

# Time Well Spent: Prioritizing Faculty Workload for High-Impact Educational Experiences



## 2024 Summer Strategic Initiative

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## Introduction

High-impact educational experiences take time, both to develop and to implement. Faculty time is one of the most precious resources at this institution and is often cited as one reason prohibiting us from providing more impactful educational experiences for our students. However, we do not know why or how each faculty member's time is so limited and short-changed.

Faculty engagement outside of core teaching and scholarship can take many different forms, but comprehensively makes Bucknell distinctive. Generational and demographic shifts in the faculty, space expansion, and post-pandemic work modality change are some of the reasons why we do not have a complete grasp of what we all do.

Based on the analysis of committee structures, review documents, and faculty feedback, we identified a broad list of the formal and informal—or invisible—expectations and obligations that faculty engage in.

A faculty survey and several focus groups were used to assess the perceived value of each of these activities and how they align with the College's Strategic Goals. Further, faculty were asked if (and why) they choose to take part in some of these activities. Engineering chairs were also interviewed to gain perspective from Departmental leadership.

This report will summarize key findings from the research so that the College leadership can take action to ensure, protect, and reclaim time for faculty to engage in impactful practices and new initiatives.

We would like to thank all those who filled out the survey and attended the focus groups as well as department chairs for additional insightful discussions.

## Faculty Survey results

A Qualtrics survey was shared with all College of Engineering faculty to support this initiative. The survey asked participants to assess their perception (importance) of a variety of activities and their willingness to participate in these activities. The activities were grouped into those at the College level, more directly related to student engagement, University level, Department level, and Professional activities. Additionally, several open ended questions asked about the context and why they deemed certain activities important and what makes them more likely or less likely to engage in an activity. Participants were also asked what prevents them from engaging in more high impact educational activities and what they would do with any reclaimed time. The survey also included a question about the perceived distribution of teaching, scholarship, and service expectations and compared it to their actual distribution of teaching, scholarship, and service. Finally, faculty were asked for their opinion on how we might collectively (as a College) reclaim some faculty time. Survey questions are available [here](#).

The results of the first series of questions assessing importance and willingness to participate were analyzed by rank and across all responses. A summary of these results is available [here](#). The responses to the open-ended questions were analyzed for common sentiments.

**Theme 1: The survey response rate and focus group participation likely mirrors the engagement of our most actively involved colleagues.**

Thirty one (about 1/3 of the College of Engineering) responded to the survey first announced on July 19 and closed on August 5. Fifteen (about 1/6 of the College of Engineering) participated in the focus group sessions held July 15 and 16. Almost half of the participants in our focus groups were also engaged in one of the other summer strategic initiative groups supported by the College this summer.

It is important to recognize that this is a self-selecting group whose participation in this summer survey reflects the opinions of the most invested faculty and the subsequent results should be viewed through that lens.

**Theme 2: Most valued service activities relate to mentoring and advising activities**

Although service activities such as mentoring students in research, non-academic student advising, and attending student presentations are not required activities for faculty, these were consistently among those that faculty perceived as being the most valued. Additionally, these are activities that faculty consistently engage in because they are perceived as being valuable to the institution, not for tenure and promotion purposes.

**Theme 3: Faculty are more likely to contribute to activities that they rated “important” or “required to function”.**

Unsurprisingly, faculty are more likely to volunteer or agree to contribute to activities that they believe are “important” or “required to function”. Service activities that are deemed “unimportant” or “neutral” are going to be more of a challenge to garner volunteers and, in the process, could continually draw from the cohort that traditionally participates more.

**Theme 4: Untenured faculty report that they are more likely to contribute to College-level activities because of Tenure and Promotion (T&P) expectations, while tenured faculty contribute to activities because they are important. Tenured faculty mention T&P influencing their contribution to University-level service more.**

Strategic selection of service may benefit individuals when it comes to T&P, but may not be the most efficient use of faculty time across the college. In focus group discussions, it was noted that service activities that included an official name (formal college committee structure) were perceived to be more valuable for T&P. It was also mentioned that many untenured faculty felt “protected” by their department (i.e. guided to the least intense service commitments).

**Theme 5: Many activities that are deemed “important” or “required to function”. However, when asked about their contribution (or willingness to contribute), faculty are prioritizing some activities more than others with their actions.**

Teaching is a nearly universal first priority. Personal prioritization (after teaching) includes activities such as service, scholarship, and advising/mentoring students. This personal prioritization could be influenced by either I) how much faculty enjoy doing these activities or II) how faculty are recognized for participating in these activities.

### Theme 6: Faculty often feel unsupported.

Faculty generally understand and agree with the shared mission and commitment of the University (“for the students”). Each member makes their own interpretation of this shared mission, which translates to the wide-ranging actions and activities that they choose to do. They often feel that they do not receive sufficient reward or resource support for that chosen work. They also feel that important activities are not equitably contributed by all members of the department. Moreover, they often feel that constant turnovers in University personnel and infrastructure take up their time and bandwidth, which makes progress difficult.

## College Committees

Multiple sources of data were drawn from to explore the value of the current College Committee structure.

- End-of-semester committee reports that were available through the Dean’s office since 2015 were summarized
- Qualtrics survey to all CoE faculty specifically asked about the value of college committees in Q3 and Q4

### *End-of-Semester Committee Reports*

Typically, each report included a short list of bullet points highlighting the major activities of the committee in that given semester. Each task or topic discussed was documented and if it appeared in a similar form in other reports, this raw data was tallied [here](#).

From this data, it appears that the regular activities of each committee are limited to a few predictable tasks. Each committee is also often tasked with one-off activities that vary semester to semester. The tasks or topics that were most consistently addressed over this 9 year time period are highlighted in the summary tables [here](#).

### *Summer 2024 Survey*

The faculty in the College of Engineering were asked to complete a survey (see previous section) and 2 questions specifically asked about the importance and individual willingness to participate in each of the college-level committees. Most respondents identified the Engineering Curriculum Committee (ECC) as the most important of all college committees, some going as far as noting that it was “required for the College to function”. Other committees that were identified as more important include the facilities (EFC), graduate (Grad), and international (Intl) committees. The library (Lib), Environmental Engineering and Science Lab (EESL), and Grand Challenges Scholars Program (GCSP) committees were identified as less important.

	ECC	EFC	Grad	Intl	Lib	EESL	GCSP
<b>Required to function</b>	10	3	3	2	0	1	0
<b>Important</b>	15	17	14	16	1	6	11
<b>Neutral</b>	1	6	11	6	13	9	5
<b>Unimportant</b>	2	4	2	4	16	5	9
<b>Cannot assess</b>	3	1	1	3	1	10	6

In addition to the perception of each of these activities, faculty were asked about their willingness to participate (past or future) on each of the committees. It appears that willingness to participate is related to how an individual values the committee work. Most would serve on ECC and this aligns with most feeling it is important to the College. The library representatives are viewed as unimportant to the college and most would not participate because they don't believe it is important. It is important to note that about 1/3 of respondents said they would not participate in each of the committees because they don't have time.

	ECC	EFC	Grad	Intl	Lib	EESL	GCSP
<b>Yes, Important</b>	17	8	11	11	1	2	3
<b>Yes, T&amp;P and CV</b>	3	5	6	4	6	4	3
<b>No, important but no time</b>	8	11	4	9	9	8	10
<b>No, not important</b>	1	4	6	4	13	6	10
<b>None of the above</b>	1	2	3	2	1	10	4

## Focus group notes

Four voluntary focus groups were conducted, prior to the faculty survey getting deployed; two were open to any faculty member; one was targeted for untenured, tenure-track faculty; and one was open to the members of underrepresented groups in engineering. Many of the general points raised aligned with the thematic takeaways from the faculty survey in an earlier section, but they were more deeply articulated in a conversation. Additional points from the focus groups are as follows:

**There is agreement/acceptance by the faculty, of all ranks and demographics, of what is generally understood as expectations, "on paper"**

The focus group generally endorsed the long list of faculty engagement activities, with minor additions, and agreed that these activities need to get done for the University to operate. We omitted activities from the list if they are in the faculty handbook or they receive course releases/stipends. When asked to guess the expected distribution of faculty time on teaching vs. research vs. service, the faculty's answers centered around 45%/40%/15%, derived from the historic ratio of 5/4/2 (Teaching/Research/Service) for merit.

**Faculty members struggle internally on how they choose their time spent**

How the faculty spend their time often do not align with the expected distribution above. Research is usually the first to get pushed back. As for the engagement activities, most faculty end up prioritizing what has to get done and what they individually value the most (very often related to student interaction and mentoring), regardless of recognition or rewards that come with it. Some faculty are solely motivated by compensation. Activities that are interdisciplinary, non-academic, and social in nature are considered to be valued to “count” less, and thus are less prioritized.

### Several specific ideas to recoup faculty time were provided, from the basic to the creative

One common idea was to reduce the number of College committees, by way of merging/consolidation, or moving to a senate model. Another was to give faculty more autonomy in declaring their own time distribution towards tenure & promotion, centered around making a difference in whatever way they are best suited/motivated. Lastly, there is a general desire for the Dean to facilitate, by giving more direct tasks to committees, and financially supporting faculty-led initiatives.

In the end, not one activity is the most important, not one activity is a complete waste of my time. Not one activity prevents faculty from doing high impact practices The focus group notes are compiled from the personal experience and opinions of 15 faculty members who volunteered their time to talk to us, and they are the ones often visibly active in committee work and student interaction.

## Discussion with Department Chairs

Department Chairs are in a distinct spot to support a group of faculty, while having the responsibility to staff various tasks. Individual interviews with each department chair were conducted. The chairs were prompted with questions prior to the interview, and general discussion points or perspectives that were shared multiple times or aligned with other observations are provided below.

- Activities and efforts (outside of classroom instruction) that are student-centered are highly valuable to Bucknell and align with the strategic plan. However, these are often inequitable when it comes to sharing the load among faculty.
- The definition and requirements of service are too broad and there are too many service requirements as a whole.
- There is a sense that (almost) everything we do is important, therefore people must make a decision on what to leave behind, which isn't always in the best interest of our community or it is not in their best interest in terms of professional development.
- The goodwill of faculty as a whole is shrinking. It is more and more difficult to get people to do service activities such as weekend events.

In addition to these commonly observed perspectives, department chairs also noted one key observation, which is made possible by their leadership role:

The primary tension for department chairs is balancing the support of individual faculty (professional development, growth, leadership opportunities, etc.) with staffing departmental activities and service obligations. Faculty are all different, which makes task completion and filling all of the requirements at the departmental level a challenge. Additionally, departments (like people) are all different, which makes managing requirements across departments different and at times inequitable.

- Everyone is different – different constraints, different passions, different wants and needs as an individual and as a teacher/scholar. Supporting individual growth/expertise/passion can come at the cost of running things efficiently.
- Challenges of getting faculty to do specific things, even if there are things that must get done. So who does them? Either a reduced number of people or it doesn't get done.
- Departments have different advantages and disadvantages. Small departments still have to staff college committees with fewer faculty. Large departments have to work harder to create departmental culture and may have the same number of support staff (such as administrative assistants). Some departments have more physical needs than others (space, equipment, lab setup/breakdown time), even regardless of size.

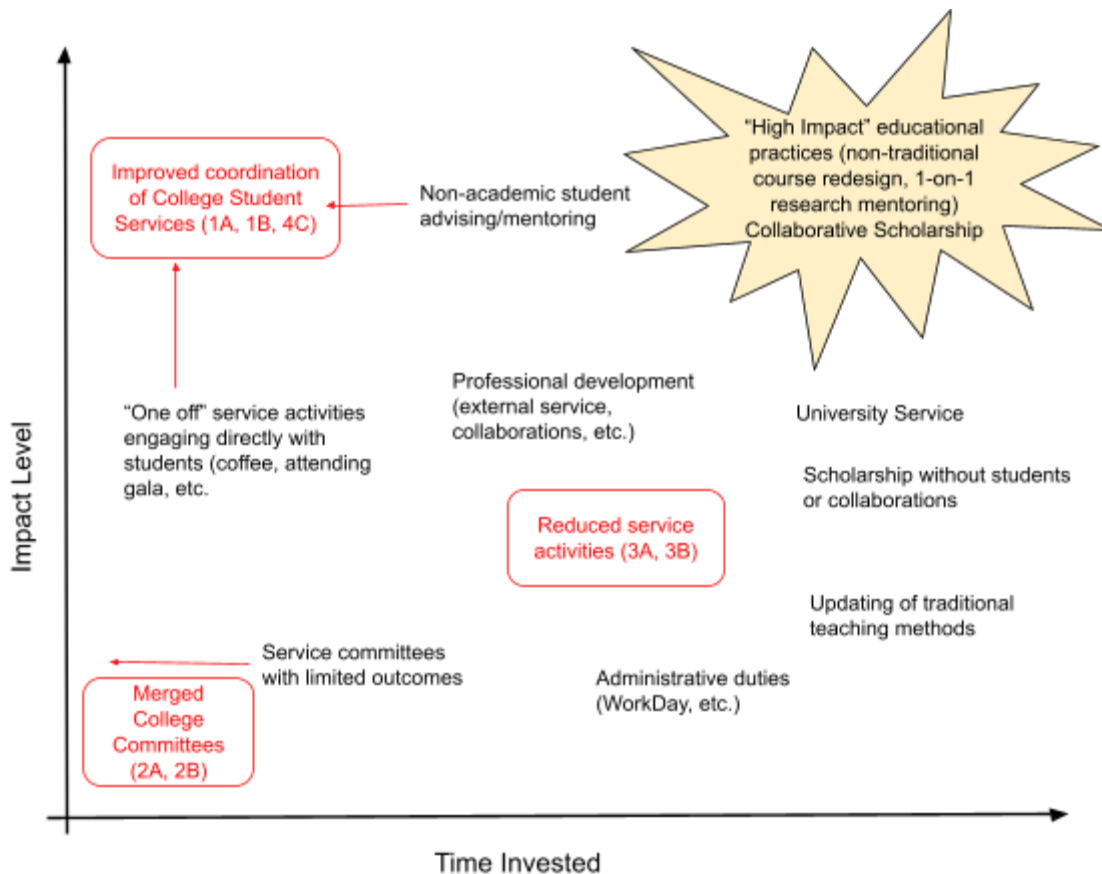
## Strategic Impact

The four goals of the strategic plan are as follows:

1. Enhance our engineering educational experience
2. Foster a diverse, inclusive, and equitable environment for all
3. Champion our distinctive identity
4. Fortify existing connections and cultivate new ones

Success in these goals requires faculty time *outside of the core requirements of the position*. Cultivating new connections requires faculty to have the bandwidth to pursue new collaborations and the consistent effort to generate enough inertia. Fostering an inclusive environment requires faculty to spend time learning inclusive strategies and reflecting on their actions. Enhancing our educational experience inherently requires faculty to go above and beyond our current educational practices.

In an effort to provide an overview of the findings of our work, we have provided the graphic below, which aims to organize some representative activities according to their impact and their time investment. This graphic is our best effort towards visualizing the big picture of our work. We believe the graphic helped us to frame our findings, discussions, and possible solutions, and could be used by the College in identifying opportunities for moving forward. The next section identifies four high-level issues and possible solutions, with some of these potential solutions shown in red on this graphic.



## Synthesized Findings and Possible Solutions

### High-Level Issue 1: Faculty's tension between personal vs. needs of the University.

Our survey results and discussions with chairs highlight the inherent difficulties between personal passions and interests (example: student mentoring vs. journal editor) and the required and desired activities at Bucknell, in the College, and in Departments. These tensions leave Chairs and the Dean's office responsible for staffing a large number of activities and events regardless of faculty interest.

- A. Reduce the number of service activities that must be populated across the College by prioritizing highly valued service activities that are student-focused or prioritize these activities in a formal manner
- B. Develop a clear acknowledgement system for faculty service activities that benefit the College community and incorporate this into the merit review process

### High level Issue 2: Functionality of current College Committee Structure

The survey results, focus groups, and college committee report review indicate that the current college committee structure functions fairly inefficiently, with few meaningful outcomes from most committees. Some commented that the committee rarely met and/or the workload was managed mostly by the committee chair(s). Possible solutions include:



- A. Merge committees into a single committee with an individual representing each of the areas represented in the current committee structure. Each individual would act as the “chair” for their area, but would still have the others to provide other perspectives.
- B. Merge Curriculum, Graduate, and International Education committees; Consider sunseting EESL, Library liaisons, and GCSP steering committee; CLC takes on work of EFC?

### **High Level Issue 3: Misalignment of values and importance between the Dean’s Office and the engineering faculty**

Many of the new initiatives and programs coming out of the Dean’s Office are not well-understood by the faculty, and there is little faculty buy-in. Many of the College-wide events do not have high attendance. There are apparent, unnecessary duplicates of efforts. College Leadership should better align the values placed by all constituents based on the data provided based on faculty survey/feedback.

- A. If the leadership agrees with something that faculty said is unimportant, sunset it.
- B. If the leadership disagrees that something faculty said is unimportant, communicate clearly with faculty and staff what the value and importance of keeping it is.
- C. Establish and communicate different levels of priorities, desired numbers, and/or time commitment for each activity or event attendance/representation that the University and College ask of faculty.

### **High Level Issue 4: Inequities and invisible service throughout the College**

While not the focus of this strategic initiative, developing the list of activities for the survey with our focus groups helped to identify the myriad of service activities that we, as a College, engage in. Many of these service activities are often informal and seem invisible, without a way to recognize the work. With this long list of service activities, it was often mentioned that some colleagues seem to do so much while others do so little. It wouldn’t seem so overwhelming if more people participated. Possible solutions include:

- A. The Dean’s Office should lead an effort to generate a list of activities that faculty are fundamentally expected to participate in, at various levels, as key elements to good citizenship of the College. These activities could be used as guidance for tenure, promotion, and merit review.
- B. Invisible labor often creeps in through an open door. Establishing some college-wide boundaries to help faculty guard their time (e.g. open door policy for <X hours/week, more coordinated efforts of ESA, Garman Guides, Academic Support Specialist, Student Success Coach, and Dean Norton such that faculty have a central place to direct students for help, clarification that faculty are not trained as personal advisors and shouldn’t feel the need or guilty into serving in a parental/personal mentor role, etc.).
- C. Solving the other three high level issues will also improve this issue.

## Implementation and Measures of Success

This report has highlighted several issues identified through a series of focus groups, interviews, report analysis, and a college-wide survey. Several potential solutions or actions have been suggested for each issue. The next step in this process is to identify which solution or action(s), including new ones not identified herein, align with the direction of the College's leadership. The implementation plan varies for each potential action. However, successful implementation would likely result in fewer service activities in the College and an improved perception of service expectations.

Because of the many pathways that implementation could take, identifying a timeline or budget is not possible at this time.

## Bonus: Observations and Considerations Beyond College's Control

There were many, repeated, reinforced, and well-articulated observations from the faculty that are worth passing onto higher administration. Faculty strongly believe that a lot of their time is unnecessarily spent on:

- Constantly changing technology choices, rules, and training: constant and frequent software changes (student hiring platform, for example).
- The over-detailed rules regarding Expense Report and how obsolete we are in not adopting a per diem meals model.
- Working on each individual customized accommodation case; Lack of infrastructure and help in administering exam extensions.
- Debating of the DRC/URC requirements for tenure and promotion, and their flexibility or lack thereof.