

# Faculty Engagement

Provost's Leadership Academy, June 2024

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## Motivation

Our 2023-2024 Provost Leadership Academy (PLA) workgroup was charged with providing recommendations to increase engagement and a sense of belonging among UCI faculty. Recognizing that engagement is a dynamic and variable process, we defined it broadly as a sense of connection or comfort in one's role in a department or working group at UCI.

Faculty engagement is an essential aspect of a well-functioning and productive campus. Faculty engagement is linked to increased collaboration, productivity, retention, job satisfaction, and student connection.

Our workgroup's recommendations are derived from our internal conversations and our survey of chairs across campus. Strategic investment in engagement is shrewd in a climate of budget restriction.

## Survey of Chairs

The following three questions were answered by 41 of 76 UCI Department Chairs (54% response rate):

- Have there been any barriers that interfere with your faculty's engagement? If so, describe.
- What, if anything, has successfully increased your faculty's sense of engagement?
- Are there things your department has done to foster faculty connection with each other and the department (e.g., walking meetings, informal gatherings to a restaurant/bar, colloquium with food, happy hours after guest lectures, regular tea/coffee hours)?

Full survey results and an A.I. organized count of themes are included in the appendices.

Below, we present a qualitative summary of our survey results, augmented by our workgroup discussions of engagement, organized first by challenges and followed by proposed solutions.

# Challenges to Engagement

Challenges to engagement beyond anyone's control: We acknowledge that many challenges to engagement are outside of university or administration control. Factors such as family responsibilities, length of commute, long-term challenges exacerbated by the pandemic, and individual temperament, for example, all contribute to campus engagement (or lack thereof) in ways that are outside the direct influence of UCI. We also note that engagement for one will look different from engagement for another. Thus, no single strategy will be ideal. Our broad and varied recommendations are made in light of these limitations and inherent challenges to universal engagement.

Challenges to engagement where agency exists: Challenges that seem to provide room for intervention include:

- Engagement is not always seen as a priority to the central mission of faculty
- Some departments feel adrift without connection to central missions
- Budgetary limitations to engagement activities
- New faculty socialization: Newer faculty can feel disconnected from the mission and are sometimes confused as to what to do and why we do what we do
- Higher work demands without additional compensation
- Changes as a result of graduate student contract negotiations
- Parking considerations creating barriers to campus attendance
- Costs associated with attending campus events
- Overreliance on Zoom
- Fewer opportunities for shared pursuit of departmental goals and mission (e.g., fewer faculty hires, encouragement of department strategic planning [would need budget])
- Faculty hiring processes. Faculty hiring both fills openings and creates community
- Staff engagement
- Recognition/compensation opportunities
- Lack of a venue for faculty to gather and socialize

## Solutions to Create Greater Engagement

### 1. Promote the Shared Mission

Create opportunities for shared mission, shared governance, and engagement in values-driven activities at the department level.

- Rationale: Central- and School-level Administration's prioritization of department activities could lead to a sense of purpose and agency among departments pursuing these activities. Examples:
  - Encouraging department strategic planning
  - Establishing/Updating mission/vision statements
  - Strategizing intra-department collaborations

- Providing adequately resourced and supported faculty searches. (Searches are noted as an opportunity to go beyond recruiting to include within-department engagement and connection.)
- Timeline: These could all be implemented as early as the fall and will depend on the appropriate activities for a given department.
- Resources: Requests, tracking, and follow-up from administration to initiate activities and to track them.
- Notes: Activities cannot be assigned for the sake of the process. Departments must believe that there will be meaningful change due to their efforts.

## 2. Commit to Faculty Onboarding

Pay more attention to faculty onboarding and ongoing assimilation for new faculty.

- Rationale: New faculty can feel lost and confused by UCI culture, policies, and bureaucracies. Having a more organized and structured system to support the acclimation to UCI can aid in success broadly defined (e.g., productivity, retention).

Examples:

- Structured onboarding curriculum that includes community building through peer engagement (incoming cohort activities) and mentorship that lasts through the year.
  - This could be similar in structure to the PLA (e.g., monthly/bi-monthly meetings)
- Additional support for AP's new mentoring program to socialize and cross-pollinate
- Timeline: Year-long task force to create a central onboarding/orientation curriculum.
- Resources: Taskforce and associated resources to implement task force recommendations.

## 3. Invest in Engagement

*Establish flexible department budgets specifically for engagement.*

- Rationale: Chairs tend to have their finger on the pulse of their faculty. In our survey, they reported numerous creative and likely effective means of increasing faculty engagement. With the support of administration, ground-up autonomy, and a flexible budget, chairs can facilitate engagement in ways consistent with their department context. These funds could be conceptualized as retention funds as they should decrease faculty departures through proactive fostering of engagement. Examples:
  - Chairs propose an **Engagement Plan** to receive funds from the Provost/Dean to support events with the proposal. Potential events within the plan could include:
    - Informal gatherings (tea, lunch)
    - Food at meetings
    - Happy hours
    - Retreats
    - Establishing Department Wellness Committees (perhaps similar to the DECADE model in terms of central support of departmental execution)
    - Social events at UniHills or other venues throughout the year

- Awards ceremonies
  - Speaker series with informal time budgeted before and after
  - Administration involvement in select events
- Timeline: To be instituted immediately for fall implementation.
- Resources: Budget for events, administrative staff support to help with planning.

## 4. Incentivize Campus Presence

*Remove disincentives to campus gatherings.*

- Rationale: Small but meaningful barriers could be removed to make the campus more accessible, with the rationale being that more time on campus will lead to more engagement (and subsequently more productivity). For example, the cost to park is a disincentive, especially when remote work options are available (e.g., why pay for gas plus commute time plus a \$17 parking fee when Zoom is free?). This initiative would have the added benefit of more faculty-student interaction. *Example*:
  - Parking
    - Free parking for faculty
    - If not free parking, additional commuter vouchers/Expansion of clean commute programs
    - Free parking on weekends for everyone
  - Easier access to engaging events and existing resources that would not add significant additional costs to operations
    - Free or discounted ARC membership
    - Free or subsidized admission to sporting events that might not otherwise sell out
      - Special “School/Department” sporting event nights
    - Subsidized tickets to performing arts events that might not otherwise sell out
    - Invite food trucks or other local food vendors to campus on Fridays
- Timeline: To be instituted immediately for fall.
- Resources: Coordination (and perhaps subsidization) with campus management responsible for these utilities/events.

## 5. Communicate

*Continued regular communication.*

- Rationale: Faculty feel more engaged when the principles of shared governance are evident. Continued regular communication through existing and expanded efforts can increase transparency, decrease feelings of disenfranchisement, and instill a greater sense of campus engagement. *Examples*:
  - More Campus-Wide or Multi-School Town Halls that include an in-person social component
  - Judicious use of Zoom
    - Zoom can be great, but it should not replace too many in-person events

## 6. Increase Community Gathering Spaces - the University Club

*Utilize the University Club for more faculty engagement activities. Consider not renewing the Wedgewood lease for the University Club in 2029*

- **Rationale:** The University Club occupies prime space on the UC Irvine campus and has the potential to be a natural gathering area for faculty. However, in 2017-2018, the University approved a 10-year lease to Wedgewood, a Z-Golf Food and Beverage Company, to run the University Club as a wedding venue and bistro. According to Ron Cortez, then-Vice Chancellor for Administrative and Business Services, this lease agreement would result in “improved dining experiences for our faculty, staff, and visitors.” However, barriers persist, including the following:
  - The bistro offers a limited menu and is only open 4 days a week. On several of those days, the bistro closes so as not to interfere with private events.
  - Many faculty indicate that it pales in comparison to the UCLA Faculty club.
  - Costs to host departmental or school events at the University Club are prohibitively expensive, with a minimum cost of \$4000 per event.
  - No discounts or other incentives are given to university-affiliated groups
  - UCI campus parking passes are not accepted in the University Club parking lot
- **Timeline:** The (extended) 10-year lease expires in August 2029; thus, UCI can pressure the University Club over the next couple of years to offer discounts and other incentives to facilitate events or risk their lease not being renewed.
- **Resources:** Not extending the lease would mean that the university would have to find another lessee or once again manage the University Club (which it did prior to 2017). Thus, new business models for the University Club would need to be developed in this scenario.

## Appendix 1: A.I.-Organized Survey Results

**Have there been any barriers that interfere with your faculty's engagement? If so, describe.**

Based on the provided responses, here are the top 20 barriers that interfere with faculty engagement:

1. Limited availability due to commuting or living away from campus.
2. Distributed labs and lack of clustering within the department.
3. Interpersonal conflicts among faculty.
4. Time constraints and feeling overextended with busy schedules.
5. Difficulty scheduling events to accommodate everyone's research and travel schedules.
6. Perception of additional events as adding more to already full plates.
7. Structural issues such as lack of on-campus presence and unclear workload expectations.
8. Zoom and remote work leading to reduced face-to-face interaction and networking.
9. Recent changes in faculty habits, such as preference for remote attendance.
10. Long-term personal challenges exacerbated by the pandemic.
11. Lack of funds to hold events or promote departmental community.
12. Perceived underappreciation, particularly linked to compensation and workload.
13. Tiredness and exhaustion from recent changes and challenges.
14. Lack of support during challenging times, such as strikes or budget cuts.
15. National attitudes toward the humanities and the university.
16. Lack of a venue for faculty to gather and socialize.
17. Geographic locations and distance from campus.
18. Tension and unease within the workplace due to recent events or changes.
19. Zoom culture hindering engagement and face-to-face interaction.
20. Non-collegial behavior or occasional disruptive actions within the department.

These barriers highlight various challenges faced by faculty members, including structural issues, personal circumstances, and external factors affecting the departmental environment.

**What, if anything, has successfully increased your faculty's sense of engagement?**

Based on the provided responses, here are the top 20 factors that have increased faculty engagement, particularly through in-person interactions:

1. In-person faculty meetings
2. In-person events with food and time for unstructured social interactions
3. Departmental retreats
4. Open and regular communication
5. Brief research presentations at faculty meetings
6. Monthly happy hours with wine and food to catch up and discuss departmental business
7. Pursuing common goals related to research and teaching missions
8. Social events throughout the year
9. Providing forums to highlight faculty accomplishments
10. Feeling of active and important role in department operations

11. Regularly scheduled in-person events with faculty and staff
12. Strong engagement during faculty hiring seasons
13. Informal luncheons and social events
14. In-person faculty meetings with lunch provided
15. Open house events for prospective graduate students
16. Annual start-of-the-year faculty "retreat"
17. Colloquium series with light food
18. Transparency, particularly around compensation and goals
19. Regular meetings with faculty for sharing information and seeking input
20. Administration reaching out to encourage participation

These factors highlight the importance of in-person interactions, communication, shared goals, and recognition in fostering faculty engagement within academic departments.

**Are there things your department has done to foster faculty connection with each other and the department.**

Based on the provided information, here are the top 20 most common activities for fostering faculty connections and social interactions:

1. Regular faculty meetings
2. Happy hours after department meetings
3. Department retreats
4. Lunch with all faculty at the beginning of the year
5. Friday afternoon talks by grad students with beer and pizza provided
6. Bagel hours twice a month
7. Colloquia with food
8. Department events in UHills with loved ones
9. Lunch served at faculty meetings
10. Informal gatherings at the chair's or faculty member's home
11. Informal Friday afternoon social events
12. Social gatherings with food a few times a year
13. Celebrations and send-offs with good food
14. Invited speakers with food/discussion afterward
15. Acknowledgment of faculty and staff service events
16. Quarterly pizza lunch gatherings for graduate students and faculty
17. Regular faculty/student creative project showcases or idea sharing events
18. Monthly drinks gatherings
19. Wellness after-hours meetings at a local restaurant
20. WomEM functions to support female faculty

These activities encompass a variety of social events, professional development opportunities, and informal gatherings aimed at fostering connections and morale among faculty members.

## Appendix 2: Raw survey responses

[Provost Leadership Academy Engagement Survey \(Responses\)](#)