



Lessons from the winners of the Delphi Award for VITAL Faculty

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The Delphi Award for VITAL Faculty was created to document the successful policy and practice changes occurring to support VITAL (visiting, instructor, temporary, adjunct, and lecturer) on campuses and through consortium, unions, alliances, and other organizations. We provide two awards each year and occasionally recognize finalists for exemplary work. With support from the Teagle Foundation and TIAA Institute, we've been providing the award for six years (12 winners and six finalists). This brief provides an overview of key insights learned from the winners and finalists (awardees) about trends in supporting VITAL faculty. Please see appendix for our award criteria.

Every type of institution can create change.

Delphi awardees represent every type of institutional sector in higher education—research universities, liberal arts colleges, community colleges, technical colleges, online institutions, minority serving institutions, and public regionals. There's no sector that hasn't been recognized by the Delphi Award. Exemplary work to support VITAL faculty can happen in any environment and doesn't require a particular set of resources, size, facilities, control (public or private), or authority/governance.

Institutions tailor changes to align with their mission and VITAL faculty population.

It's noteworthy that awardees propose and make changes reflecting their institutional type as well as the type of VITAL faculty they employ. For example, Montgomery College, Santa Monica College, Harper College, Bay Path University, and Northcentral University focused on part-time faculty, as this group makes up the majority—or entirety—of their VITAL faculty. These institutions addressed the specific needs of these faculty related to office/meeting space, administrative support, benefits, job security, salary, onboarding and orientation, professional development, and inclusion, which are issues more important to this group.

Campuses with a teaching mission that employ more full-time VITAL faculty, such as University of Denver, CSU Dominguez Hills, University of Texas at San Antonio, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, and Loyola Marymount University, focused on creating professional tracks for their teaching faculty and made progress on promotional tracks, multiyear contracts, professional development, and dedicated representation in faculty governance. Campuses with a research mission, such as the University of Arizona, paid special attention to research faculty and their need for role clarification, seed funding, job security, and inclusion.

Campuses with a religious affiliation often use their social justice values and mission to obtain buy in for and support the direction of their changes and approach to change. Campuses with unions frequently leveraged collective bargaining to drive the process of implementing change and some of the change goals.

Awardees demonstrate changes are most impactful when institutions align and make connections between VITAL faculty issues and the institution's mission and goals, attending to the specific structures and practices of that campus.

Considerations around change process

Several patterns emerge across institutions recognized by the Delphi Award in terms of the structure and process of change in higher education.

Changes can start anywhere—from the bottom up, middle out, or top down.

Awardees' efforts have started in lots of different ways—with a small group of three VITAL faculty who began to meet and discuss common challenges, in faculty senate subcommittees, with activity led by a tenured faculty member, among union members, in union leader conversations, in discussions of faculty with the director of their Center for Teaching and Learning, through the effort of a single VITAL faculty member who collaborated with an administrator, and through administrative-led efforts that connected with faculty.

While improving VITAL faculty conditions can begin anywhere, a critical success factor is change agents bringing in key stakeholders early to foster collaboration among VITAL faculty, tenure-line faculty, and administrators. While the case studies of awardees present very unique journeys of how the effort began, whether an effort was initiated by a single individual or a few people, they managed to make the idea spread and take hold. In some cases, these were people with little structural power or influence. Santa Monica College offers an example of changes starting among a few adjunct faculty. The Penn State University System, Loyola Marymount University,

and Worcester Polytechnical Institute all offer examples of changes starting in the faculty senate. Montgomery College offers a strong example of a cross-campus stakeholder group collectively leading the change process. University of Denver and University of Massachusetts Amherst are examples of collaboration across faculty and administration.

Aligning changes for VITAL faculty with campus priorities.

Many awardees recognized they could gain more support from various campus stakeholders by aligning their desired changes for VITAL faculty with existing institutional priorities, particularly around student success. Most campuses are engaged in work to better support students, but many have ignored the classroom and the role of faculty in these efforts. The leaders at the Delphi award-winning campuses consistently made a clear argument for the ways improved working conditions for VITAL faculty would better support students. For instance, giving these faculty resources and opportunities will allow them more time to mentor, advise, and spend with students to better prepare for class, better understand their students, and understand the goals for courses and programs. Other campuses aligned their efforts with existing work on campus to create a more inclusive environment, promote integrity, improve retention of faculty and staff, and increase employee morale. Aligning change efforts with campus priorities made it easier for awardees to obtain resources to make their desired changes and ensured less resistance. Campuses strongly aligned with campus priorities include Michigan State University's College of Arts and Letters, San Jacinto College, University of California American Federation of Teachers (UC-AFT), and Dominican University.

VITAL faculty challenges are identified and evidenced through data analysis and needs assessment.

Most award-winning campuses begin their work by using existing institutional data they already collect. In some cases, this is supplemented by additional data collection and research. Campuses used existing data and climate studies, gathered institutional data about VITAL faculty, and, when they identified missing data, conducted their own surveys. Many campuses also performed a needs assessment of VITAL faculty in order to identify what might be needed for them to perform optimally. A needs assessment typically involves surveys and focus groups, ensuring representation of different groups of VITAL faculty—across different schools and colleges, part-time and full-time VITAL faculty, and VITAL faculty in teaching and research roles—as these groups typically have very different experiences. As climate is local, awardees were intentional about surveying and conducting focus groups to understand variations by departments and colleges. It's through the data and needs assessment that campuses' leaders (faculty or administrators) were able to develop the best plans for moving forward.

Some campuses have a very dynamic process for understanding needs. University of Delaware has a group (caucus) that regularly assesses emerging issues. Loyola Marymount University collects data to assess their change efforts so they can continuously make adjustments and fine-tune policies and practices. And several campuses, such as UNC Charlotte and University of Michigan, have feedback loops designed to receive ongoing feedback. Unions often collect data for a range of purposes, so many of our award-winning unionized campuses have helpful examples of data collection processes (unionized campuses are listed below).

We have [survey instruments](#) available on the Delphi website to help conduct data collection. Examples of strong data collection and needs assessment can be found in the case studies for San Jacinto College, University of Delaware, University of Arizona, Loyola Marymount University, UNC Charlotte, UC-AFT, University of Texas at San Antonio, Santa Monica College, and Montgomery College.

Collaboration across groups is central to change.

A common theme among our awardees is their ability to foster collaboration across groups that may not typically partner. VITAL and tenure track faculty planned changes together, while administrative and faculty leaders collaborated to alter policies and practices. Creating improved policies and practices required administrators to develop a better understanding of the lived experience of VITAL faculty and for VITAL faculty to learn about the opportunities and constraints tenure track faculty and administrative leaders face. These new understandings lead to better decision-making. By working together, they also develop better relationships to enhance the culture and climate, moving toward greater respect and trust across faculty groups. Excellent examples of cross group collaboration can be found in the case studies of University of Denver, Montgomery College, University of Arizona, Loyola Marymount University, University of Massachusetts Amherst, and University of Texas at San Antonio.

Unions can be very supportive of changes.

Many award-winning campuses have faculty unions. It's typical for some to feel collective bargaining can block changes and contracts can lock in policies and practices, making change difficult. Yet, each new bargaining round provides an opportunity to think about ways the contract might better support VITAL faculty. Several awardees used each bargaining period to advocate for new changes, and they were able to vastly alter the environment over time to support VITAL faculty. Key policy changes around multiyear contracts, promotion tracks, involvement in governance, inclusion in academic freedom policies, and salary equity were advanced through the collective bargaining processes at many of our award-winning campuses.

While collective bargaining can drive policy changes, the campus can also engage in simultaneous changes in practices. Campuses made other changes without going through contract negotiations, such as the development of awards specifically for VITAL faculty, new types of professional development, and the creation of orientation and resource materials for VITAL faculty. Thus, some changes can be worked on between contract negotiations, and the environment can continue to evolve in a variety of practice areas to sustain momentum for improving the environment. Unions can provide the leadership and vision to move practice changes forward between contract negotiations, which allows for ongoing change.

For a look at how unions are advancing change, explore the case studies of Michigan State University's College of Arts and Letters, University of Massachusetts Amherst, Dominican University, University of Delaware, UC-AFT, Harper College, and University of Michigan.

Considerations around change goals

Culture change is the ultimate goal for most awardees.

Campuses may start with a small goal—to start a professional development program, improve salaries and job security, or create a promotional path for VITAL faculty—but over time, it becomes clear that improving the work life for VITAL faculty is about culture change. As campus leaders seek to better understand the nature of VITAL faculty, they find a lack of respect and valuation for the work of this group can become a significant issue, potentially hindering other gains if left unchecked. Culture change is about making VITAL faculty feel included in campus life. Inclusion begins with invitations to meetings/events, participation in governance, availability of awards and recognition, and thoughtfulness when creating policies, practices, and programs. The University of Denver, Loyola Marymount University, CSU Dominguez Hills, Penn State University System, and Worcester Polytechnic Institute are examples of organizations driving culture change. Each is grounded in strong principles around equity and respect for VITAL faculty.

Symbolic changes are also important to support culture change, and campuses like Penn State University System, University of Denver, and University of Texas at San Antonio addressed issues related to professional titles and how best to name faculty to honor their work. Including VITAL faculty in awards is another key way to demonstrate respect. Bay Path University, Montgomery College, Dominican University, Loyola Marymount University, and University of Massachusetts Amherst are all good examples of campuses that provided awards for VITAL faculty.

More comprehensive changes emerge over time.

Delphi awardees typically began with a modest objective, but successfully implementing one change led them to explore another area. Many campuses begin with orientation and professional development to provide support and guidance to VITAL faculty who often feel overlooked and ignored. Along with a lack of support, change agents realized other issues. Through professional development with VITAL faculty, leaders heard about job insecurity, an absence of benefits/low pay, and insufficient feedback and evaluation. In some cases, they also recognized that new supportive initiatives weren't being utilized, and other existing issues needed to be addressed. This insight helped uncover the need to collect more data to better understand the working conditions of VITAL faculty. Through data, additional issues are identified and new task forces can be set up to explore and develop solutions and plans. We saw this path on almost every award winner—work in one area led them to a series of other needed changes and a broader planning process to tackle a more comprehensive evolution.

Campus policies and practices serving as a focal point for change

While cultural change is often the ultimate goal, there's also a small set of policies and practices that emerge among awardees as powerful levers for change. These policies and practices often serve as the impetus for broader changes.

Engagement in professional development

Many campuses made changes to ensure VITAL faculty have opportunities for professional development, including workshops and learning communities related to effective teaching and career development. Several campuses created VITAL-specific professional development programs. Also, because many campuses aren't unionized and don't include VITAL faculty in governance, professional development spaces are often a place for VITAL faculty to organize for better working conditions. Professional development efforts bring faculty together in conversation, help them clarify where improvements are needed, and offer an opportunity for more formal organizing to drive change.

Centers for Teaching and Learning are frequently another key partner in the improvement of working conditions for VITAL faculty. Many Delphi Award awardees had a Center involved in helping coordinate across groups on campus with aspirations for improving VITAL faculty working conditions, but they didn't know how to collaborate or what direction to go in. Centers often support the data collection critical to setting up and coordinating the working groups. On some campuses, professional development might come through another office like the provost (see University of Denver).

Inclusion in shared governance

One of the primary ways campuses recognized with the Delphi Award advanced changes for VITAL faculty was by including them in shared governance. Many of the winning campuses realized that including VITAL faculty in governance was essential for obtaining their voice in ongoing policy development affecting their working conditions and ability to perform optimally. Most campuses have focused on including full-time VITAL faculty, such as University of Arizona, University of Denver, Michigan State University's College of Arts and Letters, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, University of Arizona, Loyola Marymount University, and University of Delaware. However, many campuses recognized the need to also include part-time faculty in governance. Fewer had implemented these changes, but Northcentral and Dominican Universities are good examples of including part-time faculty.

In those case studies and other Delphi Project resources, we detail some best practices around including VITAL faculty in shared governance, such as ensuring they have a vote, having adequate representation in shared governance, compensating VITAL faculty for involvement if it's outside their contract, including it in criteria for advancement/promotion, including VITAL faculty in academic freedom policies, and providing multiyear contracts to make sure they feel safe to speak and vote.

Support for specific roles and working conditions

Delphi awardees focus on two critical intertwined issues. First, they think about how they can support VITAL faculty to be successful based on the specific teaching and research responsibilities of their roles. Awardees then tailor the types of support based on that role, including access to professional development, mentoring, and evaluation/feedback, for example. Even with these resources, they recognize VITAL faculty can't perform optimally if they're constantly looking for jobs because of the lack of job security, facing basic needs insecurity because they don't have a living wage, or constantly worried about getting sick with no healthcare benefits or sick days. Awardees all consistently addressed these two core issues.

Another way of improving VITAL faculty roles is through revising titles and responsibilities for better consistency. For a detailed look at reviewing titles and roles, the University of Arizona offers a helpful model for how campuses can clarify work expectations and implement new faculty models.

A few awardees worked in both areas while also going deeper into specific issues needing urgent attention, and we chose them as awardees to highlight these key issues. Harper College addressed roles and working conditions by focusing on better evaluation and feedback for VITAL faculty. Louisiana State University, and University of Michigan are great examples of providing deep support for faculty in their teaching role.

Career paths and VITAL tracks

Campus leaders are starting to recognize that VITAL faculty often stay at their employing institution for decades without any formalized career path. They also acknowledge these faculty are conducting the core work of teaching on their campuses. Without promotion opportunities, there are few incentives for these faculty to engage in professional development, improve their teaching, or keep up on scholarship. This awareness has led awardees to focus on creating a career path for VITAL faculty—one that includes multiyear contracts, promotional path (e.g., assistant, associate, full, senior lecturer, etc.), salary increases, clear criteria for advancement, and opportunities for leadership over time. A career path also demonstrates a sense of respect for the role of VITAL faculty, which is worth job security, investment, and opportunities for growth. Awardees also recognize that it's not enough to simply create the promotional path—these campuses illustrate the need to make faculty aware of new paths and to provide training and other forms of support for how to successfully engage in the advancement process.

Awardees have great examples of these career paths and new tracks for VITAL faculty, such as University of Denver, University of Arizona, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Michigan State University's College of Arts and Letters, University of Massachusetts Amherst, University of Delaware, and the Penn State University System.

Leadership roles and pathways

A key opportunity on the faculty career path is leadership. On many campuses, there's a tendency to overlook VITAL faculty. Just as concerning, there can be structural impediments to moving VITAL faculty into leadership roles, such as policies prohibiting their involvement or practices of denying opportunities to serve as committee chairs, course coordinators, faculty senators, program coordinators, and in other leadership roles (e.g., associate deans, unit or department heads). VITAL faculty often yearn for the ability to serve in such leadership roles. Providing more access to career development and leadership roles is increasingly common among the Delphi Award submissions. The University of Denver, University of Arizona, and Michigan State University's College of Arts and Letters are examples of full-time VITAL faculty, and Bay Path University, Montgomery College, and Santa Monica College are all examples of campuses providing leadership opportunities for part-time VITAL faculty.

Appendix A. Delphi Award criteria

The Delphi Award criteria are as follows:

1. Is designed in keeping with strategic institutional priorities, is aligned with improving campus(es) goals, and contributes to the learning mission of higher education.
2. Was enacted in partnership or with support from one or more host colleges or universities.
3. Is assisting VITAL faculty in being more effective in their work.
4. Can be scaled, replicated, and/or emulated at other institutions (e.g., other institutions might be able to adopt the approach with minimum difficulty).
5. Has been designed in collaboration with the VITAL faculty that the program, policy, practice, or model is aimed at.
6. Is being institutionalized and will be sustained. Evidence may entail inclusion in strategic plans, stated leadership commitment, fundraising and development aimed at supporting the practice, or other demonstrations of continuity beyond the first year of implementation.
7. Employs a theory of action that explains how the program, policy, practice or model supports VITAL faculty, and how that support helps VITAL faculty in turn contribute to institutional priorities aligned with improving campus(es).
8. Is impacting student success. If including such evidence, please also articulate your definition of student success. For example, evidence of student success might include graduation rates, persistence rates, course passing rates, GPA, or other measures of student success.
9. Has resulted in organizational learning for the institution/department/unit that has encouraged rethinking other policies, programs, practices, or models.

Appendix B. Awardees and changes

Institution	Delphi Award Recognition	Contracts and Compensation							
		Titles	Salary Equity	Benefits	More Secure Contracts	Sabbatical/ Leave	Priority Hiring/ Scheduling	Compensation for Additional Work	Flexible Workload
Bay Path University	Finalist, 2020								
California State University, Dominguez Hills	Winner, 2018	X	X	X		X			
Dominican University of California	Winner, 2022			X	X		X	X	
Harper College	Winner, 2018								
Lehigh Valley Consortium	Finalist, 2020								
Louisiana State University	Winner, 2020								
Loyola Marymount University	Winner, 2023		X	X	X		X		
Michigan State University's College of Arts and Letters	Winner, 2024		X		X				
Montgomery College	Winner, 2022; Finalist, 2019								
Northcentral University	Winner, 2020			X				X	
Penn State University	Winner, 2019	X			X				
San Jacinto College	Finalist, 2024		X						
Santa Monica College	Winner, 2019								
University of Arizona	Winner, 2023	X	X		X				
University of California-AFT	Finalist, 2022		X		X				
University of Delaware CT Caucus	Finalist, 2024				X	X			X
University of Denver	Winner, 2021				X			X	
University of Massachusetts Amherst	Winner, 2024; Finalist, 2023			X	X	X			
University of Michigan	Finalist, 2021								
University of North Carolina Charlotte	Finalist, 2019								
University of Texas at San Antonio	Finalist, 2022	X	X						
Worcester Polytechnic Institute	Winner, 2021				X				

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