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Recommendations for Integration of Geographically Dispersed (“Virtual”) Faculty

The Academic Senate’s Faculty Environment and Employment Committee (FEEC) would like to acknowledge the University’s commitment to supporting faculty in their various roles, as well as steps taken to foster a culture of teaching excellence. Noteworthy recent developments in this regard include:

- Academic Senate Resolution 15/16-004, and the Provost’s announcement on 9/15/17, recognizing the vital role of part-time and full-time teaching faculty and outlining improved policies and practices to support them.
- The procurement of an institutional membership to the Online Learning Consortium (OLC)
- Changes to the Center for Excellence in Teaching aimed at promoting a vibrant culture of teaching at USC.

Building upon this foundation, the FEEC this year considered how the University could better support its geographically dispersed faculty, also known as virtual faculty, to become better integrated into the culture and processes of the faculty body as a whole. We have provided below some definitions to more clearly identify this group of faculty, along with a set of recommendations to guide university administrators, program directors, and department chairs on how to better address their unique needs.

Background and Definitions

The designation of “geographically dispersed” (GD) faculty is an umbrella term referring to faculty who meet the full time and/or part-time faculty definition as described in the Faculty Handbook (teaching track, research track, clinical track, and practitioner track) but whose physical presence on any campus is not required for the fulfillment of their job duties, as determined by their unit. GD faculty work in a teaching or administrative capacity with students enrolled in an online/virtual program and generally reside at a significant distance from USC campuses (many reside outside of Southern California). As such, they are not expected to have a regular physical presence on any campus and require a virtual/online connection to meetings, committees, or other campus-based events.

Geographically dispersed faculty are an integral part of our community. They play a critical role in the advancement of the University’s teaching mission and its movement toward becoming a global leader in education and clinical services. Currently, there are 17 schools providing virtual/online programs across USC. The Dworak-Peck School of Social Work alone has over 50 full time GD faculty and over 200 part time GD faculty affiliated with three virtual/online programs. The Rossier School of Education likewise has a significant number of GD faculty on its roster.

GD faculty contribute positively to USC in various ways such as promoting USC as ambassadors of their school and the larger university across the country in all 50 states and internationally. Faculty residing in rural, urban and suburban areas likewise bring increased diversity in the classroom and a different awareness of culture and community.

However, GD faculty face a number of unique obstacles limiting their ability to participate fully in University life and to develop in their careers. Limitations include restricted remote access to meetings held on campus, minimal inclusion in on-campus events, and under-representation on university committees. Such constraints particularly beset full-time GD faculty seeking to advance their careers insofar as they are held to the same service expectations as on-campus faculty in annual merit evaluations and promotion processes.

Recommendations

To facilitate the integration of geographically-dispersed faculty within the larger community and take steps to support their opportunities for advancement, we recommend that:

1. Each School conduct a full count of its GD faculty, both full and part time, and report those numbers back to the Provost's Office. This information may be used to
 - Raise awareness among divisional leaders about the special needs of GD faculty.
 - Provide chairs in various departments with technical guidance to allow remote participation in faculty meetings (including webcam access, audio access, and techniques on engagement in a hybrid meeting).
 - Encourage individual schools or units to create a GD Faculty Manual that can serve to integrate new faculty, provide cohesion, convey clear academic expectations, and communicate safety and disaster protocols unique to virtual/online programming.
2. The Provost issue a statement acknowledging the role and contributions of GD faculty at the university, as done previously for part-time faculty.
3. Faculty Councils / Academic Senate engage in outreach to GD faculty and invite them to self-nominate for positions. A rotating seat on the Senate may also be opened for GD Faculty.
4. Technical accommodations be made to enable remote attendance in faculty-wide, Academic Senate, and/or departmental meetings.
 - We encourage the Provost's office to provide accommodations during Listening Tours and other forums for engaging with faculty, to ensure remote participation is possible.
 - Security measures to verify the identity of remote participants may also be adopted.
5. Technical platforms be standardized and upgraded, allowing for faculty engagement by webcam, phone line and/or chat capability on a virtual platform.
 - For Academic Senate committees in particular, we suggest a video-conferencing platform that allows for greater interactivity (break-out groups, chats, split screens, etc.) than Blue Jeans currently provides. Zoom and Adobe Connect are good alternatives.
6. The Center for Excellence in Teaching provide support for GD faculty, building bridges between them and on-campus faculty who teach online classes, with a view to encouraging information-sharing. Support may include
 - consolidating a roster of GD faculty and other faculty who teach online courses
 - collecting and sharing syllabi
 - providing virtual workshops on best practices for online teaching
 - offering guidance on common problems in online courses, such as academic integrity violations.
7. IT and other support services take into account time zone differences from the main campus.