

## **Creating Time and Space for Faculty Reflection, Risk-Taking, and Renewal**

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Faculty today must stay up to date in their fields and energetic in their classrooms or they cannot provide the quality education that students deserve. However, as faculty duties expand and their personal lives become more complex, it is increasingly difficult for faculty to find the space and time necessary to grow professionally and support their institutional communities. Frequently, faculty are overextended in their personal and professional roles while trying to maintain their stride on the academic treadmill. In this climate, institutions must try to find places within the lives of faculty that enable them to reflect on their work, take risks, and reenergize themselves and their academic careers.

In this article, we share the insights we gained by studying the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's Faculty Career Enhancement (FCE) program. The Mellon Foundation sought to promote the development of faculty across the academic lifecycle by providing support to selected institutions to design programs tailored to the distinctive needs of their faculty members.

### **IDENTIFYING THE NEED**

The issues that the FCE program addressed were identified by the institutions themselves. These included 1) the need for faculty professional and personal balance, 2) the need for intellectual and social community, and 3) the need for experimentation, risk-taking, and innovation.

**Professional and personal balance.** The Mellon-sponsored institutions spoke of the need to create time and space for faculty to concentrate on priority faculty duties, to better integrate their competing faculty roles of teaching, scholarship, and service, and to achieve greater balance in their personal and professional lives.

**Intellectual and social community.** Many colleges sought to foster an environment that stimulates both intellectual and social community. These institutions recognized that a healthy and vibrant community is an important factor in sustaining faculty across their careers but that space and time to nurture community have diminished in recent decades as faculty lives have become more complex and siloed by their disciplines and competing roles.

**Experimentation, risk-taking, and innovation.** Several institutions wanted to promote faculty experimentation and innovation. Keeping faculty current in their fields and invigorated in their teaching and research are essential to maintaining institutional change. Professors take risks and innovate by adding

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new material to their established courses, developing new courses, revising their instructional strategies, moving into interdisciplinary fields, and exploring new research problems.

## **CREATING TIME FOR FACULTY**

**Semester leaves.** Semester leaves provided by many of the Mellon-sponsored initiatives gave faculty blocks of time to work on research projects, course development, or professional learning endeavors. Many faculty members said finding time is critical to their productivity or to their professional renewal. Mellon-sponsored institutions found a variety of ways to provide faculty with time to concentrate on priority concerns. For example, semester leaves were used to expand one-semester sabbaticals to help faculty complete important research projects.

**Summer leaves.** These were another way some institutions gave their faculty concentrated time to focus on a specific project or priority. For example, some faculty received modest summer support to define new projects or to do the preliminary work needed to get a new project up and running.

**Course releases.** Course releases are a more modest tool some institutions used to free up time for faculty to work on research or to take on an invigorating new project or assignment. For example, faculty received partial- or full-course releases to develop new courses or to update and revise existing courses. Others received released time to start new research projects.

**Student assistants.** Several institutions helped free up time for faculty by providing support for faculty to hire student assistants. Faculty could apply for a student assistant or a recent graduate to help with an ongoing research project or to lay the groundwork for a new research project, new course, or an important professional development activity.

## **CREATING SPACE FOR FACULTY**

**Reading and discussion groups.** Some institutions used a portion of their Mellon funds to create “space” (and time) for intellectual dialogue as well as social community on their campuses. Some faculty created reading or discussion groups organized around a common theme or academic issue as the basis for dialogue. A key goal of these gatherings was to encourage more faculty interaction across fields and academic generations.

**Co-mentoring opportunities.** Co-mentoring is based on the idea that mentoring relationships can be beneficial to all parties involved, not just the junior partner. Mellon-sponsored institutions offered co-mentoring opportunities by providing resources to encourage junior and veteran faculty to work together on a project related to teaching, research, or curriculum.

**Collaboration support.** Collaborative initiatives were designed to encourage cross-generational and cross-disciplinary faculty projects that support faculty across the academic life cycle. These collaborations

also nurtured intellectual community by providing “space” for colleagues to work together on a mutual interest.

**Conferences and workshops.** Several institutions supported a variety of field- and interest-based workshops and conferences designed to bring together faculty with common interests to exchange information, foster creativity, develop networks, and promote collaboration. Some of these activities connected colleagues in the same field or specialty from other Mellon-sponsored institutions. Others focused on broader interdisciplinary themes and brought faculty together from different disciplines and different institutions to exchange ideas, learn from each other, and spark one another’s professional renewal.

**Cohort-based and career-stage groups.** Several institutions offered activities and programs to address specific faculty career-stage issues and themes. These included orientation programs and retreats for new faculty, dinners and discussions for faculty over 50, and meetings and support for emeritus faculty. These activities enhanced community while they helped to sustain faculty in various demographic cohorts and career stages.

## **HOW DEPARTMENTS CAN FIND TIME AND SPACE THAT PROMOTES INTELLECTUAL COMMUNITY, PROGRAM INNOVATION, AND FACULTY RENEWAL**

Although the Mellon Foundation provided financial support for the activities just described, many strategies to create time and space for faculty community, risk-taking, and renewal do not require large amounts of financial support. Department chairs can help to find space and time for renewal activities if they are creative, flexible, and willing to exercise their leadership potential. A few ideas chairs may consider trying include:

### **Time**

- *Reordering faculty course assignments* to free a block of time to concentrate on a new course, research project, or professional development goal.
- *Assigning course releases* for a well-defined project that will benefit a professor and the professor’s program or institution.
- *Reducing committee assignments or other service obligations* in exchange for focus on an important renewal activity or other challenging task.
- *Providing low-cost student assistants* (awarded competitively) to help faculty start or advance new learning, course development, or scholarly projects.

## Space

- *Encouraging discussion and/or reading groups* that support professional growth while encouraging community.
- *Providing incentives for team teaching and other forms of faculty collaboration* to promote professional growth and productivity.
- *Promoting co-mentoring* by helping faculty across generations and specialties to identify mutual interests and learning needs.
- *Forming cohort groups* that address the special interests and needs of subgroups (e.g., early/mid-career faculty, women faculty, faculty of color).
- *Hosting seminars and workshops* that bring departmental colleagues together to learn from each other and from colleagues at other institutions.

These ideas are not exhaustive. Creative department chairs can find many additional ways to help their faculty discover precious space and time in their busy lives. Chairs can play a key catalyst role when faculty need space and time for community, reflection, and renewal. To find space and time within the constraints of academic schedules and resources, chairs should encourage faculty to plan their work and professional growth opportunities carefully. Chairs should be flexible with faculty work assignments, allowing equitable arrangements that open blocks of time for professors to concentrate on priority goals. They should promote collaboration and teamwork that brings faculty together to learn and support each other's professional well-being. Finally, department chairs should use their discretionary funds, however modest, to aid the search for space and time in the lives of faculty members. They can provide small grants to aid mentoring or collaborations. They can provide refreshments or a small amount of funds for books or other materials that faculty groups may request to facilitate conversation and learning. We learned from the FCE program that food helps to support socialization and idea generation. By providing small amounts of financial support, chairs convey the message to faculty that their time and professional development are valued, important, and a worthwhile investment.

Every good department chair knows that time and space are very limited resources that are extremely valuable to faculty. Thoughtful and creative chairs can work closely with their faculty colleagues to define or reserve space and time that will help professors to reflect on their work, engage in fruitful dialogue, experiment with new approaches, and support each others' professional growth and vitality.

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