

# Supporting Academic Staff

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As the number of faculty members whose position lies outside the tenure system continues to rise at American universities, college deans, department chairs and program directors must consider how to support the careers of these colleagues. The differences that commonly exist between the opportunities available to tenure-system faculty and those offered to other academics can be a recurring source of friction. That not only erodes unit cohesion and climate, but it may also impede efforts to retain valued long-term employees who are not in the tenure system.

Since the configurations and names of these people and positions vary widely across disciplines and institutions, I will denote them collectively as “academic staff.” At Michigan State University, we have several categories of faculty members who work outside the tenure system -- including outside professionals in business, law, medicine or media who teach an occasional career-oriented course in their specialty; instructors with full teaching loads and short-term contracts; and individuals with a mix of teaching, advising or other duties who have long-term appointments. As a dean, I have seen that as my college hires more faculty members outside the tenure system, identifying ways to support such academic staff professionally is an increasingly common topic of conversation. And as an associate provost, as well, charged with advancing the careers of all MSU faculty and academic staff, I am finding support for academics outside the tenure system to be an area of institutional concern.

How can new deans, chairs and directors, or those whose units have only recently hired significant numbers of academics outside the tenure system, make these colleagues feel valued, rewarded, included and consulted?

**Valued.** Considering how to improve the situation of academic staff should start with the basics: compensation, security, title and facilities. Those elements may not be entirely under the control of a chair or even a dean at your institution. Nonetheless, it is worth reviewing them to see whether any might offer room for improvement.

First, you should strive to configure academic staff positions as full-time jobs with benefits. Seeking to improve compensation is also important, given that their base salary is usually lower than that of tenure-system faculty.

For instance, you might offer your teaching staff first refusal at overload or summer courses, compensated at the equivalent fraction of their base salary. Not only is this overall approach an appropriate way to treat valued colleagues, but it is in the best interest of the institution. Having stable and reasonably compensated employment removes cognitive loads that can make it more difficult for academic staff to focus on and excel at their intellectually demanding work.

Along the way, you should acquaint yourself with the career paths available to academic staff at your institution, including those that offer the potential for a measure of job security. A longitudinal analysis of staffing patterns and budgetary data should reveal whether any short-term positions in your unit might be ripe for conversion to long-term ones. That not only supports the individual’s career but also frees other faculty members from the need to continually recruit, hire and train new short-term employees. Supporting such newly created longer-term positions will require establishing clear, well-advertised procedures for including academic staff in orientations and trainings, conducting thorough annual and promotion reviews, and coaching them about requirements for advancement in rank.

A title that accurately conveys the level of responsibility held by academic staff is also important. For those hoping to move onto the tenure track, an unclear title may impede advancement. Regardless of future plans, the right title can facilitate access to collaborations and other campus opportunities.

Each institution has its own rules regarding titles; at some, official titles involving the word “professor” may be reserved for those whose responsibilities include research or those in the tenure system. Yet a title like “instructor” may signal to search committees elsewhere that an individual has been a course assistant rather than the person leading their own class, potentially underselling their qualifications. In that situation, it is sometimes possible to offer

an individual the use of a descriptive title like “professor of practice” for their CV, syllabi and business cards.

Access to facilities such as office space and IT support is also a basic element of employment. If a unit is unable to provide private offices to all academic staff, an individual desk in a quiet shared space may still be desirable, especially if a small conference room for meeting with students is nearby. If the unit normally provides tenure-system faculty members with the use of a professionally maintained computer for teaching purposes, doing likewise for academic staff can help maintain their productivity at comparable levels.

**Rewarded.** Once the basic parameters of employment have been settled, you might next consider how to reward excellent performance by academic staff. Many of the types of rewards suggested below would also offer opportunities for publicizing the person’s achievements, which will increase the degree of recognition and visibility they enjoy on campus.

A natural starting point is to identify which institutional prizes or selective professional development programs are open to academic staff. Then you should nominate your top performers for these awards and opportunities on a regular basis. The process of compiling the application packet will acquaint colleagues with the candidate’s accomplishments; having the candidate represent the unit in an honorific capacity will demonstrate the pride you take in their work.

If your unit has a seminar series encompassing the area in which academic staff work, be it pedagogy, research or engagement, invite them to speak and advertise the event as you would any other in the series. That will acquaint colleagues with the speaker’s accomplishments and may spark collaborations that benefit all concerned. Likewise, if your unit offers funds for conference travel or professional development to tenure-system faculty members, setting some aside to support the intellectual growth of academic staff can be a wise investment.

If participation in grant-funded activity is a priority at your institution, academic staff may be able to join projects relevant to their work. For instance, even if their roles would preclude their serving as principal investigators on external grants, they might be valuable contributors as senior personnel on multi-investigator proposals in their areas of expertise. Or if your institution offers internal grants for which academic staff are eligible, you might encourage them to apply -- provided there is evidence that their applications will receive full consideration.

You may want to consider how academic staff can play leadership roles in certain projects that would advance both your unit’s mission and the person’s career. For instance, when my college began offering online courses and study abroad programs, we found that creating or leading those programs was often of interest to academic staff members. Such opportunities may enable the individual to use a different part of their skill set and earn some welcome summer or overload salary. Moreover, taking the lead in starting the program establishes them as a recognized local expert, which may further open doors for them.

**Included.** People prefer to have a say in the way their workplace is organized and operated. So it is worth investigating the regulations of your unit and institution to identify the governance roles and voting rights for which academic staff are eligible. The answer often depends on the person’s appointment type or rank; it may also depend on how long they have worked at the university.

Four major types of participation that a unit may wish to offer its academic staff are: faculty meetings, searches, voting rights and committee service. The first two may well be at the discretion of the unit leader. The latter two are usually subject to the terms of the unit’s bylaws. Note, however, that bylaws can be changed if unit members perceive a benefit to doing so.

It is generally a good idea to invite academic staff to attend faculty meetings and participate in the discussions. Not only are those gatherings occasions where information is shared and policies are shaped, but they also play a large role in transmitting the culture of the organization to new members and sustaining that culture over time. Immediately before and after the meeting proper, the room is usually abuzz with conversations between individuals

from different parts of the unit, catching up with one another's work. If academic staff members are excluded from this informal interchange by being barred from the formal meeting, they will know their colleagues less well, making it harder to work effectively together on teams.

During the meeting, listening to how other members of the unit address agenda items is invaluable, especially if potentially divisive issues are on the table. An extended discussion will often reveal diverse perspectives or highlight data that had been underappreciated. Hearing colleagues' analysis and querying their conclusions will help academic staff to understand which arguments and information are most effective for persuading colleagues to take a particular course of action. That, in turn, will make the academic staff better able to contribute to the unit's efforts to improve itself over time.

Engaging academic staff in the public aspects of searches for new colleagues is also helpful on many levels. Every new hire is a significant investment; the search committee and unit leader will benefit from having as much informed feedback as possible on the candidates who visit campus. Moreover, if several searches are underway, the pace of seminars and receptions can be grueling; inviting more individuals to those events will yield a larger turnout, producing a more favorable impression on the candidates. Once hired, new faculty of any rank will turn to experienced colleagues for advice in areas of overlapping interest. Participating in the process by which those new hires were selected will apprise academic staff of areas of mutual interest and give them a greater stake in promoting the newcomers' success.

In my college, everyone is encouraged to meet with candidates for faculty and academic staff positions, regardless of rank. While official ballots on the question of whom to hire may only be cast by individuals of appropriate rank, others are still asked to attend the meeting at which the finalists' interviews are discussed and can cast advisory ballots. I have found that knowing what impression the candidates made on everyone is important. For instance, if a tenure-system candidate treated academic staff differently than tenure-system faculty during their campus visit, it would behoove me to be aware of this.

In contrast with promoting their participation in faculty meetings and searches, offering academic staff committee slots or voting rights may be more controversial because they confer a degree of formal power over a unit's decisions. Nonetheless, where the bylaws permit it -- or may be modified to do so -- you can make a department more cohesive and competent by implementing such changes. Being part of core operations strengthens a person's identification with the unit's mission and motivates them to invest in improving the unit.

Over the last few years, my college has revised the eligibility rules for major college committees to allow interested academic staff to serve on all of our standing committees: advisory, awards, inclusivity and educational policy. Hearing their views has enabled us to make better-informed policy decisions, including those governing the assignment of offices and the evaluation of undergraduate learning assistants. We also made long-term academic staff eligible to serve on search and evaluation committees for others in their appointment track. After all, they are highly knowledgeable about what their roles entail and what qualifications are most germane.

At the same time, we modified the bylaws to clarify which matters all faculty and academic staff may vote upon (essentially, curricular, logistical and organizational ones) and which matters only individuals of particular ranks may vote upon (mainly hiring and promotions). As part of this, we ensured that our long-term academic staff members can participate, alongside tenure-system faculty, in formal hiring and promotion votes on others in the long-term academic track. Expecting someone to serve on a search or review committee without casting a ballot in the collegewide vote on its recommendations would have been inconsistent and counterproductive.

Note that, in the interests of fairness, extending eligibility for governance and committee service to academic staff should be done in the context of making service a category that counts toward their annual and promotion reviews, just as it does for faculty in the tenure system.

**Consulted.** Finally, you should seek input from the academic staff, as the opportunity arises, in order to benefit from

their expertise and learn how to better support their career development.

A couple years ago, seeking such input uncovered a flaw in our college's space allocation processes. During a multiyear space crunch, we had borrowed offices in an adjacent building to ensure that each full-time academic staff member could still have a private office. However, surveying the impacted staff revealed that having shared offices in the primary college building would be far better for them professionally, in the context of our tightly knit residential college community. Accordingly, we implemented a shared office with an adjacent conference space for private consultation with students.

More recently, a discussion with the academic staff revealed that our college needed to provide more consistent and complete information about what membership in the long-term academic career track entails. In response, we have created webpages for each faculty career track with resources that describe job expectations, annual review criteria and promotion procedures. Moreover, we are identifying experienced mentors from outside our small unit for long-term academic staff who would like to build a portfolio toward a future honorific promotion (akin to reaching the rank of full professor).

Turning this last point around, if the appointments of senior academic staff include service responsibilities, you might try asking them to mentor more junior colleagues. We have found that their experiences in classrooms, studios, labs and committee sessions can prepare them to assist new colleagues of all ranks. Given how large an investment each new hire represents, that also conveys to the academic staff that the unit trusts their judgment.

In this essay, I have tried to give a flavor of the many ways in which a chair, director or dean may reward and support academic employees whose appointments lie outside the tenure system. To uncover even more possibilities, I suggest that you reach out to the academic staff in your own unit and ask for their thoughts.