COACHE 2019 SURVEY: OPEN ENDED COMMENT ANALYSIS

Background:

During the 2018-2019 academic year, RIT collaborated for the third time with the Harvard Graduate School of Education to administer the COACHE Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey. The survey was distributed electronically by Harvard in spring semester 2019 to full time tenured, pre-tenure, and non-tenure track faculty. A total of 487 faculty responded. This represents fifty percent (50%) of eligible faculty. RIT’s response rate was higher than peer institutions by 4.4 percentage points.

The body of the survey requested respondents to rate their satisfaction on a variety of topics that affect faculty work/life, using a scale of 1-5.

The final item in the survey asked faculty to respond to an open-text prompt, “What is the one thing your institution could do to improve the workplace for faculty?”

Analysis of the individual responses revealed four (4) major descriptive themes. For the purpose of this analysis, a theme was defined as major if 15 or more respondents mentioned it. Within each major theme, sub themes emerged which are explained below.

This analysis of the open-ended comments supplements the other data generated from the COACHE survey results.

MAJOR THEMES

#1 RESOURCES AND SUPPORT (86)

Suggestions and comments related to resources and support were repeatedly offered and represented the top category receiving comment. The majority of comments focused on four areas.

A. Research Support

The commentary related to support of research/scholarship centered on an overall concern and dismay that the support of research was “largely missing” and that additional resources were needed in order to realize a robust research culture. This translated into suggestions that:

- More TA’s be funded
- More return be allocated to departments—revising the overhead model
- More support for research travel and sabbaticals
Infrastructure issues be addressed in order to encourage more external funding, including more grant writing and research support staff, start-up funds, support for graduate students, additional post-award support

Additional tenure track faculty lines be created to ease the teaching load

B. Academic Facilities

The need to update and enhance classrooms, laboratories and research space along with equipment were very frequently mentioned.

C. Compensation

The reference to compensation was also one of the areas frequently called out. Here the opinions spanned the continuum from suggestions that RIT take care of the compression problem, increase base salaries across the board, pay at a fair market rate, provide more opportunities to recognize outstanding work, as well as suggestions that RIT benchmark against R1 schools and provide differential compensation for faculty producing high quality research. Mention of particular categories of faculty and the need to improve their compensation were proposed. This included tenured faculty, non-tenure track faculty and lecturers.

D. Resource Allocation/Budget Model

Occasionally associated with comments about the need for additional resources and support was a corollary suggestion that the current budget and resource allocation model carries too much red tape, deters collaboration and interdisciplinary work and doesn’t use research productivity as a criterion for distribution of resources. These comments called for a change in the current process.

#2 INSTITUTIONAL LEADERSHIP(56)

The theme of institutional leadership spanned suggestions about leadership selection, evaluation and training at the dean and department chair level.

A. Selection

Advice here included the need to recruit deans and department chairs that have the skills, proven track records, have excelled in teaching and research and have experience overseeing both functions. Term limits for department chairs and deans were suggested as well as more formal processes for moving faculty into administrative positions.

B. Evaluation

The need to hold leaders accountable and to evaluate regularly was a common theme. Another frequent suggestion was that leaders who, in the opinion of the respondent were unqualified or ineffective, be removed. The term ‘strong leader’ was used to categorize the type of dean that
is required. Comments made about the need for oversight and evaluation, including upward evaluation, seemed to spring from the view of the respondent that oversight was currently lacking.

C. Training

The call for new chair training and 1st level supervisory training was echoed as well. An area noted where specific improvement is needed was communication and leadership strategies to meaningfully engage faculty.

#3 NATURE OF FACULTY WORK (38)

This major theme contained suggestions about how specific university-wide aspects of faculty’s work life could be improved.

A. Teaching and Scholarship

A theme that repeatedly emerged was the balance expected between teaching and scholarship. There were two views on this. The one that received the most comment was a concern that the emphasis on teaching has diminished. Those offering this view saw it as a negative. Some reasoned this as RIT placing too much emphasis on research right now and questioned the direction that RIT is taking which, in their view, has resulted in weakening RIT’s core mission (excellence in teaching) and creates the perception that teaching is not valued or respected. A few categorized this as research is the only thing that counts. Others seriously questioned whether the teacher-scholar model is sustainable at RIT given the current resource base and infrastructure. A few commented that while they didn’t see teaching and research as dualities, they did want to see RIT acknowledge faculty strengths and leverage the strengths and interests of faculty to achieve university excellence by making it possible for faculty to demonstrate true mastery in either research or teaching. It was suggested by some that faculty in general and some, specifically in departments without graduate students, should have the opportunity to teach more if they wish—not be penalized in promotion to full professor—and appreciated as highly as top researchers are. The opinion that excellent teaching needs to be recognized and rewarded was imbedded in some of the comments offered. Mention was made of ensuring that lecturers feel valued. Here a few faculty also wrote that in their opinion high quality teaching is not celebrated in the same way as grantsmanship is and that faculty who perform well should be recognized fairly.

There were also a number of comments on the changing direction at RIT in the research/scholarship arena that applauded this move. This group of faculty, however, expressed fundamental concern that current resources and infrastructure at RIT are not well aligned with what moving to an R2 institution requires. They expressed frustration and apprehension about RIT’s ability to achieve its aspirational goals in this area if the resource and
budgeting model were not re-calibrated. (See RESOURCES AND SUPPORT). A few indicated that highly productive research active faculty are not rewarded at the level they should be.

B. Faculty Workload

The second area noted was faculty workload. Here faculty suggested that workloads need to:

▪ Be More flexible depending on whether a faculty member is on a teaching track or a research track—“one size doesn’t fit all”—need to be reduced for research productive faculty
▪ Be Re-evaluated to determine what constitutes a ‘reasonable workload’
▪ Factor in Class size and lab instruction
▪ Be normalized between pre-tenure and tenure faculty
▪ Be more equitable across departments
▪ Be more transparent
▪ Be balanced across tenure track and non-tenure track faculty—a few faculty commented that lecturers should be permitted to do scholarship and have that count in the workload

C. Tenure and Promotion

Lastly, some faculty addressed concerns with the tenure and promotion process. Their suggestions primarily zeroed in on the criteria, noting that additional clarity is needed on what is expected and additional mentoring provided. The suggestion that the emphasis on research is weighted too heavily and that expectations keep changing was also expressed. The desire for more flexible opportunities for associate professors, who entered under different scholarship expectations, to be promoted to full professor was suggested.

4. DEPARTMENTAL ENGAGEMENT, DIVERSITY, and GOVERNANCE (18)

The last major area represents a combination of factors that affect faculty satisfaction with their day-to-day life and the culture within an academic unit. While none of these factors rises to the level of a ‘major’ theme, mention is made here in order to ensure that these views are noted as follows:

▪ Need to have effective hiring processes in place that result in increasing the number of diverse faculty, i.e. AALANA and women
▪ Improve faculty input into decision making at all levels
▪ Need more opportunities for faculty to come together across discipline lines. This should be supported by less rivalry for resources
RETROSPECTIVE: 2016 OPEN-ENDED COMMENT ANALYSIS

A marker that can be helpful to RIT administration in determining which suggestions and major areas to undertake first to improve the workplace is to compare the open-ended comment analysis from 2016 with that from 2018 to see if there are some recurring major themes. There are three that emerge (based on the number of comments associated with each) that match with the 2018 analysis:

#1 Facilities: “RIT needs to invest in improving it equipment, technology, and facilities (33)

#2 Research Support: “If RIT wants to push so much towards a research focus, then it needs to invest more resources in research (e.g., increase support for new faculty lines, start-up funds, graduate assistants, lab space, TAs, course releases, etc.” (26)

#3 Compensation: “RIT should increase salaries” (24)