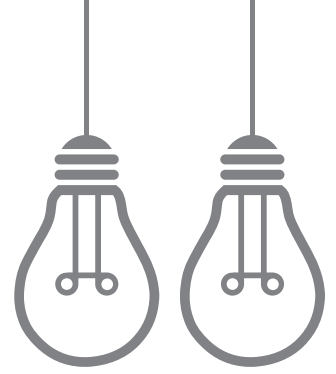


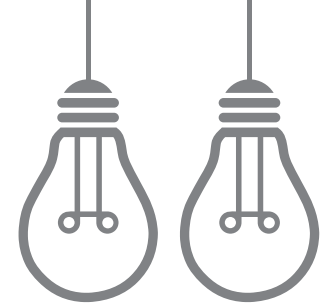
**A Guide Created by The Delphi Project on  
the Changing Faculty and Student Success**



# **The Role of Academic Affairs in Supporting VITAL Faculty on Campus**

*By Adrianna Kezar and KC Culver*

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



## Introduction and Background

---

In this brief, we argue that creating avenues to support VITAL faculty is an essential role for leaders within academic affairs, and particularly those in faculty affairs. While we review a host of supports needed, we argue for the importance of sustained professional development opportunities like faculty learning communities and certificate programs as we start to make these roles more long-term and career oriented. 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 what they are, rather than what they are not. Our work at the Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success has identified the need for faculty affairs to take responsibility for VITAL faculty, as they often have not had an advocate or any structures to support their work. The absence of leadership positions and structures dedicated specifically to VITAL faculty support has led to the problems we have seen over the last few decades — declines in graduation and retention rates for students, low morale among faculty, and a lack of belonging for students and faculty.

---

***We use the term VITAL faculty — an asset-based term — to refer to contingent or non-tenure-track faculty as a way to affirm what they are, rather than what they are not.***

---

Academic leaders may wonder why they should support VITAL faculty given the many priorities that they face. Previous research from the Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success demonstrates that lack of support for VITAL faculty has led to student attrition, declining graduation rates, poor academic performance, and challenges for students in identifying a major (Kezar et al., 2019). Alternatively, studies have shown that when VITAL faculty are better supported, they use evidence-based teaching practices that enhance student retention and performance and can play important leadership roles on campus with an ever shrinking tenure track population (Glowacki-Dudka & Brown, 2007; Nugent et al., 2008). Leaders within the student success movement are beginning to recognize that they have overlooked faculty as a critical component in student success. And we are now seeing philanthropies and policymakers shift their attention to supporting faculty in order to support students.

## Dispelling Myths About VITAL Faculty

One reason institutions have been slow to recognize the need for dedicated leadership and supports for VITAL faculty is the myth that VITAL faculty are temporary, so there is no need to invest in them. A study by the University of Michigan demonstrated that most of their VITAL faculty (full and part-time) stay for decades. Many studies conducted of other individual campuses show the same trend (**Non Tenure Track Faculty: The Landscape at U.S. Institutions of Higher Education**). Data about VITAL faculty on your own campus will likely tell a similar story — that the majority of your VITAL faculty have been working for your campus for a long time as well. It is time to abandon this myth and start the important work of supporting *all* faculty on campus.



Another myth is that faculty as professionals are internally motivated by “the calling” to teach, so external motivation does not matter, since faculty will perform whether they are supported or not. But data suggests that faculty entering the profession today are willing to leave academia if they are not provided with support, a career track, and work-life balance (Gonzalez & Terosky, 2016). And as a result, we have started to see more turnover in the faculty ranks in recent years (American Federation of Teachers, 2023). Campus leaders need to also abandon this myth or we will continue to see problematic levels of turnover in the future.

---

***Data suggests that faculty entering the profession today are willing to leave academia if they are not provided with support, a career track and work-life balance.***

---



## Concrete Steps for Academic Leaders

These issues are more pressing than ever post-pandemic with the high levels of turnover and dissatisfaction among faculty. Faculty feel less connection and sense of belonging than in any previous time. And policies related to VITAL faculty are outdated and inappropriate in an era when they are on the front line supporting students who also have greater needs. Academic leaders must rise to the challenge of supporting VITAL faculty, and sustained professional development is a critical way to show that support, one which addresses issues of isolation and mattering.

It is also critical to address faculty policies as an interconnected system rather than one by one. Faculty professional development is best supported through providing promotion processes, access to awards/rewards, salary increases, and robust evaluation processes. To work on any policy in isolation will be less successful and more limited in impact. We offer a way to approach these type of systemic changes below.

What is the responsibility of those in academic affairs for creating systemic changes in support of VITAL faculty? We propose that leaders should be tasked with the following responsibilities:

- 1. Make the case for the need to increase support for VITAL faculty.** Before any change process is likely to be successful, campus leadership at multiple levels need to be made aware of the problems and convinced of the need for action. Many campus stakeholders are simply unaware of the issues VITAL faculty face, and building awareness prevents resistance and establishes the foundation for success. Leaders in faculty affairs should lead the charge on developing awareness for the need for support. If you are having trouble obtaining traction to provide better support for VITAL faculty, we recommend the Delphi Project report **The Imperative for Change** (2014). The Delphi Project has several other documents aimed at making the case for needed changes, including data reports summarizing the impacts on student success and why faculty matter to student success. Please see [https://pullias.usc.edu/project-page/delphi-publication-search/?\\_sft\\_post\\_tag=delphi-make-the-case](https://pullias.usc.edu/project-page/delphi-publication-search/?_sft_post_tag=delphi-make-the-case).
- 2. Collect data on VITAL faculty.** Faculty affairs leaders will not be able to successfully create supports without data on VITAL faculty. The **Design for Equity in Higher Education Toolkit** guide provides insights into the first important phase of data collection — understanding the needs of VITAL faculty. Second, the Delphi Project website offers **assessment instruments** and guides for conducting assessment (Kezar, & DePaola, 2018; Kezar and Maxey, 2012).
- 3. Establish a task force at the department, college and/or overall institutional level.** Those in faculty affairs should also create planning processes to help develop the needed supports once it is decided that they are needed. By having a task force, this ensures that key faculty voices are



included in the development of new policies and practices. In order to help you with this process, the Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success has guides that can be used by task forces to develop a comprehensive plan to support VITAL faculty:

- For campuses — **Non-Tenure-Track Faculty on our Campus: A Guide for Campus Task Forces to Better Understand Faculty Working Conditions and the Necessity of Change**
- For departments — **Non-Tenure-Track Faculty in our Department: A Guide for Departments and Academic Programs to Better Understand Faculty Working Conditions and the Necessity of Change**

These guides also outline who should be on such task forces, with special focus on including key administrators and faculty of all contract types.

As an academic leader, you should provide a thorough charge, ranging from hiring practices, orientation and professional development to promotion, salary and benefits, job security and involvement in governance. The group should be charged to look at both full and part-time VITAL faculty.

Our research has identified a robust planning process that campuses may want to follow, one that can complement the planning guides which outline policy/practice changes and reflective questions for planning groups. The **Design for Equity in Higher Education report** outlines a way that campus task forces can engage this work in ways that center equity and VITAL faculty voices, using design thinking to create more generative and creative ideas that change and dismantle the current inequitable systems. We also recommend groups engage even bolder thinking about new faculty models using our report **Adapting by Design** and its related **Toolkit**.

As a leader, you will also want to provide the task forces with models of promising practices to consider. We have dozens of case studies of promising practices from campuses that cover every area of faculty work as well as support needs (See [https://pullias.usc.edu/publications/?\\_sf\\_s=delphi%20award&\\_sft\\_category=equity-for-faculty](https://pullias.usc.edu/publications/?_sf_s=delphi%20award&_sft_category=equity-for-faculty)). These case studies provide example of changes that campuses have made that can be used to create new policies or practices on your own campus.

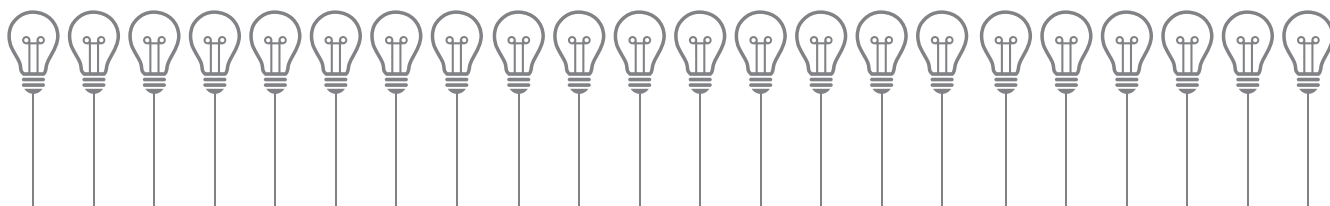
4. **Build a network of partners to support VITAL faculty.** One of the reasons that VITAL faculty continue to be lost and isolated is that they are often only connected to their department, and there are no other groups or entities that are tasked with their support. And faculty affairs cannot do all the work themselves. Faculty affairs leaders need to connect with other offices and help them to include VITAL faculty into their responsibilities. Other offices to consider are human resources, faculty senate, research office, community engagement office, student affairs, board members and institutional research.

The Delphi Project provides guides to help connect with some of these groups and ways that they may be best engaged:

- ✓ **Directors of Centers for Teaching and Learning** — See (<https://pullias.usc.edu/download/non-tenure-track-faculty-on-our-campus-supplemental-focus-guide-for-centers-for-teaching-and-learning/>);
- ✓ **Institutional Researchers** — See (<https://pullias.usc.edu/download/non-tenure-track-faculty-on-our-campus-supplemental-focus-guide-for-institutional-researchers/>);
- ✓ **Boards of Trustees** — See (<https://agb.org/trusteeship-article/the-changing-academic-workforce/>);
- ✓ **Student Affairs** — See (<https://pullias.usc.edu/download/how-student-affairs-departments-can-support-and-engage-non-tenure-track-faculty/>);
- ✓ **Students** — See (<https://pullias.usc.edu/download/waze-to-support-non-tenure-track-faculty-as-a-student-activist/>).

We are continuing to develop more stakeholder guides.

- 5. Obtain funds to support VITAL faculty.** Campuses have not considered or budgeted for supporting VITAL faculty. This is a major area that needs rethinking. Faculty affairs is poised to request this additional funding and make the case why it is necessary for meeting the institution’s mission. In order to consider how to obtain needed funds, we have created a resource that looks at costs around support for VITAL faculty and ways campuses have shifted funds once they made the case it was a priority. The **Dispelling the Myth** report provides ideas for obtaining funds and demonstrates how many changes are very low or no cost to start with.
- 6. Provide a vehicle for ongoing changes as new needs emerge over the long-term.** In order for VITAL faculty support to be realized, there needs to be an investment in human resources to do the work. At the University of Denver, they created a new position that was intended to regularly meet with VITAL faculty to understand new and emerging needs (See **case study for University of Denver** on the Delphi Project website). Some campuses, such as Montgomery College, have developed offices or units dedicated to VITAL faculty needs (See **case study for Montgomery College** on the Delphi Project website).



7. **Target key policy and practice areas to expand over time.** Several areas will need ongoing expansion — professional development and involvement in governance being two critical areas. Campuses usually start with some basic professional development for VITAL faculty such as workshops but realize over time they need more sustained and advanced options. Our report **Designing Accessible and Inclusive Professional Development for VITAL Faculty** provides ideas for designing sustained professional development. Another area that needs expansion over time is involvement in governance. The Delphi Project provides resources to expand VITAL faculty in governance, including **Non-tenure-Track Faculty Promising Practices** (Also see **Beyond Contracts: Non-tenure Track Faculty and Campus Governance**).
8. **Utilize VITAL faculty as a key asset and for emerging needs for campus.** With a shrinking number of tenure-track faculty, there are many needs on campus that are going unmet. For example, many campuses need VITAL faculty to be involved in assessment efforts (as well as other new areas such as integrating technology), and we have a guide for ways to include them in these essential activity: **Student Outcomes Assessment Among the New Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Majority**. Continue to visit the **Delphi Project website** as we update our resources for these ongoing emerging needs/opportunities.
9. **Provide accountability for VITAL faculty support.** As a leader, you need to ensure accountability across campus. Too often we hear about uneven policy implementation from task force plans. Campuses that successfully make changes have some form of accountability for changes — annual reports on goals, convenings to present annual changes, and regular working groups focused on different issues that meet and plan together and coordinate action.

The Delphi Project has chronicled dozens of campuses that have made comprehensive sets of changes. And there are hundreds of campuses now who have made this journey, so the path is clear. This approach will enable you to create a positive working environment for VITAL faculty and to create a robust teaching and learning environment. This is the core work for faculty affairs, and this roadmap can help you achieve these goals.



## Citations

American Federation of Teachers. (2023). **An Army of Temps: AFT Contingent faculty quality of Work/Life report.**

Glowacki-Dudka, M., & Brown, M. P. (2007). Professional development through faculty learning communities. *New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, 21(1-2), 29- 39.

Gonzelez, L. & Terosky, A. (2016). Aspirations and inclinations among emerging and early career faculty members. In A. Kezar and D. Maxey (eds). *Envisioning the faculty for the 21st Century*. New Brunswick: Rutgers Press.

Kezar, A., & Depaola, T., Scott, D. (2019). **The Gig Academy**. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

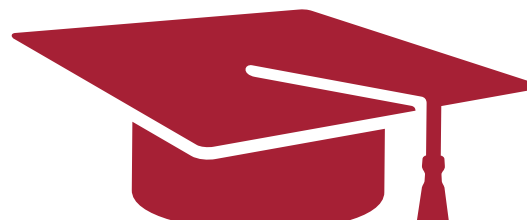
Kezar, A., & DePaola, T. (2018). The changing face of employment at research universities. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 2017(176), 83-96. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ir.20246>

Kezar, A., & Maxey, D. (2012). Missing from the institutional data picture: Non-tenure-track faculty. In J. X. Yonghong (Ed.), *Refining the focus on faculty diversity in postsecondary institutions*, *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 2012(155), 47-65.

Nugent, J. S., Reardon, R. M., Smith, F. G., Rhodes, J. A., Zander, M. J., & Carter, T. J. (2008). Exploring faculty learning communities: Building connections among teaching, learning, and technology. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 20(1), 51-58.

## About the Funder

This research is supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. (NSF DUE-1914784). Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.





## Further Reading

Kezar, A., & Maxey, D. (Eds.). (2016). *Envisioning the faculty for the 21st century: Moving to a mission-oriented and learner-centered faculty model*. Rutgers University Press.

Kezar, A. (Ed.). (2012). *Embracing non-tenure track faculty: Changing campuses for the new faculty majority*. Routledge.

Kezar, A., & Maxey, D. (2014). **Faculty matter: So why doesn't everyone think so?** *Thought & Action*, 30, 29-44.

Kezar, A., & Sam, C. (2014). Governance as a catalyst for policy change: Creating a contingent faculty friendly academy. *Educational Policy*, 28, 425-462. [doi.org/10.1177/0895904812465112](https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904812465112)

Kezar, A. (2013). Examining non-tenure track faculty perceptions of how departmental policies and practices shape their performance and ability to create student learning at four-year institutions. *Research in Higher Education*, 54(5), 571-598. [doi.org 10.1007/s11162-013-9288-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-013-9288-5)

# The Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success

The Delphi Project is dedicated to enhancing awareness about the changing faculty trends using research and data to better support faculty off the tenure track and to help create new faculty models to support higher education institutions in the future.

An initiative of the Pullias Center for Higher Education at the University of Southern California, the Delphi Project works in partnership with the American Association of College and Universities (AAC&U), the leading national association concerned with the quality, vitality, and public standing of undergraduate liberal education. The Delphi Project has received generous funding from The Spencer Foundation, The Teagle Foundation, the National Science Foundation, The Carnegie Corporation of New York and TIAA Institute.

## Project Team



### **Adrianna Kezar** | Director and Principal Investigator

Adrianna Kezar is the Dean's Professor for Higher Education Leadership at the University of Southern California and director of the Pullias Center for Higher Education and the Delphi Project. She is a national expert on student success, equity and diversity, change, governance and leadership in higher education.



### **KC Culver** | Co-director

KC Culver is an Assistant Professor of Higher Education Administration at the University of Alabama, and co-director of the Delphi Project. Her research focuses on improving equity in the policies, programs and practices related to the academic mission of higher education.

## About the Pullias Center for Higher Education

### Promoting Equity in Higher Education

The world's leading research center on student access and success in higher education, the Pullias Center for Higher Education advances equity in higher education and provides innovative, scalable solutions to both improve college outcomes for underserved students and to enhance the performance of postsecondary institutions. The Pullias Center is located within the USC Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California.