



A resource created by **The Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success**

[pullias.usc.edu/delphi](http://pullias.usc.edu/delphi)

## The Design Process

# Designing a Term Faculty Learning Community for VITAL Leadership Development at Iowa State University

By Nicole Hitt and KC Culver

- ✓ Design team reflected partnership between an academic administrator and VITAL faculty from different colleges.
- ✓ Being part of the design team served as professional development for VITAL faculty, as designers learned about administrative policies and processes.
- ✓ Designers were invited to participate in FLC meetings for continued development.
- ✓ FLC focused on leadership development offered participants a broader understanding of the institution.

---

## Background

Iowa State University (ISU) is a public, four-year university in Eastern Iowa. Located in Ames, ISU enrolls about 29,900 students across eight colleges. ISU awards a variety of degrees including baccalaureate, master's, doctoral, and professional degrees. About one-third of full-time faculty at ISU are in VITAL<sup>1</sup> roles, positions they refer to as term faculty. Term faculty have promotion line opportunities that mirror tenure-line faculty; across five specialized roles (teaching, practice, clinical, research, and adjunct), there are ranks of assistant, associate, and professor; teaching faculty have an initial rank of lecturer.

The Office of the Senior Vice President and Provost at ISU oversees the Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT), faculty development, and student success. The Office also collaborates closely with the Faculty Senate and other student, professional, and staff organizations involved in shared governance.

---

<sup>1</sup> 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.

---

## Previous Improvements to Professional Development for VITAL Faculty

A new faculty orientation is held twice a year by ISU that is open to faculty across ranks. However, term faculty are often hired just before a semester begins, so they may not be able to attend the institution-level orientation and may only be able to attend college-specific orientation activities. Thus, in 2020, they developed a space in their learning management system (Canvas) for new term faculty, in order to provide greater access to resources and information asynchronously. All term faculty hired after 2020 have access to the shell.

ISU has recently been focusing on strengthening faculty peer mentoring on campus. Peer mentoring activities are coordinated at the college level; two or three faculty from each college serve as designated College Peer Mentors who can share college-specific information with interested faculty. To better tailor mentoring activities and resources, some College Peer Mentors are in VITAL roles. To facilitate inclusion among VITAL faculty, ISU also hosts an annual term faculty dinner and reception, which gives VITAL faculty an opportunity for socialization and recognition.

---

## Project Overview

The Assistant Provost for Faculty Development, whose own career began in a VITAL faculty role, recognized the need to better support term faculty and decided to develop a faculty learning community (FLC) for VITAL faculty to be piloted in the 2022-2023 academic year. FLCs are a well-established model for building knowledge and community at ISU. The CELT regularly offers instructionally-focused FLCs that are open to VITAL faculty, and ISU also uses learning communities for undergraduate students.

To develop the term faculty learning community (TFLC), the assistant provost invited term faculty representatives from each of ISU's seven colleges to form a design team. The design team met through the spring and summer of 2022 to plan efforts.

---

## Design Team Process

In Spring, 2022, the design team conducted a needs assessment survey of term faculty. In their initial meeting, the design team started thinking about the purpose of the TFLC, how to ensure that it expanded professional development rather than duplicating existing resources, and how to motivate term faculty to participate in a TFLC.

To start considering the purpose for the TFLC, the design team discussed the issues raised by the results of their needs assessment, as well as challenges that term faculty face based on the personal experiences of the design team members and conversations among term faculty that design team members had engaged in within their respective colleges. These issues included burnout, a lack of clarity related to evaluation and promotion, a lack of representation on faculty senate, and being isolated and/or marginalized within certain departments. The assistant provost made some suggestions about the purpose and format for the TFLC based on these issues and led a discussion of whether the program should be only to all term faculty or should focus on term faculty in a specific role, such as teaching faculty or clinical faculty.

The design team paid attention to situating the TFLC in the context of existing resources available to term faculty. For instance, they discussed the Canvas shell for new term faculty, recognizing that the site only included term faculty hired since 2020, and they discussed the potential to increase the impact of that website by making it available to all term faculty. They also discussed the importance of distinguishing the TFLC from existing mentoring programs and practices so that it was not duplicative.

The design team also discussed how to motivate term faculty to participate in the TFLC. Term faculty on the design team articulated the importance for sending personalized invitations to participate, reflecting the reality that many VITAL faculty are bombarded with emails from institutional leaders that are not relevant to them—or that they perceive not to be relevant. They also discussed the importance of providing small rewards for participants such as institutional swag bags.

The assistant provost also guided the design team to think strategically, recommending that the team explicitly align the proposed project with ISU's strategic plan, especially as one of the institution's major goals is to be an inclusive environment for faculty, staff, and students.

Additional meetings were held monthly during the spring semester to further develop the purpose and structure of the TFLC, logistics related to implementing it, and specific session topics. Based on the issues raised in their initial meeting, the design team decided to focus the TFLC on leadership development. They noted, for instance, that the results of their needs assessment survey suggested a lack of opportunities for leadership development among term faculty, and that these results were aligned with the findings of previous institutional surveys, including a campus climate survey in 2017 and more recent results from the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) Job Satisfaction survey. The design team also decided, based on the results of their needs assessment survey, that the TFLC should engage term faculty across roles who had been at the institution for five years or less.

Leadership development was also identified as a focus that would help the team get the necessary approvals and funding to make the TFLC a reality. The assistant provost raised the importance of viewing leadership development broadly as a set of skills and knowledge related to how the institution functions, rather than thinking of it only as preparing for a specific administrative position.

The assistant provost continued guiding the design process, suggesting that a kick-off event for all term faculty early in the fall semester could provide an opportunity to build community and continue learning directly about term faculty members' goals and desired opportunities. She suggested that the TFLC could combine opportunities for community building with guest speakers from within and outside of the university. She also encouraged design team members to contribute to the development of the project proposal, including the budget, topics, and schedule.

Term faculty on the design team suggested some session topics based on their experiences. They discussed that, while promotion opportunities existed, there is a lack of clarity within departments around evaluation for promotion, especially in terms of what service means and how university service is evaluated compared disciplinary service and service in the community. They also noted that even though there are workshops on promotion offered annually, term faculty often can't attend because the workshops are held at times during the semester when term faculty are incredibly busy.

The team also planned their recruitment and application process to be conducted at the beginning of the fall semester, so that they could be inclusive of new hires. Team members discussed the relative merits of peer nomination compared to self-nomination, as well as whether department chairs should be required to sign a letter of support as part of application or only once participants had been accepted to participate in the TFLC. The assistant provost noted that the department chair was important to include in the process for two reasons: to recognize the role of the department chair in promoting the professional development of their faculty members and as an opportunity to document support within departments that may not be as inclusive of term faculty.

The design team initially discussed having a larger cohort of 35-40 participants but ultimately decided to conduct the pilot with a smaller group in order to allow for more flexibility and responsiveness. They also discussed the importance of selecting participants before scheduling TFLC meetings to make them accessible to as many participants as possible. The assistant provost also invited design team members to participate in the TFLC sessions.

While the term faculty who were on the design team shared ideas and experiences during meetings, they also communicated limited bandwidth to work on project planning outside of meetings. One team member expressed concern in particular about the amount of work required to put the TFLC together, including developing the written proposal and budget for the provost.

---

## Program Structure/Design

The purpose of the TFLC is to help term faculty “cultivate leadership skills, build connections, and pursue their professional goals,” especially as they increasingly serve in administrative roles within their departments and programs. The TFLC is therefore positioned as a continuation of the ISU orientation with more individual specialization driven by the participants within the cohort. The TFLC pilot had ten participants from across the institution.

The kick-off event in fall provided an opportunity for term faculty to network with one another and included a speaker: a term faculty member who is also the president-elect of the ISU Faculty Senate. Thus, in addition to networking, this event provided an opportunity for term faculty to see a model of leading from a term faculty role. The speaker also functioned as a resource for VITAL faculty participating in the TFLC.

Meetings were held once a month in person during the fall and spring semesters of 2023. Meetings were facilitated by the assistant provost; each session included a guest speaker, opportunities for discussion, and some time dedicated to leadership development. Topics for the TFLC included agency, leadership, and faculty development; leadership and term faculty collegiality, resource management and university budgeting, shared governance and the ISU Faculty Senate, and administration (including meetings with ISU general counsel and student affairs leaders). Sessions with senior leaders allowed participants to learn about policies directly rather than rely on informal peer-to-peer conversations. It also gave term faculty a voice with campus leaders. Thus, the TFLC facilitated networking, community, and belonging among term faculty, while also helping them understand the institution more broadly and allowing them to see that they can lead from any position.

---

## Good Practices in the Design Process

- ✓ To guide planning, the assistant provost assembled a design team that was inclusive of VITAL faculty, with term faculty representatives from several colleges across campus and from both teaching and clinical roles.
- ✓ The design process centered VITAL faculty needs and perspectives, including using data about VITAL faculty, the results of the needs assessment survey, and the experiences of VITAL design team members to establish program goals and structures.
- ✓ The design team intentionally connected the goals and purpose of the TFLC to ISU’s strategic plan for institutional buy-in and impact.
- ✓ Having the design process situated within the Office of the Senior Vice President and Provost created a stronger likelihood of institutional support and funding for the project.
- ✓ The assistant provost provided context and guidance for VITAL design team members. VITAL design team members noted that participating in the team served as professional development for them, as they learned about institutional structures and policies as well as design practices.

---

## Program Successes

- ✓ Having guest speakers from across various roles gave participants a wider understanding of how ISU works and dispelled misinformation while also building community at the same time.
- ✓ Many of the eight sessions that occurred during the pilot were led by term faculty in leadership positions at ISU.
- ✓ Information and resources shared during the TFLC meetings were also disseminated to those who were absent to aid in community building, transparency, and belonging.
- ✓ The TFLC facilitated a stronger understanding of shared governance at ISU and helped participants learn how to advocate for term faculty needs with the Faculty Senate.
- ✓ Instituting a safe space to allow term faculty to speak freely and discuss issues and challenges as a community in order to move forward and feel belonging was important.
- ✓ Having the TFLC sessions organized so that participants engaged in leadership development and meeting management before sessions with senior administrators allowed term faculty to be better informed with processes and procedures so conversations could be more productive.
- ✓ Inviting design team members to participate in TFLC sessions along with the pilot cohort provided greater opportunities for professional development among this group.

---

## Lessons Learned

### Design Process

- ✓ The CELT regularly offers instructionally-focused FLCs that are open to VITAL faculty. However, the design team did not include anyone from CELT who could have contributed expertise related to structuring recruitment, participant selection, meeting logistics, etc.
- ✓ The design team acknowledged that the presence of a tenure-line faculty member on the design team would be beneficial to provide another perspective to bridge the divide between tenure-line faculty and VITAL faculty at ISU, while also providing tenure-line faculty an opportunity to understand the experiences of VITAL faculty.

### Implementation

- ✓ The first iteration of the TFLC was facilitated by the assistant provost. With the inherent power disparity between the facilitator and participants, the design team noted that having a term faculty member lead the TFLC in future years could create a safer space for participants to speak their minds. Simultaneously, it would provide a leadership opportunity for term faculty.

- ✓ The design team noted that there TFLC could benefit from additional time dedicated to networking and connection among term faculty. Having more events like the fall kick-off and dedicating some time during sessions to more personal and informal conversations could further promote community and belonging among VITAL faculty.

---

## Professional Development Program Summary

- ✓ **Purpose and Objectives:** The purpose of the TFLC is to help term faculty “cultivate leadership skills, build connections, and pursue their professional goals.” It also serves as a continuation of the ISU faculty orientation that is also more tailored to the needs of VITAL faculty
  - ✓ **Participants:** 10
  - ✓ **Delivery Mode:** In-person.
  - ✓ **Structure and Length:** Eight one-hour meetings between the fall 2022 and spring 2023 semesters. Meetings were generally once a month that included a presentation and a discussion on a pre-determined topic. Several presentations were led by exemplar VITAL faculty leaders on campus.
  - ✓ **Content:** The topics for the FLC included agency, leadership, faculty development, resource management, university budgeting, and the ISU Faculty Senate and shared governance.
  - ✓ **Facilitation:** The assistant provost facilitated each meeting.
  - ✓ **Deliverables:** Participants received materials and resources during the meetings related to the presentations.
  - ✓ **Assessment:** The University of Southern California (USC) Pullias Center administered a pre- and post-survey to participants.
  - ✓ **Compensation and Recognition:** Participants received an email with an embedded letter cc’ing their department chair and dean recognizing their program 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.



**USC Rossier**  
*Pullias Center for  
 Higher Education*

*This project is funded from the Improving Undergraduate STEM Education program within the Department of Undergraduate Education of the National Science Foundation, under Grant No. NSF DUE-1914784.*