

# Adapting by Design

A report on the future of the academic profession from  
**The Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success**

## Executive Summary

The American professoriate has experienced an “unraveling” over the past several decades, reflected in the shift from a more traditional model of a professional, mostly tenure-track faculty toward a mostly contingent academic workforce. Contingent or non-tenure-track faculty members now represent 70% of the instructional faculty nationwide; half of all instructional faculty are adjunct faculty who are employed only on a part-time basis. Although percentages vary by institutional type, it is hard to overlook the fact that tenured and tenure-track faculty members represent less than half of the instructional faculty in every single category. The erosion of a strong and well-established academic profession, in the absence of new visions to replace the status quo, has implications for a broader deterioration of the higher education enterprise as a whole. Our ability to continue producing high-quality research and learning outcomes, as well to meet the increasingly complex expectations of our society, is at risk. Deliberate dialogue, followed by collective, intentional action are necessary to ensure that a robust academic profession is in place for years to come so that American higher education institutions can continue to meet these important goals.

While the adjunct model has received the most attention and criticism in recent years, there are also long-standing concerns with the tenure-track model that can be addressed by new models for the faculty. Examining some of the prevalent concerns and critiques about the two main faculty models today—adjunct and tenure-track—is necessary as we discuss the ways that roles will need to change for the future. This report presents an opportunity not just to reconcile the ethical and functional shortcomings of our current arrangements, but also to conceive a vision—or visions—for new faculty models and roles, and perhaps even for the academic profession as a whole.

*Adapting by Design* invites stakeholders to have a collaborative and intentional discussion about challenges facing the faculty and how we might better design faculty models to meet important institutional goals, while preserving values such as academic freedom, equity, flexibility, professional growth, and collegiality—whether that involves a tuning of the current model or a more extensive set of changes that requires reimagining faculty roles and introducing new arrangements for faculty work. History shows us that changes to faculty roles have often occurred with limited intentionality and inadequate attention to the implications for student learning and institutional goals. Such changes have been decided primarily on the side of the faculty or of the administrators, with little collaboration between these groups or with other stakeholders. This is not the way forward. Instead, we must collectively take responsibility for the future status of the academic profession, ensuring that all faculty members are regarded and treated as professionals and supported in making meaningful contributions to their institutions, to their fields of study, and to the public good.

The backward design process articulated in the report—which involves identifying the desired outcomes, examining the current faculty model, and developing a plan for redesigning the faculty—presents a method for considering what the faculty ought to look like in order for an institution to address its various stakeholder priorities and the important aspects of its mission. The goals of this work are more likely to be achieved when a diverse group of stakeholders who can speak to the interests of students, the faculty, administrators, policymakers, community members, and others are involved and engaged in the redesign process. The process acknowledges perspectives that are voiced by diverse stakeholders and constituencies, but also emphasizes the need to identify and attend to goals contained in the institutional mission and culture, mandates from government entities, and factors in the larger higher education landscape that affect how institutions go about serving their missions.

Although we have deliberately tailored this report as a resource to facilitate thoughtful discussions and intentional efforts to change faculty models at the institutional level, we also believe that a broader, more systemic discussion about the future of the faculty must ultimately take place to guide changes across higher education, overall. We are confident this can happen if higher education stakeholders can look past their differences and disagreements and acknowledge that a shift away from the current bifurcated system we have in place today would be in the best interest not only for the faculty, but also for our students, for our communities, and for the long-term viability of our institutions and of the enterprise of higher learning.

The report is available for download at <http://adaptingbydesign.thechangingfaculty.org>. For more information about the Delphi Project, please visit <http://www.thechangingfaculty.org>.

The Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success was initiated to support a better understanding of factors that have led to a majority of faculty being hired off the tenure track, the impact of these circumstances on teaching and learning, and potential strategies for addressing issues of rising contingency together. It is a project of the Earl and Pauline Pullias Center for Higher Education at the University of Southern California in partnership with the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), as well as numerous other organizations representing a broad cross-section of stakeholders and interests across the higher education sector. The project has received generous funding from TIAA-CREF Research Institute, The Spencer Foundation, The Teagle Foundation, and Carnegie Corporation of New York.