

When Faculty Work Is Measured but Faculty Lives Are Not

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Abstract

Universities often judge faculty work through visible outputs such as publications, grants, teaching, and service. Those indicators matter, but they can hide the conditions that make academic work possible, difficult, or meaningful. Drawing on the Faculty, Academic Careers, and Environments (FACE) framework, this research blog examines the space between measuring faculty productivity and understanding faculty experience. It argues that meaningful participation can connect issues often studied separately, including workload, institutional support, belonging, agency, recognition, and well-being. The blog also considers why these conditions differ across appointment types and academic roles. Future research should therefore look beyond isolated measures and examine how faculty experiences interact with institutional, disciplinary, and external environments. A fuller understanding of faculty success requires attention not only to what academics produce, but also to whether they have the resources, security, voice, and support needed to sustain meaningful work and viable careers over time in a changing academy.

Keywords: Faculty work; meaningful participation; academic careers; faculty well-being; higher education

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Rationale

Two faculty members can submit nearly identical annual reports and still inhabit very different academic worlds. One may have protected time to write and colleagues who offer support. The other may carry the same teaching load while worrying about renewal or inadequate resources. On paper, their performance may look similar. Their working lives may not.

That contrast matters because the academic career itself has changed. The image of a stable faculty position no longer describes much of the professoriate. Academic capitalism has tied more of academic life to competition and visible performance, while contingent employment has widened differences in security, autonomy, resources, and institutional voice (Kezar et al., 2019; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). A useful research rationale connects a lived concern to the larger scholarly problem that gives it weight (Hasan et al., 2026a). Here, that problem is how institutions shape the conditions under which faculty work becomes possible.

The Faculty, Academic Careers, and Environments, or FACE, framework helps us see those conditions more clearly. Culver et al. (2026) place faculty work within four overlapping environments: individual, disciplinary, institutional, and external. The framework also distinguishes among faculty roles, activities, and experiences. Similar responsibilities can therefore be lived in very different ways. A teaching load may feel manageable with clear expectations and support, yet exhausting when those conditions disappear (Hasnat et al., 2025; Hasan et al., 2025).

Earlier scholarship points to the importance of professional growth, autonomy, collegiality, and supportive working conditions (Gappa et al., 2007; O'Meara et al., 2008). FACE adds a more human question through meaningful participation: can faculty take part in academic life in ways that feel purposeful, supported, and sustainable? It asks whether they have the resources, recognition, flexibility, relationships, and opportunities needed to do work that carries meaning (Culver et al., 2026). Faculty success is not only about what appears in an annual report. It is also about the working life behind it (Hasan et al., 2026b, 2026c, 2026d; Hasnat et al., 2026b, 2026c).

Research Gap

The problem is not a shortage of studies on faculty work. It is the tendency to examine pieces of academic life in isolation. Productivity is often studied apart from belonging, while burnout is discussed apart from recognition. Workload, support, and agency can appear as separate problems even though faculty experience



them together. As Hasnat et al. (2026a) suggest, a research gap can lie in an important relationship that scholarship has not yet brought fully into view. That is the gap here.

Universities are skilled at recording what is easiest to count: publications, grants, courses, student evaluations, and service commitments (Hasan et al., 2026e, 2026f). These indicators matter, but they rarely tell us what it took to produce them. A publication record does not reveal whether a scholar had protected time to write. A teaching evaluation does not show whether an instructor received mentoring. A grant total cannot capture repeated funding uncertainty. Two faculty members can therefore arrive at the same visible outcome by very different routes.

Those routes are shaped by appointment type, identity, and institutional power. Faculty do not begin academic work with equal security, resources, or influence. Perceptions of organizational support vary across appointment types (Culver et al., 2020), while workloads can reflect gendered and racialized expectations that formal evaluation systems do not always recognize (Misra et al., 2021). Common measures can therefore flatten differences that matter.

The same pattern appears in discussions of well-being. The academic environment is closely linked to psychological needs and faculty well-being (Larson et al., 2019), yet emotional strain is often treated as a private matter rather than something shaped by the workplace (Smith & Ulus, 2020). A university may offer wellness resources while leaving insecurity, isolation, unclear expectations, or unequal workloads untouched. Those risks treating the symptom while ignoring part of the cause.

Meaningful participation gives us a way to reconnect these pieces. It brings productivity, agency, belonging, recognition, support, and well-being into the same conversation. The sharper question is whether faculty have a fair opportunity to contribute in ways that matter, or whether they are mainly being asked to keep producing. That shifts attention from output alone to the conditions that shape academic work and to how faculty experience their roles (Culver et al., 2026).

Future Implications

This question needs to be studied where academic work is actually lived. Researchers could ask when faculty feel most connected to their work, when they feel pushed to the margins, and what changes those experiences. The answers will vary across appointment types, disciplines, career stages, and institutions. That variation is part of what future research needs to understand.

The inquiry also needs methods that follow the contexts around faculty lives. Interviews can reveal how people make sense of their work, but they may miss the structures around them. Contracts, promotion guidelines,



departmental practices, and state policies also influence what faculty can do. Case studies, ethnographies, and multi-method designs can connect personal experience with these wider environments (Culver et al., 2026), especially for faculty outside tenure-line roles.

The implications do not stop with research. Future-oriented research blogging is most useful when it connects evidence to choices in policy and practice rather than ending with a vague call for more studies (Khandakar et al., 2026). Universities could start by asking who receives resources, whose work is recognized, who has a voice in decisions, and who carries risks that annual reviews never capture. Those questions place institutional responsibility back into a conversation too often framed around individual resilience.

Well-being belongs inside this conversation, not beside it. A healthy workplace depends on protection from harm, connection and community, work-life harmony, mattering, and opportunities for growth (Office of the Surgeon General, 2022). These conditions are not extras. They help determine whether people can keep doing the work at all.

None of this means universities should stop measuring faculty work. Publications, teaching, grants, and service will remain important, but they tell only part of the story. The larger challenge is to understand whether academic careers give people enough purpose, agency, security, and support to sustain their work. That question asks us to see what makes productivity possible. In the end, the task is to measure work without making workers disappear.

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