

Research brief



Resilient institutions and shared governance:

Results from a national survey of faculty and senior administrators



About this study

As this research brief summarizes, the challenges facing higher education today have been long in the making. Yet in many respects, key stakeholders within our colleges and universities are often still trying to come to grips with the root causes of the issues facing so many of our institutions, large and small — and for some, quite reasonably, it is not yet clear how best to respond to the many challenges of the present moment. This national survey, undertaken by Huron in collaboration with the American Council on Education and The Chronicle of Higher Education, makes a unique contribution to understanding the current state of shared governance in higher education and its role in fostering institutional resilience and opening new opportunities in these challenging times.

The data summarized below provide helpful lessons for faculty and senior administrators to draw upon as they look to collaborate more effectively in making sound decisions to advance their institutions' futures and missions to deliver meaningful outcomes for their students and their communities. We particularly hope faculty and administrator readers of this research brief will reflect on their readiness to collaborate in effective decision-making efforts to support a sustainable future for their institutions and to the benefit of all their diverse stakeholders.

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Colleges and universities are complex organizations with many diverse stakeholders. Even under the ideal conditions, leading a college is hard. Anyone initiated with the sector, and even many who aren't, understand that today's conditions are far from ideal. These challenging times invite us to reflect upon the 1966 Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities, to which the American Council on Education was a signatory. This statement highlights the foundational role that shared governance can play in the success of a college or university. It places a "special obligation to innovate and initiate" on presidents and goes on to observe that they should be evaluated, in part, on their abilities to "envision new horizons for their institutions," and engage all in working towards those visions.

The work of leading a college or university doesn't fall solely on the shoulders of its president. Indeed, this belief is at the core of shared governance. This national survey, a collaboration between Huron, the American Council on Education, and The Chronicle of Higher Education, reports that among other constituents, presidents can find willing partners among the ranks of their institutions' faculties. This is especially true in matters of student success, educational mission, vision, and advancing the values of their institutions. Not surprisingly, this survey also observes specific points of tension or misalignment between faculty and university senior administrators. Insights from this report can be helpful for stakeholders, including presidents and faculty, seeking to ensure the success of their institutions and their students.

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The importance of faculty and administrator collaboration

In the next few years, more colleges and universities than ever before will face challenges that threaten their core missions or even their very existence. While the vast majority will survive, many will be significantly weakened, toiling in the shadows of stronger, well-resourced institutions that will be better positioned to attract students from the shrinking pool of high school graduates interested in pursuing a college degree.

While public flagships and mid-to-large-sized private institutions with strong brands and healthy endowments are likely to continue to thrive, a portion of regional public universities and smaller, tuition-dependent private institutions will likely struggle — with some facing the prospect of closure or being swallowed up by other institutions in whole or in part.

Successfully managing this challenging moment that higher education finds itself in isn't simply a matter of having a strong brand or sufficient financial resources. A healthy organizational culture with well-defined roles in decision making, strong collaboration, and clear communication among stakeholders is just as important. Effective governance practices will be a crucial factor in determining which institutions will thrive.

It takes effective collaboration between faculty and senior administrators to ensure a sustainable future in challenging times.

When that is absent, external threats can be compounded, challenging even those institutions that are on stable financial footing. When strong collaboration practices are present, even institutions facing financial hardship can marshal their resources in effective ways to reinvent themselves and set a course for sustainability.

Shared governance is the mechanism through which that collaboration is conducted. The question today is whether that mechanism is working well enough for all parties, and whether the participants in the process are engaging with one another in a manner that builds trust and mutual understanding and supports appropriate levels of shared decision making.

The survey data summarized below suggest that the faculty and administrators who successfully face this challenging moment together will be aided by focusing on their shared interests, particularly with respect to serving their educational missions, fostering student success, and producing high-impact research and scholarship.



The historical context

Long in the making, the painful realignment of institutional capacity with student demand is a consequence of many factors, including the demographic fallout of the 2008 recession; a long-term decline in state funding; the rising cost of college tuition; and the ballooning debt carried by students upon graduation, which currently totals more than \$1.6 trillion.¹ These pressures are further amplified by the public's increasingly negative perception of higher education, coupled with the post-pandemic emergence of good-paying jobs that don't require a college degree.

After more than six decades of growing demand for higher education and institutional expansion, academic leaders now find themselves in a very different economic, demographic, and cultural environment that they must learn to navigate in new ways.

Following decades of consistent growth from 1950 to 2010, total enrollment declined by 10% by 2020.

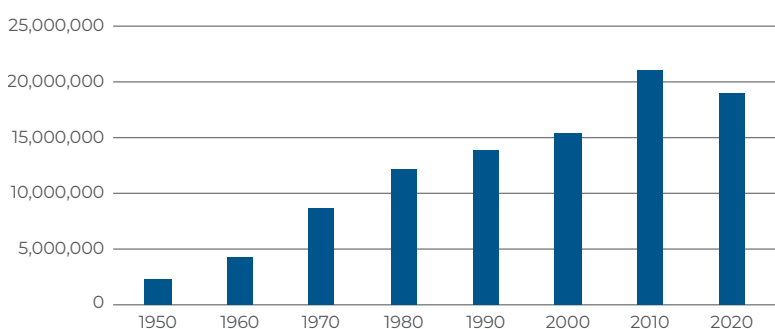
Demographic forecasts suggest that over the next decade, a shrinking pool of high school graduates and lower rates of college participation will lead to a further drop of 10% or more. And, depending on the region of the country and the selectivity of the institution, many colleges and universities may see even greater declines.²

In the context of these challenges, the sometimes-difficult collaboration between faculty and senior administrators — each with their own distinct roles and responsibilities — can be further exacerbated as disagreements deepen about how best to steward their institutions' limited resources to ensure sustainability and pursue new opportunities. These foundational and sometimes existential questions can manifest in disagreements about activities as diverse as position-taking and activism, social justice and DEI initiatives, post-affirmative action recruiting strategies, and debates about the utility of the Kalven Report, among many other topics. As these stresses mount, trust between faculty and administrators can erode, complicating discussions around shared governance and academic freedom alike. At their worst, these pressures may prompt each group to treat the other as a caricature — the corporatized administrator, the nostalgic faculty — which does little to foster greater trust between constituent groups or to advance solutions that ensure a stronger future for the institution.

Needless to say, these are not fair characterizations. Undoubtedly, most faculty and administrators want to see their institutions thrive and would welcome an authentic opportunity to collaborate in doing so. But the tensions between these groups are often real and significant, and research suggests that they want different things from one another when it comes to defining authentic opportunities to collaborate.

Total higher education fall enrollment by decade

Source: U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics



About the survey

1,021 faculty

504 senior administrators

Four-year, non-profit institutions: 53% public, 47% private

Recognizing the growing array of challenges and opportunities that higher education leaders are faced with, this survey — conducted in early 2024 — was designed to measure and report on faculty and senior administrators' current perspectives, including the extent to which their opinions and outlooks are aligned or divergent.

For more information, see survey sample details at the end of this brief.

¹ [Federal Student Aid Posts New Quarterly Reports to FSA Data Center | Knowledge Center](#)

² [Colleges Were Already Bracing for an 'Enrollment Cliff.' Now There Might Be a Second One. \(chronicle.com\)](#)

Insights from a national survey of faculty and senior administrators:

What faculty and administrators want from one another

In Huron's recent survey exploring the roles of faculty and senior administrators in leading their institutions through challenging times — conducted in partnership with the American Council on Education and The Chronicle of Higher Education — faculty reported that what they want most from administrators is “clear communication” and “budget transparency,” whereas what administrators want most from faculty is a “willingness to embrace change.” These are laudable aspirations but expressing them is not sufficient to realize them — as the results summarized further below indicate, it is also important that each group be ready to work with the other to achieve these aspirations.

Neither group is a monolith. Faculty and administrators' survey responses express positions that are both divergent and convergent within their constituent group, as well as with one another. Notably, faculty and senior administrators are united in their level of concern about the impact of certain external pressures impacting their institutions' futures. Rising costs are the number one issue from among the choices provided to both groups, with 63% of faculty and 75% of administrators reporting that they are either very or extremely concerned about this. Sixty-three percent of both faculty and administrators are very or extremely concerned about the negative public perception of higher education, and one-in-two faculty and administrators are highly concerned about increased political conflict at the state or federal level — as well as declining enrollment. Perhaps understandably given their role, declining net tuition revenue is a high concern for 59% of administrators, while 47% of faculty are very or extremely concerned about this issue.

In many respects, the survey results reflect the fact that academic leaders are facing a growing range of external challenges that in turn result in new challenges for institutional governance, or in the words of one respondent, “an appreciation and understanding of the fragility of the state of higher education.”

External pressures of high concern to faculty and administrators

Rising costs

63% of faculty
75% of administrators

Negative public perception of higher education

63% of faculty
63% of administrators

Political conflict at the state or federal level

56% of faculty
53% of administrators

Declining enrollment

48% of faculty
52% of administrators

Declining net tuition revenue

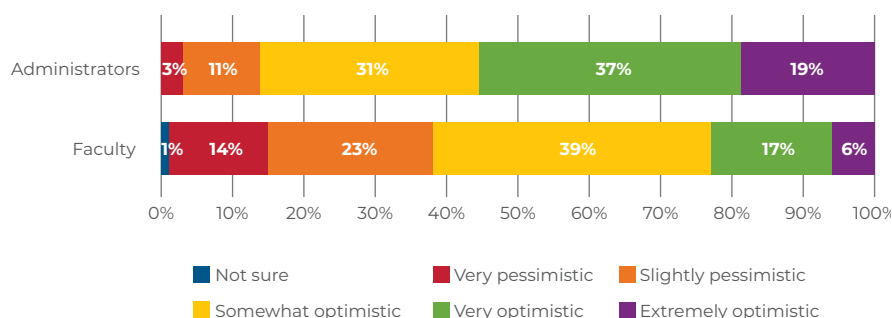
47% of faculty
59% of administrators

An optimism gap

Notwithstanding those areas of alignment, faculty and administrators expressed starkly different levels of optimism about the future of their institutions, with only 23% of faculty very or extremely optimistic — compared to 56% of administrators. Indeed, 37% of faculty are either slightly or very pessimistic about the future, compared to only 14% of administrators.

When there is such fundamental disagreement between these groups about the prospects of their institutions, it is difficult to imagine that they will find it easy to identify common ground on a wide range of issues and concerns that may significantly impact those institutions' future directions.

How optimistic are you about the future of your institution?

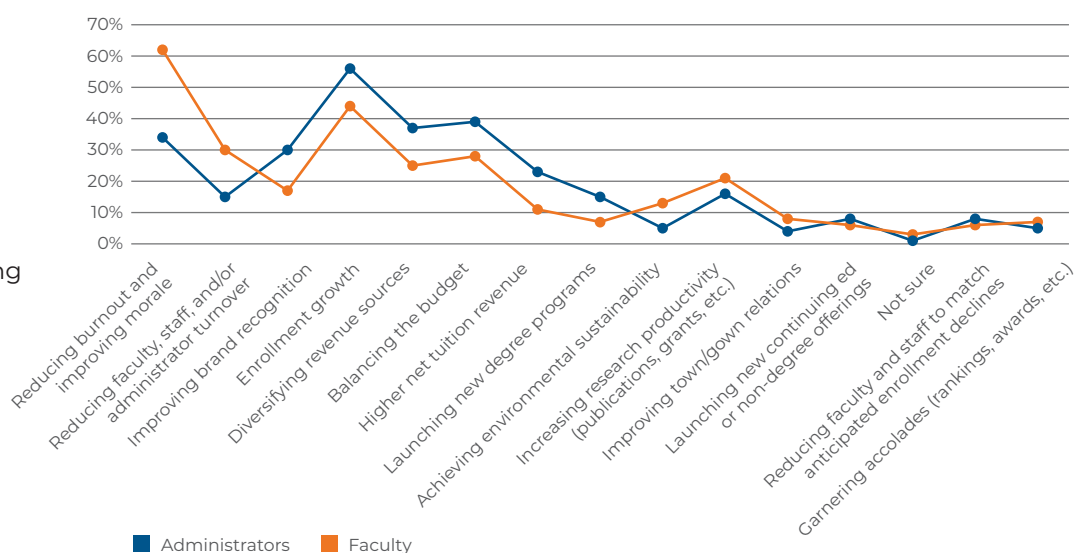


Further divergence of opinion on institutional priorities

These data also suggest a divergence of opinion on institutional priorities. When indicating their top-three urgent issues to be addressed at their institutions, faculty and administrators expressed a shared appreciation for action in certain areas (e.g., enrollment and finances), but they disagree in others (with faculty and staff retention as a top-three concern for the faculty and student wellbeing as a top-three concern for administrators).

These differences are further amplified when respondents are asked to consider which actions are most critical to defining future success at their institutions: the top response for faculty, selected by 62%, was “reducing burnout and improving morale,” followed by “enrollment” (44%), and “reducing turnover” (30%). By contrast, the top response for administrators, selected by 56% of them, was “enrollment,” followed by “balancing the budget” (39%) and “diversifying revenue sources” (37%).

Top 3 goals in terms of defining success for your institution over the next 5-10 years



It isn't entirely surprising to see faculty concern themselves with faculty issues such as burnout, morale, turnover, and retention, or to see that administrators concern themselves with business issues such as enrollment, brand, budgets, and revenue diversification. Nor is it surprising to find that the least frequently selected priority for faculty was "reducing faculty and staff to match anticipated enrollment declines" (6%). But these differing perspectives can complicate efforts to establish and maintain common ground and shared interests — particularly when times get tough.

Varying views on the effectiveness of current approaches to governance

When two parties involved in decision making hold opposing perspectives, resolving those differences can be challenging. This underscores the rationale for and importance of shared governance in higher education as a means of decision making. But when these two groups express divergent priorities for their institution, and differences prove difficult to resolve, the institution faces risks with respect to effective decision making, and the introduction of risk in challenging circumstances can prove especially difficult for more vulnerable institutions.

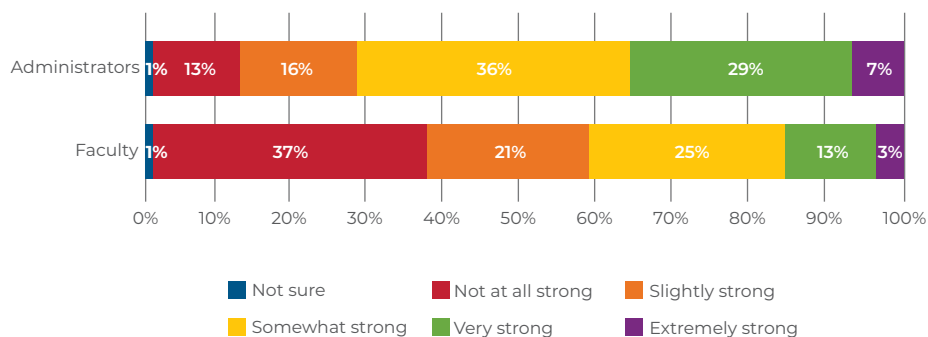
When asked to characterize the state of shared governance at their institutions, only 16% of faculty responded that it is very or extremely strong — and 37% of all faculty chose the most negative response, "not at all strong." Among administrators, 36% characterized the state of shared governance as very or extremely strong and only 13% said that it was "not at all strong."

For the purposes of this survey, "shared governance" was defined as referring to two complementary and sometimes overlapping concepts: "giving various groups of people a share in key decision-making processes, often through elected representation; and allowing certain groups to exercise primary responsibility for specific areas of decision making."

It is not easy to precisely identify what contributes most to the challenging state of governance in higher education. Faculty report that the least effective aspects of governance at their institutions are "transparency and shared decision making" (71%), "resource allocation determination" (70%), and "faculty involvement in setting strategy" (54%).



How would you characterize the state of shared governance at your institution?



Administrators' responses on the least effective aspects of governance are "resource allocation determination" (57%), "transparency in shared decision making" (43%), and "mechanisms for conflict resolution" (35%). There are interesting parallels here, but one may wonder whether these are signals of agreement or symptoms of two distinct groups with nearly equivalent degrees of frustration with one another around the same issues.

Perhaps not surprisingly, senior administrators often reported that they wish faculty were better versed in financial realities and business matters — while faculty often emphasized their lack of inclusion or engagement in decision making. Indeed, whereas administrator responses indicate that what they believe faculty don't understand about effective governance includes "resource allocation determination" (63%), "academic and administrative collaboration" (58%), and "alignment to long-term strategic planning" (45%), faculty believe that administrators don't understand the importance of "transparency in shared decision making" (79%), "academic and administrative collaboration" (69%), and "faculty involvement" (66%).

One might be inclined to believe that these two constituencies are in so-called "heated agreement." But the more likely takeaway is that they disagree with how the other party defines transparency or collaboration, and it would also seem likely that they disagree about the effectiveness of at least some resource allocation decisions themselves. This is a critical issue, as there seems to be a difference in how each party views the behavior of the other relative to matters of communication, collaboration, and participation in decision making.

Whatever the nuances of these different views, the alignment between faculty and senior administrators comes into sharper focus when a perceived threat to institutional stability comes from outside the institution. To underscore that point, it is worth noting that a plurality of both faculty and administrators share concern about the proposed efforts in some states or at some institutions to limit the role of faculty in shared governance at public colleges and universities in 2024 and in the future. Indeed, 56% of faculty and 42% of administrators are pessimistic about this outlook, and nearly half of both groups were just "somewhat optimistic" or not sure.



56% of faculty and 42% of administrators

have a pessimistic outlook regarding their state legislature's support and enablement of shared governance.

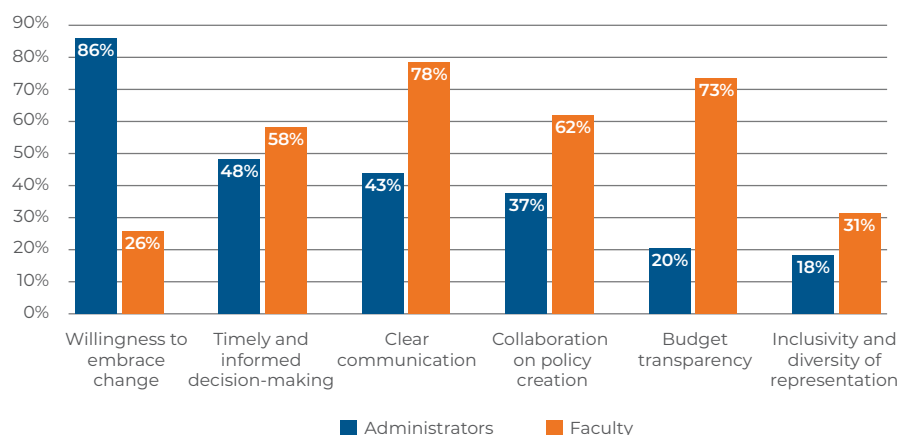
Strengthening transparency and trust are critical to future success

These survey data suggest that the resiliency of colleges and universities requires more transparent collaboration and greater trust between faculty and administrators — not to diminish the importance of achieving the same with board of directors, legislatures, and other stakeholders, of course. Unfortunately, it is difficult to imagine how faculty and administrators can improve trust and transparency in an environment where they appear to use the same words but with different meanings implied.

As noted earlier, what faculty want most from administrators is “clear communication” and “budget transparency,” whereas what administrators want most from faculty is a “willingness to embrace change.”

Mirroring the stark differences in optimism expressed earlier about the future of their institutions, an added challenge is overcoming the pessimism and very different outlooks between faculty and administrators with respect to the potential to improve trust between them at their institution. Nearly half (49%) of faculty said that they are pessimistic about the prospect of improving trust with administrators, compared to only 19% of administrators saying the same about relations with faculty.

What administrators want from faculty, and faculty want from administrators in service of more effective governance



Given this, the survey sought to identify what faculty could do to strengthen trust with administrators and what administrators could do to strengthen trust with faculty. Both parties cited “faculty involvement” and “academic and administrative collaboration” as among the top priority actions. In addition, faculty again emphasized “transparency in shared decision-making,” as well as an emphasis on playing a role in “resource allocation determination.” Whether faculty and administrators expect the same thing when it comes to faculty involvement is a question institutions should explore further themselves.

Strengthening trust: Top priorities among faculty and administrators

Faculty: What administrators can do	Administrators: What faculty can do
1. Transparency in shared decision-making (84%)	1. Academic and administrative collaboration (72%)
2. Faculty involvement (73%)	2. Faculty involvement (49%)
3. Academic and administrative collaboration (70%)	3. Alignment to long-term strategic planning (44%)
4. Resource allocation determination (54%)	4. Transparency in shared decision-making (29%)
5. Alignment to long-term strategic planning (31%)	5. Conflict mediation (21%)
6. Ethics and compliance (24%)	6. Resource allocation determination (19%)
7. Conflict mediation (21%)	7. Ethics and compliance (13%)

These responses underscore the theme of transparency and inclusion in decision-making, which was prominent among faculty respondents in the survey. In the view of many faculty, it is important for senior administrators to re-establish trust through true inclusion and consultation with faculty, rather than just an “illusion” of shared governance. As one survey respondent shared, trust can be improved by making sure that shared governance is “more than lip service.”

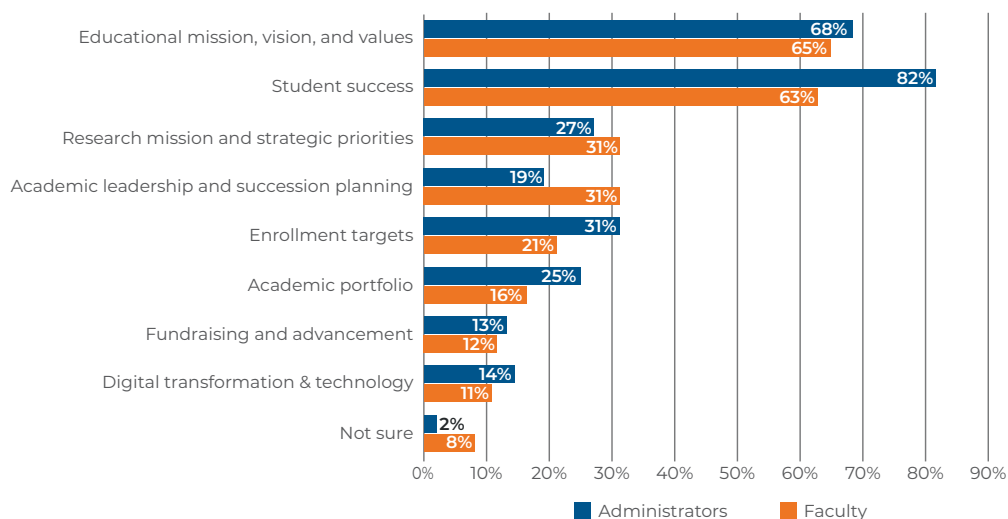
Finding common ground in the educational mission and student success

Faculty and administrators are aligned on the importance of “student success” and “educational mission, vision, and value” as priority areas to establish common ground and shared interest to safeguard their institution’s future. This category rose to the top for both groups when asked to select their top three choices; interestingly, administrators were much more likely to choose “student success.”

It is also encouraging that both administrators and faculty report high levels of readiness to work with the other party to ensure a resilient future for their institutions. This was particularly true on the administrator side: 90% said that they were either extremely or very ready to work with faculty, along with 63% of faculty reporting the same. Of course, that still leaves a meaningful share of faculty who do not share that sentiment, and this certainly warrants attention from both groups.

Faculty and administrator relations are, arguably, being tested today in a way that they haven’t been for decades – whether because of different views on academic freedom, such as position-taking by academic departments on complex international issues and conflicts, or the growing trend toward unionization among diverse types of faculty, student employees, and athletes, or the difficult decisions in the domain of shared governance, such as choices to be made about which academic programs to maintain or grow, and which to reimagine or sunset.

Areas of greatest opportunity to establish common ground and shared interest (top 3 choices)



90% of senior administrators and 63% of faculty say that they are very or extremely ready to work together to ensure a resilient future for their institution.

The path to institutional resilience

The data summarized here certainly suggest that faculty and senior administrators are not always in harmony when it comes to the critical decisions facing their institutions. But the data also suggest that there are areas of common ground and shared interest between them — and there is broad interest in authentic collaboration across both groups. Foremost among these areas of alignment is a shared belief that common ground can be established around issues related to the educational mission and student success.

Institutions with healthier cultures seem to have already accomplished this work but given the increasing pressures facing so many other institutions — whether financial, political, cultural, or other — achieving this alignment will prove very challenging for some. Indeed, these challenges may be further exacerbated by the emerging set of state-wide policy efforts referenced earlier, further complicating the sometimes-difficult collaborations already being navigated by faculty and administrators.

Whatever the level of difficulty, the results of this survey suggest that making the effort to collaborate more effectively will be critical for all parties. Few institutions will thrive in the coming years if their faculty and administrators aren't able to strengthen mutual trust and achieve authentic, meaningful engagement in the difficult work of creating a sustainable future for their students and other stakeholders. Survey participants' responses underscore that accomplishing this will require more thoughtful and engaged communication within and between these groups, as well as a renewed commitment to their respective responsibilities in fostering effective shared governance.

The simple truth is that the moment demands it. As one faculty respondent put it, now is the time for “productive conversations about change.”



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About the survey

Survey responses were fielded between January 16 – February 5, 2024, through The Chronicle of Higher Education's national database of administrators and faculty, yielding a sample of 504 senior administrator respondents and 1,021 faculty.

The tables below present descriptive statistics on the survey sample.

Institution type

	Faculty %	Administrators %
4-year, private not-for-profit	35%	45%
4-year, public	57%	45%
4-year, religiously affiliated private, not-for-profit	8%	10%

Institution size (by enrollment)

	Faculty %	Administrators %
Less than 5,000	30%	46%
5,000-14,999	29%	23%
15,000-29,999	18%	16%
30,000 or more	23%	15%
Not sure	1%	0%

Region

	Faculty %	Administrators %
Northeast (ME, MA, RI, CT, NJ, MD, DE, DC, PA, NY, VT, NH)	26%	26%
South (WV, VA, NC, SC, GA, FL, AL, MS, LA, TX, OK, AR, TN, KY)	28%	32%
Midwest (MN, WI, MU, OH, IN, IL, MO, IA, NE, KS, MI, SD)	24%	24%
West (AK, HI, WA, MT, ND, SD, WY, CO, NM, AZ, UT, ID, NV, IR, CA, OR)	21%	17%
U.S. territories (PR, Guam, American Samoa)	0%	0%

Administrator type

		Administrators %
Which of the following categories best describes your primary administrative appointment?	President	12%
	Provost	6%
	Chief Business Officer (CBO)	4%
	Chief Operating Officer (COO)	2%
	Chief Human Resource Operations (CHRO)	3%
	Senior Vice President/Vice President	24%
	Dean	9%
	Assistant or Associate Vice President	15%
	Assistant or Associate Vice Provost	4%
	Director	18%
	Other (please specify):	5%

Faculty type

		Faculty %
Which of the following best describes your faculty employment status?	Full-time	95%
	Part-time	5%

		Faculty %
Which of the following best describes your faculty type?	Tenured	76%
	Tenure-track	7%
	Non-tenure track	16%

Faculty type

		Faculty %
Which of the following best describes the academic discipline of your primary faculty appointment?	Humanities	22%
	Social Sciences	28%
	Physical Sciences	11%
	Mathematics	3%
	Computer Science	2%
	Arts	5%
	Engineering	4%
	Law	1%
	Business	7%
	Religious Studies	1%
	Other (please specify):	17%



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