

# Recognizing and Supporting Faculty Work

Faculty stand at the center of the academic enterprise, and their work is the key to educational quality. Since these uncontroversial observations are universally recognized, it is a cause for both surprise and dismay that faculty are almost entirely absent from the recently released report of the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education.

In the commission's report, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, there is only one mention of faculty members, which appears near the end of the document. In that passage, faculty are charged to set "educational objectives" for students and to invent measures to assess their progress.

Apart from this cameo mention, faculty do not figure at all in the commission's vision for higher learning in America.

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

My dismay over this surprising omission was deepened when I visited the Web site of Neumont University, one of only a few educational institutions whose work is actually recommended in the draft report. Neumont, which offers a B.S. in technology fields and is nationally rather than regionally accredited, lists eighteen faculty members in all. Eighteen.

The commission calls for a new era of innovation in pedagogies, curricula, and technologies to help raise the level of learning for today's students. I endorse that call, of course. But I wish the commission had been willing to see what AAC&U staff and senior fellows see when we work with colleges and universities in our projects, conferences, and institutes, as well as on our hundreds of campus visits. From our active work with campuses, we know that tens of thousands of faculty members already are leading the development of educationally powerful learning innovations across all parts of postsecondary education.

As has been noted in an extensive series of reports from the Greater Expectations initiative, college campuses are dotted with "islands of innovation," including many that make rich use of the educational potential of technology. Many of these innovations are so widespread that they are already being studied by research scholars. And the evidence is mounting that many of these innovations have a particularly beneficial effect on students from less advantaged backgrounds—the very students to whom the Spellings Commission urges a new commitment.

First-year experiences and seminars, writing-intensive courses, learning communities, service learning, civic engagement, diversity learning, global studies, innovations in STEM disciplines,

undergraduate research, curriculum-embedded assessments . . . the list goes on and on. The real challenge before us is not to launch new innovations but to take such tested and effective educational practices to scale.

Unfortunately, the commission overlooked entirely these results of faculty—and staff—creativity and the emerging body of research showing the benefits of the new emphasis on student learning. A huge opportunity was lost that could have been used to build public interest and support for more active, hands-on, and public-spirited forms of learning.

I was tempted, really, as I read early drafts of the commission’s report, to send the members “emergency back subscriptions” to *Liberal Education*, *Peer Review*, *Diversity Digest*, and *On Campus with Women*. Collectively, AAC&U’s quarterlies (and many related journals) show the amazing degree of educational invention and change that is already occurring across higher education. When I look at higher education, I see far-reaching change in the making—albeit largely hidden from the view of the general public and still serving only a subset of our students.

Just as in primary and secondary education, the most important ingredient in quality college learning is effective teaching by well trained faculty members. If any point is well established by education research, it is that close interaction between faculty and students is among the most effective predictors of college completion and achievement.

Yet the future is not bright for the nation’s new and future faculty. As a result of recent and dramatic changes in faculty appointments across all sectors and fields, approximately half of all faculty members today are part-timers and a growing majority of new full-timers are without tenure and ineligible for it. There is grave cause for concern about the potential long-term impact of these structural changes on faculty roles, academic freedom, the mutual commitment of faculty members and institutions, the attractiveness of the academic career, and the amount of interaction between faculty and students.

**We will achieve none of our important priorities unless we make a new investment in the quality and vitality of the nation’s faculty**

We will achieve none of our important priorities—world class knowledge, access and success for underserved students, new synergy with the schools—unless we make a new investment in the quality and vitality of the nation’s faculty. And the first step is to recognize and honor the heroic and essential work that faculty already do.—CAROL GEARY SCHNEIDER