attack, the results indicate that college educators don’t see themselves, or at least their profession, as targets.
Many colleges and universities understand the importance of keeping faculty members engaged and satisfied in their jobs. Continuity can strengthen an institution and fortify parts of it even at a time when budget cutbacks are forcing some colleges to ditch tenure-track positions in favor of lower-cost, part-time instructors.

Losing professors through means other than retirement, meanwhile, can take its toll on faculty leadership, mentorship, and morale.

It can also be expensive. Research professors who leave an institution can take external grant dollars with them. A 2012 study reported in *Science* pegged the cost of hiring a full-time science or engineering professor and properly equipping them and their labs at $110,000 to over $1 million — costs that can take up to a decade to recoup.

The average cost of replacing a faculty member, factoring in search, start-up, and training costs, across the typical college campus is $96,000, according to a study conducted by the provost advisory board at the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education, or COACHE, a research entity based at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Some universities have gone so far as to create programs to retain professors. In 2016, the University of Wisconsin at Madison spent $9 million to keep faculty members who were at high risk for leaving. In addition to holding on to top educators, the university kept $18 million in research grants on campus.

Previous studies, including surveys conducted by COACHE, have found that senior faculty are satisfied or very satisfied with their jobs, but associate professors and assistant professors are decidedly less so.

*The Chronicle’s* survey found that tenured professors and non-tenured ones share high, though varying, levels of satisfaction regarding aspects of their jobs. It could find very little difference between the attitudes of faculty at public and private institutions.

As a group, respondents report very high positive rates of satisfaction from teaching, mentoring students or junior faculty, performing service activities, and conducting research.

**HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU WITH EACH OF THESE ASPECTS OF YOUR JOB?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Portion answering “somewhat” or “very” satisfied</th>
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<tr>
<td>Teaching students</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring students or junior faculty</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performing service activities</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conducting research</td>
<td>68%</td>
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Such results echo the overall satisfaction ratings for people working in other professional fields, including nurses (85 percent), doctors (76 percent) and information-technol-
ogy professionals (74 percent).

The Chronicle survey results aren’t monolithic, however. Many college educators report frustrations with faculty’s role in governing institutions, the support they get from their college’s administrators, the university bureaucracy, and the engagement levels of today’s students.

What’s more, even though aspects of their jobs prove highly satisfying for faculty, nearly one in three say they have, within the past year, seriously considered leaving their posts — a sign, some experts say, that the turbulent times have begun to make people feel less secure in their positions.

Despite the tenor of the times — when the very concept of higher education can seem threatened by political forces and is subject to the anxieties of parents who want their children to land jobs after graduation — college educators say they feel respected by students and the public.

“That may reflect studies that show that, regardless of political party, people are generally satisfied with how higher education prepares students for jobs and for life,” says Molly Ott, an associate professor at Arizona State University who researches faculty issues.

Over all, experts see the survey results as a sign that faculty are generally happy, except for what they perceive as roadblocks from administrations.

“Within the Past 12 Months Have You Thought Seriously About Quitting Your Job?”

- 32% Yes
- 68% No

“The big takeaway from this survey is that faculty derive satisfaction from their students and love the challenge — but they see the ‘managerial university’ as a barrier to their success and fulfillment, not as a source of support,” adds David Vanness, a former chapter president of the American Association of University Professors, and a professor of health policy and administration at Pennsylvania State University.
A Job Worth Having

Among the adjectives faculty chose to describe their job were “challenged,” “lucky,” “privileged,” “fulfilled,” and “important.” Interestingly, a similar number of respondents each selected the words “valued” and “undervalued.”

Although they also chose some other words with negative connotations — “underappreciated,” “tired,” “frustrated” — they selected them at a lower rate than positive ones. Experts say the responses are generally signs of a group that views its work with satisfaction.

“Most faculty workers are reasonably happy, want to stick with their professorial jobs, and, not surprisingly, their satisfaction increases with rank,” says David Kiel, a higher-education consultant and a former faculty leadership development administrator at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

About 95 percent agree or strongly agree with the statement, “By doing my job, I make a difference in the world,” while nearly all agree or strongly agree that their teaching benefits students and their lives. By a wide margin, faculty say that working with students is the major factor that drives them, with research also receiving a strong but lesser response.

Nearly 80 percent agree or strongly agree with the survey statement, “My research makes an important intellectual contribution.” Among tenured and untenured pro-
fessors, the number is roughly the same, though many more non-tenured professors and instructors or adjuncts say they don’t know whether their research adds value to their university or not — perhaps because they don’t conduct research on campus.

“That makes sense,” says Maria Maisto, a longtime adjunct professor who recently left the profession to take a better-paying job in the non-profit world; she also co-founded the New Faculty Majority, an adjunct and contingent equity advocacy group. “Contingent faculty rarely have the chance to do the research they’d like to do and are qualified to do.”

More than three-quarters of all professors surveyed agree or strongly agree that their service work matters to their colleges, that their campus climate is collegial, and that their job performance is fairly judged.

The vast majority of college instructors and professors say that if they had to make a career choice all over again, they’d still opt to become professors, that they were well or somewhat well trained to teach, and that they expect to remain in their careers for the duration of their work lives. Nearly half say they would encourage their children and other family members to follow them into the profession.

The numbers of professors who say they will remain professors until retirement — roughly 88 percent — are significantly higher than those of instructors and adjuncts — 73 percent.

Still, experts say both numbers show that college professors — full or part time, contingent or tenure track — deeply appreciate their jobs.

“This really underscores that we’re all part of the faculty, and that we shouldn’t be viewed any differently when it comes to our passion for what we do, whether we’ve been lucky enough to land a tenured job or not,” says Maisto.

Educators at public institutions are more likely to say that they expect to stay in the profession for the rest of their careers (87 percent) than those who work at private colleges (80 percent) — a rare
instance when the viewpoints between public and private college faculty in the survey diverge.

Some found the result surprising. “I wonder if that reflects the number of struggling private colleges,” says Kiel. “One would expect professors at the well-heeled private schools, including many of the top 25 universities in the United States, to be happier than in the relatively strapped public colleges.”

Amid the self-reported sense of satisfaction lies some tension. Only about half of those surveyed say that they’d seek another job in higher education if they left their current one. “The results indicate that faculty are conflicted,” says Ben Givens, an associate professor of behavioral neurosciences at Ohio State University, and the secretary of the University Senate there. “They feel like their environment is inclusive and collaborative, and yet almost a third said they thought seriously about quitting their job in the past 12 months.”

“I love the cycle of the academic year, the freedom to choose areas of my research, the flexibility in my workday, and the opportunity to interact with students who are fun and often intellectually curious and highly motivated.”

Anonymous survey response
Faculty Frustrations

Among the issues that make faculty feel conflicted, according to responses to the survey, are their college’s administration, bureaucracy, and pay. Meetings, a lack of time, and grading also were often mentioned.

While a little more than half of respondents say leadership at their college is effective and that their institutions take an interest in their career development, a majority disagree or strongly disagree that faculty/administration relations are strong, and that college administrators understand the faculty’s needs.

Even fewer faculty members agree or strongly agree with the phrase, “Shared governance at my college is healthy.” Among instructors and adjuncts, agreement on the governance issue was a good bit higher, with nearly 55 percent saying they are in agreement with the phrase.

Experts on adjunct faculty saw the latter result as an anomaly. “That’s odd. You wonder how adjuncts made that determina-
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tion, given that they usually aren’t involved in governance,” says Adrianna Kezar, professor of education at the University of Southern California and co-director of USC’s Pullias Center for Higher Education.

Some saw a relationship between the rise in the hiring of adjuncts, instructors, and full-time non-tenure-track faculty — who now make up 70 percent of college educators — and what appears to be a decrease in faith in college governance.

“As institutions grow and hire more part-time faculty, the burdens of service fall more often to full-timers,” says Kiernan Mathews, executive director of COACHE, the Harvard higher-education research consortium. This comes at a time when relatively fewer full-time educators are being hired. “We have a proportionally smaller pool from which to draw leaders. We’re hurting ourselves more and more by leaning on contingent professionals.”

Kezar adds that faculty discontent overall with administrators is part of a growing trend — one that reflects a concern among faculty members about the competency of college leaders.

“You can see in the scandals at Michigan State, Penn State, and here at USC that there is a lack of checks and balances within institutions,” says Kezar. “Faculty are very concerned that we’re not maintaining a safe

TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS?

“The relationship between the faculty and administrators at my college is favorable and strong”

- Strongly Disagree: 17%
- Disagree: 36%
- Agree: 36%
- Strongly Agree: 11%

“Administrators at my college understand the needs of the faculty”

- Strongly Disagree: 19%
- Disagree: 32%
- Agree: 38%
- Strongly Agree: 10%

“I feel disposable as a non-tenure-track faculty, despite being incredibly effective in my role as teacher and professional.”

Anonymous survey response
learning environment for students, which is a core priority for them.”

Others worry that colleges’ increased hiring of executives from outside higher education has eroded trust in leadership.

“There’s a cultural mismatch happening,” says Julie Schmid, executive director of the American Association of University Professors. “Institutions have become more top-down. They’ve moved away from the model that allowed academics to move up the ranks to leadership positions. The new corporate model is creating a strong negative reaction.”

Elsewhere in the survey, the viewpoints of adjuncts and instructors diverge from those of their full-time peers. The gulf is especially wide on opinions regarding pay and benefits. A little more than half of tenured faculty agree or strongly agree that pay and benefits are adequate; around 57 percent of faculty without tenure disagree or strongly disagree.

About half of professors without tenure say they find it hard to prepare financially for retirement, compared with slightly more than one-third of tenured faculty.

“Faculty’s views of stability hinge on whether they are eligible for pension plans, as other studies have shown,” says Ott, the associate professor at Arizona State.

While educators view their work with students as a paramount reason for their job satisfaction, a strong majority of faculty, almost 63 percent, agree or strongly agree that today’s students are harder to teach than students in years past. What’s more, nearly 80 percent disagree that today’s students are more engaged than the students of years ago.

A similar percentage disagreed with the statement, “Teaching today’s students is more fulfilling than teaching students of years past.”

If students are more disengaged than in years past, the reason might be found in outmoded or ineffective teaching methods, some say.

“I’m not sure students are less engaged as much as they’re quick to disengage if the course instructor is not delivering what they perceive they need,” says Givens, at Ohio State.
But others say that the increasing percentage of young adults who attend college is confronting faculty members with many more students who have not been adequately prepared for college learning.

“We’re seeing a more diverse group of students than in the past,” says Elisabeth Barnett, senior research scientist at the Community College Resource Center at Columbia University, which provides research on the workings of two-year colleges. “We’re not seeing improvements in preparation at K-12, but we’re seeing more and more students.”

Many students are the first in their families to attend college and are under more pressure to succeed at college and beyond. Many must take jobs to pay their tuition and fees.

“The environment is completely different. By the time they get to college, students are already anxious,” says Donna Kerner, a professor of anthropology at Wheaton College, in Massachusetts, where she is a member of the college’s Committee on Faculty Workload and Economic Status. “They’re being told they need to maintain three majors and do internships, because parents feel the pressure of paying all this money to have them educated.”

For others, faculty answers to questions about student engagement don’t necessarily reflect a belief that today’s students are less able. “One cannot interpret ‘disagree’ responses as indicating that students today are worse,” says Vanness, from Pennsylvania State.

Besides, he adds, faculty report receiving more respect from students than from their families, the community, or the American public at large: “The results do not reflect increased frustration.”
committed but concerned

Nat Stein
The present political moment is having an effect on faculty, some educators report, though not enough overall to make them question their choice of profession.

In comments faculty were invited to add to their survey answers, some say they are “confused,” “misunderstood,” and “somewhat defensive” because of the tensions that come with being a professor in today’s political climate.

They may feel that way because of Republican attacks on tenure and university budgets, battles over free-speech rights on campus, as well as the results of recent studies showing that a growing percentage of Republicans are skeptical of the aims of higher education.

Some say the public’s view and the current national leadership have made them skittish about how to proceed while doing some aspects of their jobs.

“When the White House is talking about ‘alternative facts’ and you’re trying to teach students the value of using evidence to study things, you can feel like you’re going uphill,” says Kerner, at Wheaton.

In the survey itself, faculty members described themselves as “undervalued,” “overworked,” “worried,” “depressed,” and “tired.” The word they use most often is “challenged,” which can have conflicting connotations.
A fraught political environment, including campus debates over free speech, doesn’t seem to have discouraged many faculty.

But in a series of survey questions that asked them to choose opposite adjectives to define their views, eight in 10 respondents say they favored the term, “My job is challenging,” to another that says, “My job is easy.” Even more agree with the statement, “My job is exciting,” as opposed to, “My job is boring.” More than seven in 10 were more likely to say their job is “fulfilling,” rather than “frustrating.”

Some experts see this as a sign of resiliency among professors.

“Faculty don’t see the public disinvestment in their profession as a result of their shortcomings — and they shouldn’t,” says Kezar, at the University of Southern California.

“It’s nice to hear that faculty love their jobs, and sort of counterintuitive, given that in the public discourse campuses are under a great...
deal of pressure from the right wing that controls many state legislatures,” says Kiel, the academic consultant from North Carolina.

“Your survey’s respondents defy the caricature of whiny, entitled people who are part of a protected class,” adds Mathews, at COACHE.

Overall, a majority of survey respondents indicated that they felt the profession was respected by others, including families and friends, students, their community, and the American public.

Faculty members were least secure about the favorable views of the public. But professors and experts say that many of the studies that show misgivings about higher education by Americans who lean to the right politically also reveal that the public at large, regardless of political party, is happy with how higher education prepares students for the workforce.

“Even as the profession is being dismantled, the broader public still views it as positive,” says Kezar.

“**I feel inspired by my students, exploited by my institution’s administration, despised by state and federal government powers, and corporate interests actively seek to exterminate me and my voice in society.**”

Anonymous survey response
College and university faculty members highly value their jobs and their students, remain highly engaged with them, and derive considerable satisfaction from them. They are likely to stay in the profession until they retire and to encourage family members to follow in their footsteps. And they maintain faith in their profession even as some political groups are increasingly skeptical of their work.

And yet, as the Chronicle survey demonstrates, some aspects of their jobs dampen that high level of satisfaction. Experts say several survey results could serve as guides for administrators who are looking to improve their institutions’ relations with faculty.

“The main concerns have to be pay, benefits, and working conditions,” says Kezar, the higher-ed researcher at USC. “The profession is being threatened. The tenure track is under attack. The vast majority of adjuncts want full-time work. How are institutions going to deal with that?”

The sometimes-vast financial gulf between tenured professors and other faculty needs to be addressed, others agree — especially as more and more institutions look to cut costs and hire more part-time, contingent faculty for less money and fewer benefits. That inequity, some fear, will outlive some faculty members’ careers.

“There is a huge contingent of adjuncts who are of retirement age who have nothing,” adds Maisto, the former adjunct professor. “It’s an upcoming crisis. We’ll have people who won’t be able to teach and with nothing to live on. It’s an issue higher education has to deal with.”

Some university systems have begun pilot programs to help non-tenure-track faculty develop retirement plans, but they are few and far between. “In Oregon and Washington, there have been efforts to create more generous retirement plans for contingent faculty, but those are really the exception,” says Ott, at Arizona State.

The mass hiring of adjuncts and instructors has also had an effect on how colleges are governed — something that is becoming an issue for faculty, according to survey results. With fewer full-time faculty, there are more demands on those who remain to fill campus leadership roles.

“Trustees need to take responsibility for cultivating faculty leadership,” says Mathews, executive director at COACHE. “To sustain these institutions, faculty members need to lead them.”

Such organizations as the Associated Colleges of the Midwest, a group of 14 liberal-arts colleges, have formed their own leadership programs — to some effect. Mathews adds: “The real result of these programs is that colleges say, ‘We’re going to treat faculty like grown-ups and invite them to learn how their colleges actually work.’”
Committed but Concerned is based on a survey of 997 professors and instructors at colleges and universities. Maguire Associates, of Concord, Mass., conducted the online survey for The Chronicle of Higher Education with support from TIAA. The data collection took place in July and August 2018.
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