

COACHE 2023 SURVEY: OPEN-ENDED COMMENT ANALYSIS

Background

In the 2022-2023 academic year, RIT collaborated with the Harvard Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) for the fourth time to conduct the COACHE Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey.

The survey was electronically disseminated by Harvard in the spring semester of 2023 to full-time tenured, pre-tenure, and non-tenure track faculty, a population of 947. A total of 449 faculty members responded, accounting for forty-seven percent (47%) of the eligible faculty. This response rate matched that of RIT's peer institutions and exceeded the overall response rate of COACHE's participating institutions by 5 percentage points (42%).

Respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction, using a 1-5 scale on a range of topics impacting faculty job satisfaction. The final item in the survey asked faculty to respond to an open-text prompt, "What is the one thing your institution could do to improve the workplace for faculty?"

The thematic analysis of COACHE's final open-ended survey question revealed five major descriptive themes. A theme was considered "major" if it was mentioned by 15% or more of the respondents. Below are the five major themes that faculty identified as areas for improvement:

1. Compensation and benefits (26.15%)
2. Facilities and work resources (21.85%)
3. Nature of work: General (19.08%)
4. Culture (16.92%)
5. Nature of work: Teaching (16.62%)

This examination of the open-ended comments supplements the quantitative data derived from the COACHE survey results.

#1 COMPENSATION AND BENEFITS (26.15%)

Compensation and benefits emerged as the most frequently discussed topic in the feedback, underscoring its significance. The feedback regarding compensation primarily expressed widespread concern and disappointment that compensation was insufficient and needed to be improved. The suggestions offered were primarily focused on three areas:

A. Compensation

This theme encompassed a range of suggestions for improvement, including salary adjustments, remuneration for service/administrative roles, competitive compensation, addressing salary compression, increased base salaries, inflation/cost of living adjustments, and salary equity across ranks and colleges. There was also a call for ensuring competitive compensation at fair market rates, with benchmark comparisons against R1 schools. Mention of benchmark salaries for lecturers, namely the proportional difference between lecturer ranks relative to tenure track ranks, and the need to improve their compensation was suggested. The proposal for differential compensation for faculty producing high-quality research was also suggested by several faculty.

B. Merit Raise Process

Several faculty members suggested improvements to the merit raise process, including ensuring transparency, increasing the available pool percentage, and revising the merit raise to be a truly performance-based program that recognizes high-performing faculty.

C. Benefits

The need for improved benefits, specifically retirement and healthcare benefits, was highlighted by a few faculty.

#2 FACILITIES AND WORK RESOURCES (21.85%)

Feedback and suggestions related to resources and work resources were frequently mentioned, making it the second most discussed category. The majority of comments were concentrated in four areas:

A. Physical Workplace

Faculty members emphasized the significant role their physical work environment plays in their overall satisfaction. The need for updates to the physical workplace, including offices, labs, research or studio spaces, equipment, and classrooms was frequently mentioned.

B. Work Resources

This feedback underscored a common concern: the perceived lack of faculty support and the need for additional resources to cultivate a robust research culture and support the teaching mission. Faculty members voiced their need for more workspaces, building renovations, and sustained support for research spaces. A frequent issue raised pertains to the cutback in travel allowances, which has consequentially affected various areas such as research, the dissemination of work, and opportunities for professional advancement. Several faculty suggested that restoring travel funding to pre-pandemic levels should be a priority for the university. Additional recurring concerns included the ongoing need for technology funding, more teaching assistants/graduate students, financial support for Ph.D. students, and post-award grant support.

C. Support for Staff and Technology

Faculty members identified a need for support in the areas of staffing and technology. They suggested hiring additional staff to reduce administrative tasks placed on faculty and called for enhanced technological support, particularly for teaching. Also clearly voiced was a need to reverse the decline in staff hiring. Ensuring sufficient staffing levels to avoid overloading the faculty and the need for staff to receive pay that is competitive in the market was suggested.

D. Resource Allocation

There were suggestions to reallocate resources to departments and colleges for technology, classrooms, and office space/condition, rather than focusing on new construction. The majority of these comments called for moving towards an activity-based budgeting approach.

#3 NATURE OF WORK: GENERAL (19.08%)

This major theme reflected the faculty's desire for a balanced workload, clarity of expectations, and contained suggestions about how specific university-wide aspects of faculty's work life could be improved.

A prevailing concern and the one receiving the most comment in this area is that current teaching loads are too high. Some proponents of this view maintain that the institution can successfully function as both a teaching and research university, prioritizing small class sizes and student success. The most common suggestion to address this issue is a universal reduction in teaching loads. Other suggestions for decreasing teaching workload include limiting class sizes and discouraging the admission of more students than the teaching staff or facilities can adequately support. A few commented on the need for a fair, objective, and consistent distribution of teaching load amongst faculty members.

Faculty also offered specific suggestions regarding workload distribution and suggested that workloads should:

1. Be distributed more equitably across different units and colleges.
2. Be made more transparent.
3. Be balanced between tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty.
4. Be adjusted to acknowledge high-performing researchers - several faculty members suggested that those who are highly productive in research should receive a more balanced workload distribution.

A few faculty also suggested that the university should strive to reduce the administrative burden on faculty and invest in supportive systems and technology, such as a curriculum management system. There were also calls to hire more tenure-track faculty, teaching faculty, and support staff to alleviate faculty workload.

In addition to workload issues, several faculty members have voiced their apprehensions regarding processes for promotion, annual evaluations, and tenure. For tenure, they specifically highlighted the lack of a consistent approach in delivering formative feedback for mid-tenure reviews. Their suggestions primarily revolved around the importance of establishing clear expectations, particularly concerning promotion to full professor. There were also suggestions for increased adaptability in opportunities for associate professors, who were initially hired under varying scholarship expectations, to advance to full professor.

#4 CULTURE (16.92%)

Feedback on the university's culture constituted the fourth largest category of responses. These comments underscored the faculty's aspiration for a culture that values all employees, encompassing faculty of all ranks, disciplines, and colleges. A culture that appreciates and values shared governance was deemed equally important. In this context, faculty members suggested that leadership should enhance mechanisms to incorporate faculty input into decision-making at all levels. There was also a desire for an environment that celebrates and acknowledges faculty contributions beyond scholarship. This stems from a perception held by some faculty that their contributions to teaching and service roles are not adequately valued or acknowledged.

Several faculty members expressed a perception that the university does not hold faculty accountable for their work, or lack thereof. This can be demoralizing for those with a strong work ethic who in some cases are expected to shoulder additional responsibilities. Some have suggested that RIT should foster a culture where faculty underperforming in research/scholarship are either assigned more teaching duties or service.

Lastly, several faculty emphasized the need to uplift faculty and staff morale. They expressed a desire for a stronger sense of belonging and recommended the provision of opportunities for community building and networking, particularly within their respective departments, units, and colleges.

#5 NATURE OF WORK: TEACHING (16.62%)

The faculty's comments highlight several key concerns and suggestions regarding teaching.

A number of faculty expressed concern that the focus on teaching has lessened, a shift viewed negatively by some. The transformation of RIT from a teaching university to a research university has led to a perception that teaching is undervalued. A handful of comments categorized this as a shift towards prioritizing research and grants above all else. Many comments emphasized the need to recognize and reward teaching excellence, especially in tenure and promotion processes.

Suggestions were also put forth to foster a sense of appreciation and recognition for lecturers. Some faculty members expressed their belief that high-quality teaching by lecturers is often undervalued, especially among their faculty peers. This perception underscored the existence of a two-tier faculty system for some. The establishment of a teaching-specific tenure track and extension of lecturers' contract durations were proposed suggestions by a few faculty.

Several comments highlighted concerns about existing obstacles to fostering interdisciplinary teaching. These comments advocate for the establishment of policies that incentivize, bolster, and recognize interdisciplinary teaching and programs. They point out the current challenges in developing interdisciplinary classes and programs, emphasizing that the responsibility largely falls on faculty to navigate these complexities.

Finally, some faculty members voiced concerns about the evolving landscape of teaching. Central to these concerns was the increased time commitment and work required to support students with accommodations and mental well-being. Suggestions were made for the provision of teaching assistants, workshops, and additional resources to aid faculty in these endeavors.

RETROSPECTIVE: 2019 OPEN-ENDED COMMENT ANALYSIS

This summary presented the top five themes identified from the open-ended question in the COACHE survey. To assist the RIT leadership in prioritizing which workplace improvement suggestions and key areas to address first, a comparison of the open-ended comment analysis from 2019 and 2023 could be beneficial. This comparison would help identify if certain themes persist over time.

There are a number of themes (based on the count of associated comments) that coincide with the 2023 analysis. These themes are:

1. Compensation
2. Facilities

3. Faculty Workload

4. Work Resources

5. Research Support

6. Tenure and Promotion Clarity

By focusing on these recurring themes, leadership can target areas that persist and are seen by faculty as important levers to positively impact the workplace environment.