



Growing Our Own: Cultivating Faculty Leadership

Kiernan Mathews

To cite this article: Kiernan Mathews (2018) Growing Our Own: Cultivating Faculty Leadership, Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, 50:3-4, 88-92, DOI: [10.1080/00091383.2018.1509617](https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2018.1509617)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2018.1509617>



Copyright Taylor & Francis



Published online: 16 Oct 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1615



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

Growing Our Own: Cultivating Faculty Leadership

By Kiernan Mathews

“What do the faculty think?” It’s a question that governing boards and presidents ask routinely—or don’t ask at their peril. It’s also the question that, for nearly 15 years, has prompted nearly 300 colleges and universities to participate in the survey research project I direct to understand and assess the faculty experience.

But here’s the problem: it’s the wrong question. The seasoned college leader appreciates that there is no such thing as “a” faculty (“encamped just north of Armageddon,” according to Robert Zemsky; <https://www.chronicle.com/article/How-to-Build-a-Faculty-Culture/141887>) followed by a verb in the third-person singular. Rather, there are *many* faculties. Since *Change’s* founding, the increasing diversity in the roles, demographics, and institutional homes of faculty is the most consequential factor bedeviling the leadership of the faculty enterprise and, therefore, any transformation of the academy.

I once believed that the increased complexity of faculty affairs requires a professional class of administrators to manage it—not faculty, but career practitioners from the higher

education and organizational behavior programs of our graduate schools of education. People like me. It took nearly 15 years studying faculty and academic leadership to teach me otherwise. Although Ed School allies have an important, facilitating role to play, I believe that an overreliance on these allies will widen the gulf that divides faculty from administrators and the disciplines from each other.

To overcome the pressures pulling the academy apart, presidents and provosts, governing boards and legislatures, foundations and associations should commit to the cultivation of leadership from the faculties and by them. Fortunately, countervailing trends in faculty development and academic leadership are making the ground fertile for change.

THE MYTH OF “THE FACULTY”

The phenomenon of a fragmented faculty was colorfully captured by Hazard Adams over 40 years ago. It is a principle of academic politics, he wrote in *The Academic Tribes* (1976), that “the fundamental allegiance of the faculty member will be to the smallest unit to which he belongs” (p. 8). Other, more scientific examinations have shown us that the disciplines’ powers of socialization can shape the



Kiernan R. Mathews is Executive Director and Principal Investigator of COACHE, the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education, a research consortium based at Harvard University. He is also Educational Chair of the Seminar on Leadership of the Faculty at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and a board member at the Association for Collaborative Leadership.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

very personalities of faculty members and how differently professors behave in “hard” and “soft” disciplines, “pure” and “applied” fields, “life” or “non-life” subjects. The assumption that such classifications separate faculty members has guided scholarship on the professoriate with “surprising persistence” for nearly a half-century (Simpson, 2015).

Not that the disciplines alone define the faculty experience: rank and time-in-rank, tenure status, and teaching load are also professional differentiators. Studies of institutional contexts like size, selectivity, control, mission, religious affiliation, even region and “urbanicity” further indicate that what is taken for granted by one faculty group might be utterly foreign to another. Then there are those demographic qualities, such as race, country of origin, gender, and sexuality that scarcely registered among the more cloistered, homogeneous professoriate of the era at the launch of *Change* but that are essential to comprehend fully today’s academic communities.

The Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) has existed since 2005 to give voice to these faculties and to teach leaders how to listen to and engage with them. Beginning with studies of pre-tenure women and faculty of color, COACHE has adapted to meet the evolving challenges of the academic workforce: mid- and late-career professors, then full-time faculty who are off the tenure-track, then faculty at community colleges, and now (through exit surveys) the departing faculty whom universities work hardest to keep, yet lose anyway.

These data about faculty, along with my personal experience supporting the senior administrators who use these data to guide action, have afforded me the privilege of studying faculty affairs at the nexus of research, policy, and practice. From this vantage, I have observed the forces pulling faculty and administrators apart, but also the necessity of cultivating a new generation of college leaders from within our faculties.

THE FACULTIES MAY LOOK THE SAME, BUT THEY’VE CHANGED UTTERLY

To be sure, much hasn’t changed about the faculties. In 2001, my former colleagues prophesied in the *New York Times* (<https://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/11/opinion/professors-at-the-color-line.html>) that the faculty would remain overwhelmingly white until compelled by outside forces, perhaps a boycott by athletes of a major athletic conference (<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/09/us/missouri-football-players-boycott-in-protest-of-university-president.html>) where there has been the least progress toward faculty diversity. In the intervening years, the data supporting their argument that faculty diversity has been “too little for too long” (<https://harvardmagazine.com/2002/03/faculty-diversity.html>) have barely budged (<https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=61>).

Tenure has also proven resistant to change, for worse and for better. The threats to tenure are a perennial lead (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/03/29/kentucky-legislation-could-limit-tenure-protections>) in the higher

education press, but reports of tenure’s ultimate demise have been exaggerated. While the proportion of faculty on the tenure track has indeed declined, their absolute numbers (and faculty union chapters; <https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/ticker/new-study-charts-recent-proliferation-of-faculty-unions/116611>) are historically high. The MOOCs and for-profit universities embraced by evangelists of innovation have retreated for now, slowing the advancement of non-tenure systems. Tenure has resisted the onslaught, but it has also resisted thoughtful reforms (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/rethinking-tenure-for-the-next/48262>), even after the elimination in 1994 of a mandatory retirement age for professors.

That decision, the heft of the “baby boomer” generation, and the lingering impact of the Great Recession are having lasting effects on the composition of the faculties. At both ends of their careers, faculty today are older. They are starting later: more than half of the assistant professors in HERI’s studies (<https://www.heri.ucla.edu/monographs/HERI-FAC2014-monograph.pdf>) are 43 years or older; no longer “junior” faculty, these middle-aged employees are balancing work and families, but theirs include aging, ailing parents. Faculty are retiring later too (especially in the arts, sciences, and education; <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/0013189X13497993>), a phenomenon shown to depress the hiring (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3737001/>) of new and more diverse tenure-track faculty.

Colleges have adapted to the pressure, intensified by growing enrollments and tightening budgets, by turning to a contingent workforce—adjuncts and graduate students for teaching, post-docs and other fixed-term, “soft-funded” scholars for research. With clinical roles added to their mix, medical and other health science schools have seen the variety of faculty employment arrangements grow like kudzu. (One dean recently described to me his university’s push to reduce their categories of appointments from over 50 to a “mere” 18. It failed.)

Anyone attempting a comparative study of faculty across institutions will tell you: unlike the simpler pre-*Change* era, today’s complexity in academic appointments defies rational taxonomy. Still, in many quarters, administrators and faculty are responding to these challenges by exercising a more pluralistic, “cybernetic” style of leadership—a style more sensitive to institutional feedback, more incremental in decision making, and more aligned with organizational life and values (Birnbau, 1989).

They are authentically engaging full-time, non-tenure-track faculty in the life and governance of their institutions. They are training faculty search committees to confront and lean against their biases. Pre-tenure supports are improving: stop-the-clock, for example, is now *de rigueur* (<https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aer.100.2.219>), automatic, and triggered by many life-changing circumstances besides childbirth. Midcareer faculty are supported by more transparent and deliberately developmental promotion processes; by mentoring networks

(<https://doi.org/10.3200/CHNG.39.6.58-C4>) and differentiated career roadmaps (<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2158244017710288>); and by more strategic, equitable approaches to service assignments. Senior faculty, too, are transitioning into retirement through “encore” programs like emeritus academies (<http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/Faculty-Retirement-Transitions.aspx>) that value their institutional knowledge and their desire to remain engaged in the intellectual and civic life of their campuses.

FACULTY DEVELOPMENT AND THE CHIEF ACADEMIC OFFICER

This tailoring of faculty policies, practices, and programs to “meet faculty where they are” is helping faculty, especially those whose voices historically have been silenced. More profoundly, however, these changes are the effects of a seismic shift in the ethos and influence of faculty development in higher education.

It was once the norm of academic culture to perceive newly-minted Ph.D.s as fully-formed assistant professors, hired to “be brilliant.” Professional development was HR’s purview, not the provost’s, and faculty were left alone to their classroom alchemy. The science of student learning, however, has made the harm of the hands-off status quo (<http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2014/05/lecturers-arent-just-boring-theyre-ineffective-too-study-finds>) and the benefits of “high-impact,” active learning pedagogies and co-curricular supports too urgent to be ignored (<https://www.aacu.org/resources/high-impact-practices>). In the 21st century academy, the estimation of faculty development has risen from coddling to crucial. Yes, we’ve realized: faculty, too, can grow.

Meanwhile, the college president has been pulled away from campus to manage external relationships with donors, alumni, trustees, and legislators, for starters. At the local level, the chief academic officer is playing roles that, fifty years ago, could have been mistaken for a presidency (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/More-Power-for-Provosts/17172>). A provost’s portfolio might now include: “student success” for both undergraduates and graduates; enrollment management; assessment and institutional research; diversity and inclusion; international affairs; libraries; dispute resolution; research and technology development; oversight of the school and college deans; and of course, “other duties as assigned.”

The multiplying responsibilities of the provost have given rise to a new class of senior academic administrator. The titles differ from campus to campus, but Georgetown’s Randy Bass helpfully suggested we call them “the vice provosts for giving a damn” about faculty (<http://blogctl.gatech.edu/an-inclusive-and-integrated-vision-for-higher-education-randy-bass-at-the-pod-network-annual-conference/>). At smaller campuses, they are usually assistant or associate deans.

These first officers of faculty affairs, almost without exception appointed from the ranks of the faculty, are broadly committed to (but not necessarily accountable for) faculty success. They are expected to use more carrots than sticks

to influence faculty recruitment, orientation and onboarding, development, diversity, tenure and promotion processes, service assignments, post-tenure review, conduct (read: misconduct), retirement and, naturally, “other duties as assigned.” Once these were the duties of the provosts; now, CAOs deputize promising leaders among the faculty to collaborate with their colleagues to create the conditions in which faculty do their best work.

At the threshold of faculty and administration, these chief faculty affairs officers (CFAOs) must lead from the middle with relatively small budgets and few or no direct reports. To make a difference from this liminal state, CFAOs must exercise not “heroic” or positional power, but the “sustainable” leadership (<https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/15/04/conversation-teresa-sullivan>). “Leading from behind,” one provost said to me, “is how you enact change in higher ed, and women are particularly skilled at it. Unfortunately,” she continued, “it’s lousy for your career prospects,” because it doesn’t catch the eye of boards and search firms.

WHAT KIND OF ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP WILL THE NEXT 50 YEARS DEMAND?

I have described three trends that are not exactly new, but together are deeply significant:

1. the increasing complexity of the academic profession and population;
2. the gradual recognition of (and investment in) faculty as career-long learners;
3. the ascent of the chief academic officer and spread of “sub-specialists” in the provost’s office who must lead through collaboration.

The exhaustive job descriptions of today’s provosts and deans might have baffled their counterparts reading *Change* a half-century ago. It was a simpler time for them, but then again, their academy kept out would-be faculty who thought or looked differently and ignored the potential of adult development. Given these pressures and their impact on the expectations of academic leaders, what capabilities are required to lead and nurture the faculties of the 21st century?

Seeking an answer, I invited provosts, deans, and senior faculty development administrators to complete a skills inventory derived from a 2007 article by Peter Senge and his colleagues at MIT (<https://hbr.org/2007/02/in-praise-of-the-incomplete-leader>). The authors describe four leadership capabilities: *relating* (building relationships and balancing inquiry and advocacy), *sensemaking* (capturing complexities of environments and explaining them to others in simple terms), *visioning* (articulating a picture of what faculty and administrators want to create together), and *inventing* (developing new ways to achieve a vision, that is, execution with creativity and collaboration) (Ancona, Malone, Orlikowski & Senge, 2007).

We discovered that most faculty-administrators’ strongest leadership capability was *relating*, while some others excelled at *sensemaking*. *Visioning* was less developed

among participants, but by far their weakest capability was *inventing*.

This may seem surprising. Nearly all of the participants were once faculty themselves—many, in fact, still were. In their disciplines, they had discovered new medical procedures, reinterpreted ancient texts, pushed the boundaries of knowledge. What happened, then, to their capacity to invent when they transitioned from faculty to academic administrator? Why do they struggle to take new approaches, to overcome obstacles, to forge new relationships between the institution and its parts?

Seeking answers, our forum identified at least two constraints on faculty-turned-administrators. The learning curve is steep when professors otherwise at the top of their game shift from work permitting high levels of autonomy to roles requiring collaboration with a larger, more diverse array of stakeholders. We questioned, also, the orthodoxies of academic culture that condition faculty not to admit failure and administrators to take pains to avoid it. Higher education's traditions of expertise comfort us in the certainty that our belabored search processes surely lead us to hire the best in the world; so, how do we turn around and ask that person to be inventive, to take risks, to be vulnerable?

I followed up with a new self-assessment built on my colleague Robert Kegan's concept of the "deliberately developmental organization," or DDO (Kegan et al., 2016). The DDO might be described as an environment of "extreme candor," and it succeeds only when our vulnerabilities are held in trust and not used against us. The faculty affairs leaders in this particular seminar found that their institutions struggled most to embrace the notion that weakness—that is, the willingness to admit one—is a strength. At their own and their institutions' risk, they spend too much energy pretending that they have it all figured out: they play the superstar professor, the heroic president, the unflappable provost. These are not the portraits of mortals. **This is so true**

One lesson I have taken from these exercises is that higher education must embrace and strengthen our capacity for *diversified, distributed, and developmental* leadership. To change the academy for the better, we must commit completely to the lifelong development of our faculties—not just into better faculty, but into faculty leaders. And we need every variety: the relaters, the sense makers, the visionaries, the inventors, all of them engaged early and meaningfully in authoring our academic enterprise. Their differences, far from being our weakness, have made our institutions of higher education uniquely resilient through this diversity (<https://harvardmagazine.com/2011/11/bullish-on-private-colleges>).

WHERE DO WE FIND THE LEADERS WE NEED?

In this call for leadership development, I concur with a statement offered by the recent national commission of the Association of Governing Boards (AGB). In *Consequential Boards* (2015), the commission not only argued for "a reinvention of faculty shared governance" (p.18), but called upon *all boards* to establish "institutional leadership development" committees focused on cultivating faculty and

managing presidential transitions. The leadership we need is right under our noses, and the AGB has preemptively overruled the objections that presidents and provosts might hear from trustees:

"Faculty governance moves too slowly, too deliberately." *That's why it tends to make good decisions*, said a CAO in one COACHE study (Ott & Mathews, 2015).

Or the perhaps apocryphal exchange: "What if we spend our money investing in faculty, and then they leave?" *What if we don't, and they stay?*

I have lost count of the occasions in the course of my research when faculty members have described the first time they were given a peek behind the curtain of institutional leadership. Once invited to engage in generative discussions about the threats (many) and opportunities (few) to their colleges and universities, faculty I have interviewed become more sympathetic to administrators' difficult decisions. They may even grow to become allies.

An excellent example of inviting faculty into the conversations of leadership comes from the Associated Colleges of the Midwest, whose Institute on College Futures (https://www.acm.edu/professional_development/Institute_on_College_Futures.html) makes faculty conversant in the economics of higher education. (The program is available to colleges outside the consortium, too.) Another example is Michigan State's Academic Advancement Network (<https://aan.msu.edu/>), which offers us models for a thoughtfully-designed strategy to support a thriving faculty, no matter what their career stage or professional path—so long as there is a deliberate plan. The University of California (<https://ucfacultyleadership.ucdavis.edu/>) has made faculty leadership a systemwide priority (<https://ucfacultyleadership.ucdavis.edu/>).

At COACHE, we have enlisted an academic dean to interview presidents, provosts, and faculty leaders about promising practices in cultivating faculty leadership—a dimension of our surveys—at the institutions who excel at it. Another dean is helping COACHE to launch LMS-based learning modules designed for the provost and vice provost who need support, including feedback, for engaging their faculties in institutional sensemaking processes. This year, we are also mounting a new seminar for this class of leaders on more inventive practices in leadership of the faculty.

On the other hand, some well-meaning, mid-level administrators are making a case for greater professionalization of faculty affairs careers, particularly given the expansion of technological applications for managing the faculty enterprise. In their view, leadership in higher education can't be learned on the job, but deserves the same course of study that faculty have pursued in their own disciplines. Administration, they suggest, can be handled best by those with graduate degrees in higher education.

As a product of two higher education programs, I am sympathetic, but I believe those arguments have it backwards. Whether you feel that we need to renew the academy or rebuild it completely, we will need *more* faculty involved, not fewer:

- in continuing engagement with the governance of their institutions in promoting greater organizational resilience;
- in sustained programs of leadership development to cultivate the next generation of provosts, vice presidents, and presidents;
- in existing, consortium-based communities of practice; or in a new national association for faculty success where vice provosts for giving a damn can be exposed to rigorous scholarship on the professoriate, then find common cause on a shared national agenda for strengthening and growing the professoriate. (The thriving Professional and Organizational Development Network could be the locus, but has not yet convened great numbers of those at the most senior administrative ranks.)

Few college provosts or deans are acquainted with relevant higher education research, and fewer still with research on the organizational behavior and faculties of higher ed. Yet the wise among these leaders have learned from experience that leadership of the faculties is a retail business, not a wholesale one. If “culture happens on the shop floor,” then academic leaders’ success might be predicted by the number of steps logged by their FitBits. Those pounding this pavement are driven to ask, “What do the *faculties* think?”

That’s the right question. Asking about “the” faculty is like polling the American voter: there are countless subtypes, and if you miss a slice, you could lose the election—or the vote of confidence. **Understanding faculty members, on the**

other hand, and cultivating leadership among them brings institutional benefits beyond the faculty. Boards, presidents, provosts and deans will enjoy a comparative advantage in attracting and retaining the best faculty, providing a top-tier education, and ultimately, sustaining our higher education enterprise through more turbulent times ahead. Because they are the links to the many faculties, leaders among faculty and of faculty can be the lynchpins of distributed leadership, the *sine qua non* of change in the academy.

Their future, however, is uncertain. Are some faculties just as likely to resent as revere so-called leaders (once “the L word in higher education”; <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED316074>)? Rather than seek development, how many will turn inward, preferring faculty concierges to make their lives better and easier? And will boards answer the AGB’s call to invest in faculty leadership development? Who will provide that education, nurture those communities, and keep higher education research and practice in close contact?

Scholarly inquiry and COACHE data alone cannot answer questions such as these, but the collective experience of our faculties, deans, provosts and presidents—and of *Change* readers—might. A summit of the major associations and institutes, key researchers of higher education, and college and university leaders could produce a framework to build capacity for academic leadership at scale. Such a project would be likely to succeed *because* of the faculties, not in spite of them. ☐

REFERENCES

- Adams, H. (1976). *The academic tribes* (1st ed.). New York: Liveright.
- Ancona, D., Malone, T. W., Orlikowski, W. J., & Senge, P. M. (2007). In praise of the incomplete leader. *Harvard Business Review*, 85(2), 92–100.
- Becher, T. (1989). *Academic tribes and territories: intellectual enquiry and the cultures of disciplines*. Milton Keynes [England]; Philadelphia, PA: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.
- Birnbaum R (1989) The cybernetic institution: toward an integration of governance theories. *Higher Education* 18(2), 239–253. doi: 10.1007/BF00139183
- Kegan, R., Lahey, L., Miller, M., Fleming, A. (2016). *An everyone culture: becoming a deliberately developmental organization*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press. <https://hbr.org/product/an-everyone-culture-becoming-a-deliberately-developmental-organization/14259-HBK-ENG>
- National Commission on College and University Board Governance. (2014). *Consequential boards: adding value where it matters most*. Washington, DC: Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. Retrieved from: http://agb.org/sites/default/files/legacy/2014_AGB_National_Commission.pdf
- Ott, M. W. & Mathews, K. R. (2015). *Effective academic governance: five ingredients for CAOs and faculty*. Cambridge, MA: The Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education.
- Simpson, A. (2015). The surprising persistence of Biglan’s classification scheme. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(8), 1520–1531. doi: 10.1080/03075079.2015.1111323