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The Design Process

Designing Professional Development for Mid-Career VITAL Faculty at the University of Denver

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- ✔ **Design team reflected partnership between leaders in the CTL and Office of Faculty Affairs and VITAL faculty.**

- ✔ **Designers explicitly used a liberatory design thinking model to guide their planning process.**

- ✔ **Designers focused on the empathy phase of designing by centering the voices of VITAL faculty in the design process, ensuring the program reflected current, pressing needs.**

- ✔ **The FLC created for mid-career VITAL faculty reflected a holistic approach to professional development encompassing individual meaning and purpose, career development, and organizational change.**

Background

University of Denver (DU) is a private, research university in Colorado. Located in Denver, DU enrolls approximately 14,000 students across 10 colleges. DU awards a variety of degrees including baccalaureate, master's, doctoral, and professional degrees. DU has recently increased their research funding, earning the designation of R1 institution in 2022, but they are also continuing to invest in teaching. About 41% of full-time faculty at DU are in non-tenure track positions, which they refer to as Term and Professional Faculty (TPF).

In 2015, DU expanded promotion opportunities for TPF that mirror those available to tenure-track faculty, with ranks of instructor, assistant, associate, and professor. Since 2016, they have included TPF representation on the DU Faculty Senate for shared governance participation, created annual "Pathways to Promotion" workshops for TPF in conjunction with the Faculty Senate, and formally changed the nomenclature for all VITAL[1] (contingent) faculty TPF including on documents, communications, and reports.

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[1] We use the term VITAL faculty — an asset-based term— to refer to contingent or non-tenure track faculty (including visiting faculty, instructors, adjuncts, lecturers, research faculty, and clinical faculty) as a way to affirm their vital role within institutions.

DU has committed to mentoring teaching, clinical, and professional series faculty. Two additional examples of this investment include the appointment of a Resident Scholar for Teaching and Professional Faculty in the Faculty Affairs office and creating a Faculty Learning Community (FLC) for TPF at the assistant level. In 2021, DU was a recipient of the Delphi Award in recognition for their past and continuing work in supporting TPF at DU.

The Faculty Affairs office focuses on faculty support while at DU (faculty lifecycles), teaching and instruction, faculty relations, and advancement, promotion, and retention. Within the FA is the Office of Teaching and Learning (OTL), and the Vice President for Faculty Affairs (VPFA) serves as the Faculty Director of the OTL, and the Assistant Vice Provost serves as the Director of the OTL. Faculty fellows, directors, research scholars, and graduate assistants are responsible for supporting unique functions within Faculty Affairs, including COACHE surveys, faculty mentoring, campus administrator support, and the Faculty Senate.

Design Process

In spring and summer of 2022, the design team intentionally used equity-minded design thinking to guide their planning process; design thinking is an inclusive process for thinking creatively and truly meeting the needs of people teams are designing for. The process has several phases which are also intentionally recursive. Below, we provide a brief overview of the **Design for Equity in Higher Education (DEHE) model** that adapts design thinking for the higher education environment and discuss how the design team at DU enacted each phase. For more detailed information about DEHE and to enact DEHE on your campus, downoad the **report** and **toolkit**.

The **Organize** phase of DEHE acknowledges the diversity of strengths, power, and connections of team members, uses participatory approaches, and assesses participation for representation and political will. During the **Organize** phase, the design team drew on the expertise, experiences, perspectives, and positions of different campus members to make up the design team which also expanded their ability to understand the institutional landscape through a multifaceted lens. The design team included the Resident Scholar for Teaching and Professional Faculty, the Director of Faculty Development and Career Advancement, the former VPFA, a graduate assistant in the Faculty Affairs office, and two TPF from two different academic departments.

The design team executed an intentionally inclusive approach to the design process by spending time in their first meeting discussing the question of "what could be accomplished with a well-run meeting?" so that team members could shape the planning process. The team also engaged in an activity together where they imagined participants talking to each other after the conclusion of a program the team had designed. They used this discussion to create initial objectives for the professional development program they were going to plan, evidencing a backwards design approach.

In summer 2022, several members of the design team also participated in a Stanford University d.School Design Thinking Bootcamp hosted by DU, which allowed the team to engage in a more active and experimental design thinking process for the leadership cohort program. The design team noted it allowed them to avoid hidden traps to design, such as creating a program for an intended audience but only assuming the topics of concern among the audience without involving them in the design process.

The work done during the Organize phase guided the design team's initial focus on creating a leadership-focused faculty learning community specifically for mid-career TPF: the "Pathways and Purpose Leadership" (PAPL) cohort program.

In the **Empathize** phase of the DEHE model, designers use different data approaches to learn more about their colleagues, including their lived experiences within the institutional context, in order to develop a genuine understanding of them in their professional roles. Through this empathizing, designers gain a holistic view of their colleagues, which can allow designers to better meet the needs and interests of their colleagues. The design team was intentional through their design process to utilize needs assessments prior to commencing their structured program and empathizing with their colleagues.

In spring 2022, the design team conducted a needs assessment survey of TPF; they compared the results to DU's 2019 Collaborative Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey and the 2020 "R1 Out Way" Report from the VPFA and Faculty Senate. The results of the needs assessment survey demonstrated that more than half of the respondents had been working at DU for at least 10 years. The survey results also suggested that existing professional development programs were beneficial for instructional development but that opportunities for leadership development were lacking. The design team also utilized literature and engaged in scholarship to guide their planning process.

Designers also conducted five focus groups with TPF to learn about the needs of TPF. Participants for the focus groups receipted $25 as compensation for their time. During the focus groups, they asked about joys and challenges that TPF experienced at DU, about relationships and communities that supported TPF's success, and about the trajectory of mid-career TPF, including leadership opportunities and constraints.

In the **Re(define)** stage, designers evaluate what they have learned from their empathizing work, considering whether the problems, perspectives, and assumptions that they initially define still hold true that. In this phase, the design team revisited their initial objectives based on the learning they had done in the Empathize phase. They also analyzed the data from focus groups and identified themes. Since the Empathize phase was a significant part of their design process, it provided opportunities for TPF to shape the focus of the program, using a participatory design approach. This phase also gave way for the design team to develop big questions from their empathizing work to plan engagement and objectives for TPF across the year:

- Is this it? (Questions about trajectory, growth, purpose)
- How do I make an impact? (Questions about efficacy, voice, change, agency)
- How do I connect? (Questions about community, belonging, relationships)
- How do I move forward? (Questions about creativity, renewability, energy, well-being)
- How do I design my faculty role? (Questions about flexibility, creativity, agency)?

Another important part of this phase was that they realized that mid-career TPF did not have a strong sense of community among colleagues, so they delayed the implementation of their program to create opportunities for community-building in fall 2022.

In the **Ideate** phase, designers brainstorm a wide variety of possible solutions, and practice curiosity to allow creativity to flow without judgment. The design team brainstormed ways to create community, including what eventually became brunches in the fall quarter. These exercises ultimately allowed the design team to create sessions that prioritized reducing the barriers TPF may face in attending such community building meetings, to ideate or brainstorm solutions to problems that are specific to TPF experiences in teaching, professional development, teaching effectiveness, and other areas.

In the **Choose** phase, designers narrow potential solutions to an identified problem and how choosing a specific solution may impact colleagues and the institution at large. When deciding on the specifics of the program, the design team used responsive design approaches. For example, during the brunches they ranked the top themes that arose from the community building which would become the focus of the program. They also considered the time commitments and mental capacity of TPF when planning activities such as choosing brunches instead of dinners, assigning short pre-readings or summaries ahead of program sessions instead of dense texts, and allowing creativity through flexibility through design team planning or with participants in sessions.

In the **Prototype** phase, designers lean on insight gleaned from the **Empathy** phase to develop a solution while building it. The design team outlined the objectives for the program as answering "big questions" that TPF discussed having in the focus groups and then planned different activities and sessions to achieve each objective.

Therefore, they organized two brunches during the fall quarter of 2022 that were open to all mid-career TPF. These brunches were designed to facilitate connection and community among TPF, to provide opportunities for TPF to engage in reflective activities, and create further feedback for the structured PAPL program. The design team found that the brunches became an opportunity for them to further empathize with colleagues.

In the **Get Buy-In** phase, designers consider how to build consensus, collaborate, and acquire buy-in from key stakeholders including colleagues. By the design team hosting the fall brunches for TPF to facilitate community building, it helped to get buy-in from TPF to participate in the program and the program was supported by the VPFA.

Program Structure and Implementation

The professional development program they piloted in spring 2023 was a faculty learning community (FLC) called the "Pathways and Purpose Leadership" (PAPL) cohort program. It was facilitated by the Resident Scholar for Teaching and Professional Faculty and the Director of Faculty Development and Career Development, who are also two TPF members of the design team. The original purpose of the PAPL was to explore topics of career development, meaning, purpose, and organizational change at DU. Because of their extensive work in the **Empathize** phase, they expanded these goals through the use of the aforementioned "big questions" for themselves with the support of the PAPL facilitators.

Participants at the brunches in the fall quarter of 2022 could apply to the PAPL via an online application on Qualtrics. The design team accepted applications on a rolling basis until late November/early December before the commencement of the PAPL. Applicants who would be unable to attend at least **three** of the workshops were asked in the email to screen their eligibility for participation in the FLC and to join the FLC in the future. The PAPL cohort program had 15-20 participants and took place in-person. The program consisted of three 90-minute workshop sessions during the winter quarter 2022 and a culminating project in spring 2023. The fourth session allowed faculty to brainstorm and choose topics for their final projects by using a Google Jamboard with digital "post-it notes" in the form of a collective working session. Each session was meticulously planned through an agenda and had specific objectives that focuses on either burnout, creativity, or agency. In the sessions, they had participants engage in icebreaker and mindfulness activities so that they could engage in play together and build relationships, engage in self-reflection and sharing related to learning from shorts readings and other sources of information related to the topic of each session, with an emphasis on small group conversations and whole group reflection on these conversations.

The culminating project allowed participants to Ideate and create a **Prototype** for a solution on campus by proposing a change to policy or practice. The project or Letters of Inquiry (LOI) that participants were tasked with was a project proposal no more than five pages to a leader or leaders on campus for institutional transformation on a topic of their choosing that connected to the FLC themes of purpose, community, creativity, and change. The project/proposals were not required of participants, however, those who did complete the project and attended three FLC sessions received a $750 stipend. The proposals were shared with the VPFA by the two facilitators of the FLC, the Resident Scholar for Teaching and Professional Faculty and the Director of Faculty Development and Career Development.

Good Practices in Design Process

- ✔ The design team explicitly implemented a liberatory design thinking process to guide their work, grounded the design in equity.

- ✔ The design process emphasized the incorporation of TPF voices within the design process, allowing the design team to tailor the program to the exact needs of their intended audience.

- ✔ The flexibility of the design team allowed the design team to be responsive to TPF needs, allowing for changes and modifications to the benefit of all involved.

- ✔ Design team members were actively engaged with TPF throughout design and program implementation (brunches, focus groups, FLC sessions, projects, etc.)

- ✔ The design team facilitated institutional buy-in and support for the program by utilizing data to provide evidence for program design and focus.

- ✔ Utilizing the expertise of design members to create a FLC that is responsive to the needs of TPF, credible and supported through institutional partnerships, and well-run due to collective experience in FLC creation, shared governance, faculty development, design thinking, and academic planning.

Program Successes

- ✔ Participants developed relationships with other TPF through program sessions and program facilitators.

- ✔ Belonging as a central theme for the cohort was achieved by participants in the program.

- ✔ TPF participants benefited from the opportunities and activities to reflect on their experiences.

- ✔ Institutional support and recognition of the FLC across DU was apparent at the time of the program.

Lessons Learned

Design Process

- The amount of time and energy required of design team members to use an iterative, responsive process posed a challenge for the design team members who were TPF due to their numerous responsibilities. Therefore, the other design team members intentionally took on more responsibilities during summer and fall 2022, which was sometimes challenging for them. Therefore, while the use of a more inclusive and responsive design approach was beneficial for the resulting program, it is important for design teams to consider timelines, roles, and responsibilities at the outset of planning.

Implementation

- Organizing and leading sessions was a lot of work for facilitators. The design team felt that separating the logistic work from the role of facilitating sessions would be beneficial.

- The design team noted that they might allocate more time to unstructured discussions in future iterations of the FLC, as the amount of time they spent on content was sometimes at the expense of fostering connections among participants who may not have known each other in advance.

Professional Development Program Summary

- **Purpose and Objectives:** The purpose of the program is to explore topics of career development, meaning, purpose, and organizational change at DU. The objectives of the program include enhancing faculty culture, belonging, and community, faculty career planning, and identifying strategies for work-life balance.

- **Participants:** 15-20. Participants were recruited during the fall quarter at the brunches on a rolling basis until December.

- **Delivery Mode:** In-person.

- **Structure and Length:** Four 90-minute sessions over two semesters.

- **Content:** Participants were required to attend the three sessions on the topics of agency, burnout, and creativity. The fourth session was a discussion of the final project and working session.

- **Facilitation:** : Two co-facilitators on the design team from the Faculty Affairs office.

- **Deliverables:** A project proposal in the form of a Letters of Inquiry (LOI) that addressed a campus issue by proposing a change to policy or practice related to TPF and connected to themes of the FLC.

- **Assessment:** Five mid-career TPF focus groups and a needs assessment survey in spring 2022.

- **Compensation and Recognition:** Participants who completed the project proposal and attended three program sessions would receive a $750 stipend. They also had their proposal shared with the VPFA. Focus group participants received $50 for their participation.

Visit the **Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success** website for more case studies of professional development that is accessible and welcoming of VITAL faculty and a wide range of resources and toolkits to better support them.

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