

# What is the Employee Value Proposition for contingent/VITAL faculty?

The TIAA Institute has been building an important body of work to understand how best to recruit, retain and engage professional staff at colleges and universities and, to a lesser extent, faculty too. Such efforts have become more challenging in recent years, particularly post-Covid-19 as employees began reconsidering their priorities and, in some cases, became more likely to leave higher education. Based on qualitative and quantitative research, the TIAA Institute discovered what employees value most and developed an Employee Value Proposition (EVP) framework to help campus leaders better understand how to position their institution as an employer of choice.

The EVP for higher education has five components:<sup>1</sup>

**Total compensation:** salary plus the many additional benefits that campuses offer (e.g., tuition remission)

**Work-life balance:** ability to work remotely and have flexible work schedules

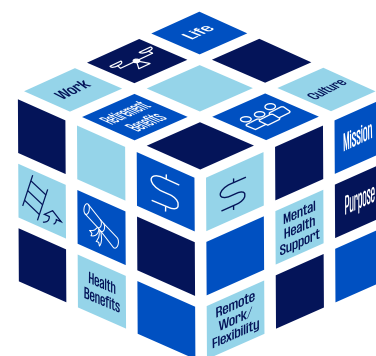
**Professional development and learning:** opportunities for promotion, to take on new work responsibilities and to access ongoing engagement with professional development

**Mission and purpose:** ability to contribute to student learning, new research and community engagement—and to connect with the campus mission

**Community and culture:** a collegial campus atmosphere, a sense of belonging and a respectful and positive work environment

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<sup>1</sup> For a full EVP overview, see [“Why would someone want to work for my university: An EVP for higher education”](#) (TIAA Institute, 2023).

This brief considers extending the Institute’s EVP for professional staff in higher education to contingent or non-tenure-track faculty. We use the asset-based term VITAL faculty, which stands for visitors, instructors, teaching assistants, adjuncts, and lecturers—and captures the role these faculty members fill in higher education. VITAL faculty aren’t on the tenure track and have minimal job security, but they represent 70% of all faculty in higher education today. Across the nation, 52% of VITAL faculty are in part-time contingent positions, with an additional 18% in full-time positions (NCES, 2023). VITAL faculty face unique employment conditions, so their EVP looks somewhat different than that of professional staff (and tenure-track faculty), who enjoy greater job security, benefits and pay. The five EVP components are certainly important to these populations, but leaders must understand some important nuances if they are to attract, retain and engage VITAL faculty.

VITAL faculty are a diverse group, so understanding their EVP requires knowledge of their differing motivations. Part-time faculty (often called adjuncts) are most commonly thought of as freelancers—people who teach a course occasionally and don’t rely on the university for their primary salary. For these faculty members, total compensation will not be as meaningful. Similarly, some VITAL faculty work part-time and have other careers, for example, as artists, journalists, and community health workers. These positions provide income outside of teaching, so their total compensation may be less important to them than serving a greater mission; perhaps they want to give back and help the next generation. Additionally, many VITAL faculty have other responsibilities as parents, as caretakers for older relatives, and as students themselves, such that work-life balance may be very important. However, aspiring academics—i.e., those who want a full-time tenure-track position—make up the largest group of VITAL faculty (Gappa & Leslie, 1993; Kezar, 2012). For them, total compensation is absolutely crucial for recruitment and retention.

### Is there a problem recruiting VITAL faculty?

Compared to tenure-track faculty, who often obtain attractive offers from other colleges, the market for VITAL faculty is more variable. For campuses in rural or suburban areas, there may be much more competition for VITAL faculty and so recruitment can be challenging as there are fewer potential faculty in their area; these campuses should be more intentional about communicating their EVP to prospective VITAL faculty. Campuses in urban areas often have less difficulty recruiting and retaining VITAL faculty since potential instructors are more plentiful in number. In any case, if colleges want to compete for the most talented

VITAL faculty, then it’s important for leaders to articulate their EVP.

To compete for the most talented VITAL faculty, it’s important that leaders articulate their EVP.



### Why is engaging VITAL faculty important?

All campus leaders should be concerned about engaging VITAL faculty. Decades of studies (Kezar et al., 2019) demonstrate that if VITAL faculty aren’t well supported and offered opportunities for engagement, then the teaching and learning environments are poor, and campus outcomes—including student success—suffer. When VITAL faculty feel their institution values them and tries to create a positive work environment, they’re more likely to update curriculum, assess student outcomes, and create rich learning environments for their students.

One key way to engage VITAL faculty and help them succeed is to provide professional development opportunities and pathways for promotion. Some campuses may already be taking these steps but fail to communicate these positive factors to VITAL faculty. In any case, even if a campus doesn’t struggle to recruit and retain VITAL faculty, leaders should be concerned about whether they’ve created a positive, supportive and engaging work environment.

### What makes VITAL faculty think about or decide to leave their institution or higher ed more broadly?

Research suggests that VITAL faculty often leave academia based on low wages (averaging \$24,000 per year) and lack of job security (Kezar, 2016). Other driving factors include a toxic work environment and a lack of respect from colleagues. Alignment with mission contributes primarily to long-term retention of VITAL faculty. Other key retention motivators are work-life balance, access to professional development, and the ability to engage with interesting and inspiring ideas (through campus talks, colleagues, etc.). In terms of overall retention, however, higher education leaders need to think most about total compensation, and community and culture.



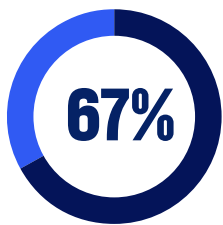
#### Why VITAL faculty leave:

- Low wages
- Lack of job security

## What EVP variations among VITAL faculty should leaders consider?

### Total compensation

For many VITAL faculty, total compensation is a primary concern. Average salary for part-time VITAL faculty is about \$3,000 per course; it's very difficult to teach more than eight courses a year (four each semester for total annual earnings of \$24,000) and maintain teaching quality. Thus, many VITAL faculty live below the poverty line. Because their academic role is the primary source of income for the majority of VITAL faculty, boosting total compensation improves recruitment and retention. A university ignores their compensation at its peril. In fact, two-thirds of VITAL faculty (67%) say they've thought about leaving academia in the last two years (American Federation of Teachers, 2023) due to a lack of both economic security and respect.



Two-thirds of VITAL faculty considered leaving academia in the last two years.

Many VITAL faculty are also ineligible for benefits (healthcare and retirement being the most important), so making benefits available can improve a university's EVP and help build its VITAL faculty workforce. If that's not financially possible, just helping VITAL faculty join a pool where they can purchase benefits for less can make an EVP more appealing. Many academics are under the impression that benefits tend to be the same everywhere, so an institution can shine by clearly showing how specific institutional benefits—for example, benefit pools and tuition remission—distinguish it from other campuses.

### Professional development and learning

Opportunities for professional development and advancement are highly prized by VITAL faculty, perhaps even more so than for tenure-track faculty (Culver & Kezar, 2021). On most campuses, however, such opportunities are rare. Research shows that recent changes to provide VITAL faculty with professional development and paths to promotion have been well received (Culver & Kezar, 2021). Campuses should do more in this area and promote these opportunities, which could improve morale and motivate VITAL faculty to stay and engage.

Additionally, VITAL faculty are motivated to remain in academia thanks to campus vibrancy and opportunities to engage intellectually—for example, through speakers,

events, and conversations with students, staff, and other faculty. VITAL faculty may find more value in these learning opportunities, because they generally have weaker connections to their disciplinary societies, which focus primarily on research. Thus, VITAL faculty often look to their campuses for intellectual fulfillment; this presents an opportunity for institutions to promote positive campus learning environments for VITAL faculty.

### Community and culture

While community, collegiality, and a positive culture are important to VITAL faculty, they find this almost exclusively at the department level. Campuses often create policies and supports for faculty at an institutional level, or within a specialized area such as a Center for Teaching and Learning. However, VITAL faculty are generally hired and engaged only at the departmental level, so leaders need to consider how to improve departmental community, collegiality and culture. This can be challenging as campuses tend to be decentralized, and leaders generally focus on community at the overall level in the hope that local departmental communities will follow. But departmental subcultures often vary from the institutional culture, and some departments are supportive of VITAL faculty while others exclude or ignore them.

Although VITAL faculty members are diverse, nearly all value community and culture. It's critical that campus leaders conduct surveys to understand various environments at the departmental level. For one such assessment tool, see [Departmental Cultures and Non-Tenure-Track Faculty: A Self-Assessment Tool for Departments](#) (USC Pullias Center for Higher Education, 2015). VITAL faculty often report disrespect and lack of collegiality among fellow faculty (Kezar, 2012). Yet at the same time, this is one of the areas they value most. Thus, ensuring positive departmental community and culture goes a long way in retaining VITAL faculty and engaging them in ways that support teaching and learning. Note too that VITAL faculty also report feeling a strong affiliation to their discipline and field, and find great value in being part of a disciplinary community where they can engage and share ideas.

#### VITAL faculty value

- Professional development and learning
- Intellectual fulfillment
- Positive community & culture



EVP Element	Considerations specific to VITAL faculty
<b>1. Total compensation</b>	Many part-time VITAL faculty teaching full course loads live below the poverty level. Average salary per course is \$3K; 4 courses/semester x 2 = \$24K annual pay. Improving salary can dramatically improve an EVP for VITAL faculty. Benefits could be improved with creative approaches, such as offering participation in multi-institution benefit pools to lower costs.
<b>2. Professional development and learning</b>	VITAL faculty appreciate professional development opportunities and promotion paths. Invite them to attend guest speaker events and colloquia, for example, and include them in opportunities to engage in conversations with students, staff and other faculty, from which they're often excluded.
<b>3. Community and culture</b>	Although a diverse group, most VITAL faculty highly value community and culture where they teach—but they often report feeling disrespected. Culture for VITAL faculty is most often determined at the departmental level. To understand, improve, and then leverage a positive community and culture, a <a href="#">self-assessment tool</a> for departments is recommended.

## What remains the same for VITAL faculty as for tenure track faculty and professional staff?

Mission is a strong EVP factor for VITAL faculty. In fact, many VITAL faculty endure poverty wages, lack of work-life balance, and poor community—all because they're so dedicated to the mission and to working with students. But while mission alignment is perhaps the main benefit and value for VITAL faculty, it's critically important to balance the five EVP elements. Too many campuses today rely on the value of mission to the detriment of compensation—that is, salary and benefits—and creating a positive work environment.

Work-life balance is equally important to tenure-track faculty and staff as it is to some VITAL faculty. Like tenure-track faculty, VITAL faculty's priorities often vary based on their life situations. However, we're seeing that the new generation of faculty, in general, values the work-life balance that academic jobs can sometimes offer due to flexibility and autonomy. Indeed, VITAL faculty often mention the ability to create their own work schedule as appealing.



VITAL faculty appreciate creating their own work schedule.

## Other considerations for an EVP for VITAL faculty

### Job security

VITAL faculty experience precarious levels of job security, sometimes more perceived than real. In fact, increasingly, VITAL faculty remain on campus for decades, making it a career. Campuses could do a better job tracking the length of

employment of VITAL faculty and promoting the data about how long-term many appointments actually are. Additionally, campuses can make changes and move to multi-year contracts—with increasing lengths of three-, five-, and seven-year contracts that provide greater peace of mind for VITAL faculty yet still allow institutional flexibility.

### Autonomy

VITAL faculty highly prize autonomy, a key factor that attracts them to academia. Exploring ways to ensure that a campus maintains this autonomy can help VITAL faculty continue to enjoy their roles. For example, some campuses mandate that VITAL faculty use predeveloped syllabi, which clearly limits autonomy and, importantly, faculty's ability to bring their expertise to their work. Being aware of policies that may hamper autonomy is important to maintain this critical aspect of an EVP for VITAL faculty.

### Leadership

VITAL faculty enjoy filling leadership roles as part of contributing to the campus mission. While tenure-track faculty welcome leadership opportunities, VITAL faculty may value them more and want to share their expertise—but they're often not provided the opportunity to do so, or are even prohibited from holding leadership positions. Creating visible paths to leadership for contingent faculty can increase an EVP for VITAL faculty.

Increase EVP for VITAL faculty by creating visible paths to leadership.



## In sum

The TIAA Institute's EVP for higher education professional staff can readily be extended to VITAL faculty and, likewise, help guide efforts to recruit, retain, and support this important group of faculty. The fine-tuning suggested here, reflecting considerations specific to VITAL faculty, will enhance the EVP for campuses working to build and nurture their VITAL faculty workforce. In addition to the five elements in the broader EVP framework, important

considerations around job security, autonomy and leadership opportunities should be considered as well.

Finally, given the current overreliance on mission to attract and retain VITAL faculty, universities benefit when they achieve a more optimal balance of the EVP elements discussed here. Doing so helps them make progress over time to attract, support and retain VITAL faculty, and help VITAL faculty be most effective and thrive in their work.

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- For additional detailed resources, please see the Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success: <https://pullias.usc.edu/project/the-delphi-project-on-the-changing-faculty-and-student-success/>

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