2017 COACHE Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey Analysis:
## STEP PLUS SYSTEM Custom Questions

The 2017 UC Davis COACHE Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey queried faculty about their perceptions of the Step Plus System. The Step Plus adjustments to the merit and promotion system were introduced in 2014 at UC Davis, so the 2017 survey presented an opportunity to gather faculty feedback about the implementation of the policy and its impact in their departments. This report presents an analysis of faculty responses to those survey items. [1]

FACULTY PERCEPTIONS OF STEP PLUS SYSTEM IMPLEMENTATION:

To assess faculty perceptions about how the Step Plus program is implemented in their department, faculty were asked to report their level of agreement with the following statements:

- *Under the Step Plus system, faculty members in my department have a clear understanding of what is required for a 1.0, 1.5, 2.0, etc. step increase.*
- *Faculty members in my department are able to apply the standards consistently when reviewing candidates for advancement under the Step Plus system.*

Among all survey respondents, a greater proportion report disagreeing rather than agreeing with both of these statements. Forty-five percent of faculty disagree somewhat or strongly (Figure 1a), compared to 36% who report they agree somewhat or strongly, with the idea that their colleagues have a clear understanding of the requirements for step plus advancements.

Figure 1a: "Faculty members in my dept have a clear understanding of what is required for a 1.0, 1.5, 2.0, etc. step increase," overall and by academic rank
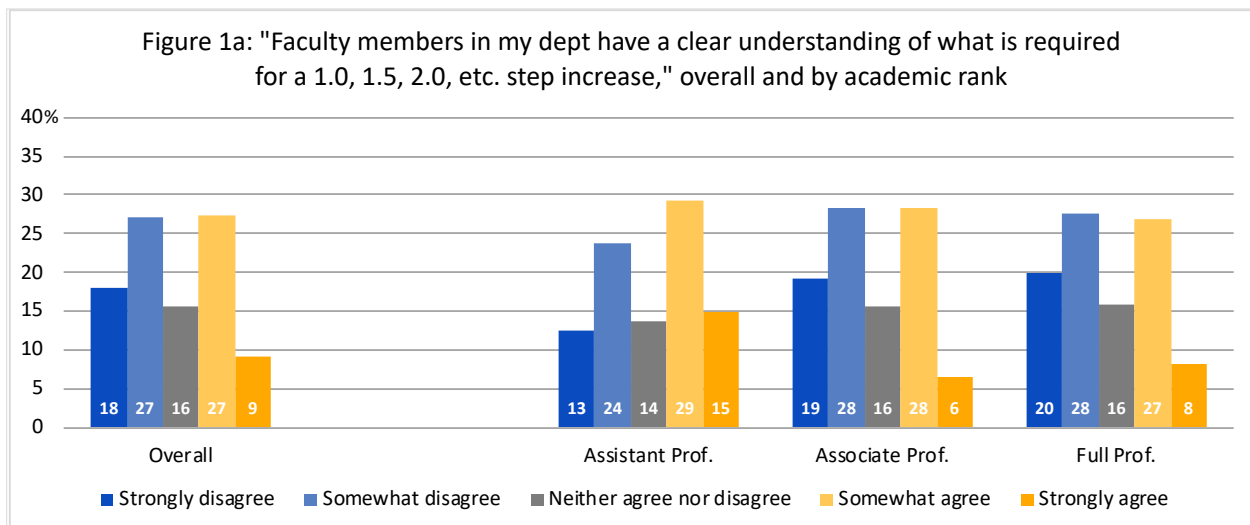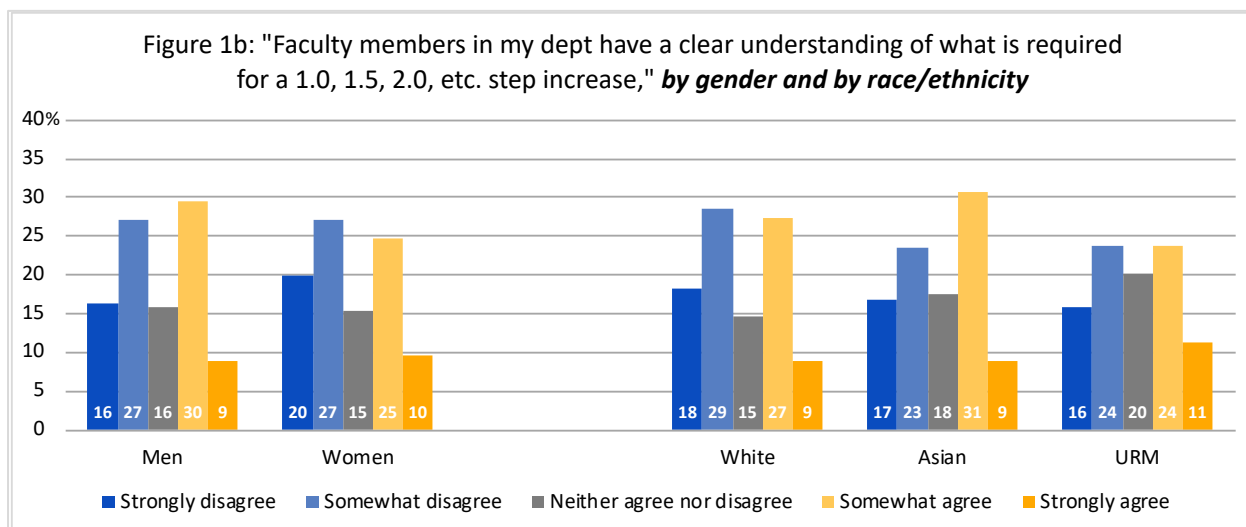
The pattern of relatively higher levels of disagreement is generally consistent across tenure-track faculty at all ranks, except among assistant professors who are more likely to agree (strongly or somewhat) than disagree that their colleagues clearly understand the requirements for step plus advancement.
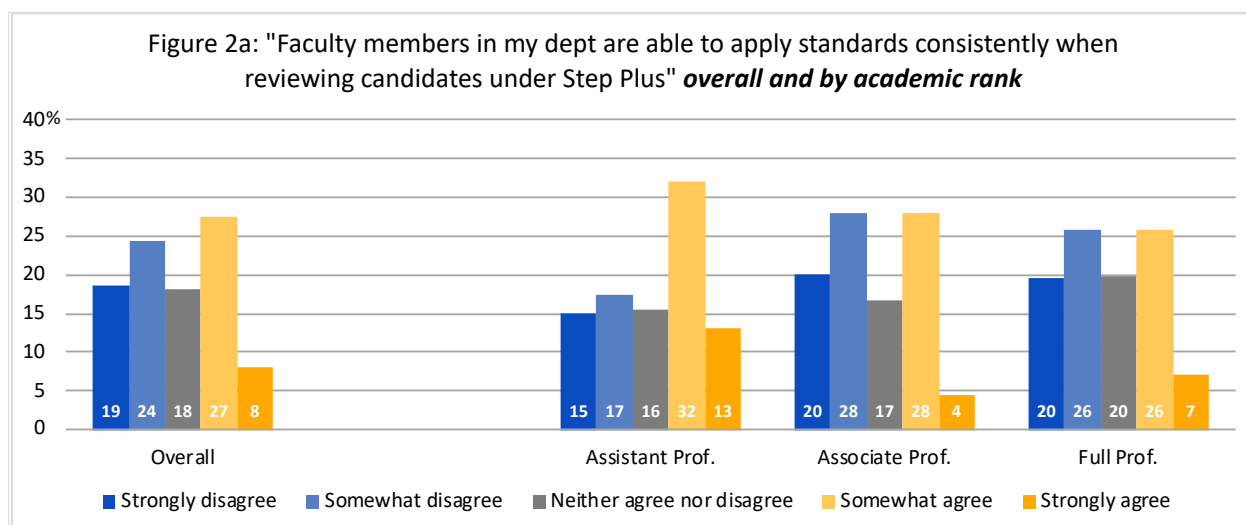
Faculty of all demographic groups are more likely to express doubt than confidence that their colleagues have a clear understanding of the requirements for step plus advancement (Figure 1b). While women are more likely than men to "strongly disagree" with the statement that their colleagues have a clear understanding of how to assess merits in the step plus system, when the "strongly disagree" and "somewhat disagree" categories are combined there are no gender differences in the proportion of respondents who "disagree." There also are no significant disparities in the proportion of White,

---

[1] Distributions in this report are based on 958 valid responses received for these survey questions (total number of responses = 1,112). Sample sizes for faculty subpopulations are: 528 full, 204 associate, and 168 assistant professors; 425 men, 533 women; 695 Whites, 137 Asian/Asian-Americans, and 114 Underrepresented Minorities. See Appendix Table 1 for response rates by rank, gender and race/ethnicity.
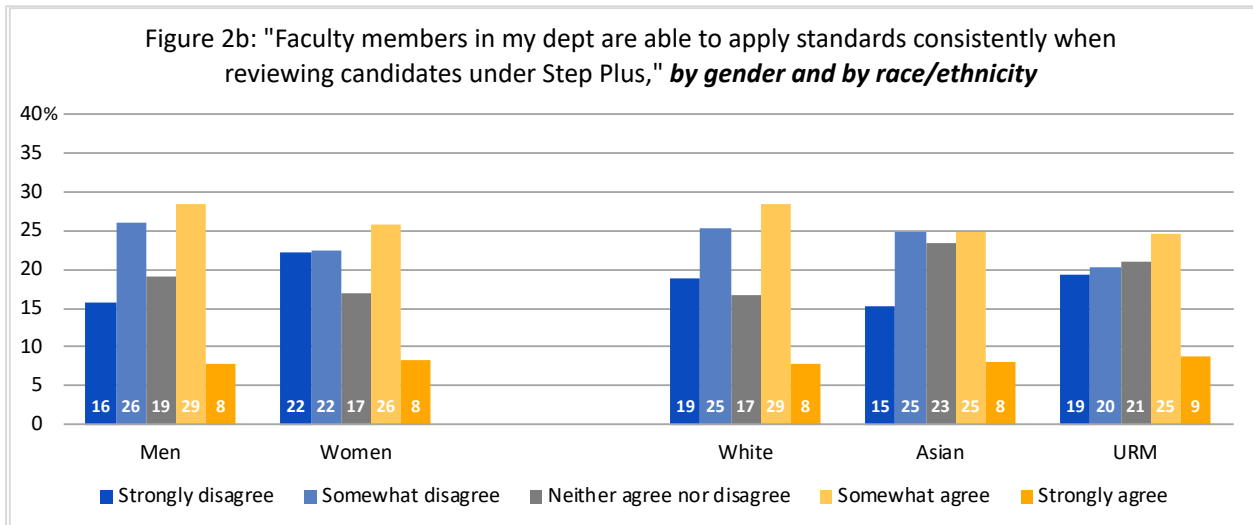
Asian/Asian-American and URM faculty members who disagree versus agree with the idea that their colleagues clearly understand what is required for multiple-step merit increases.

Figure 1b: "Faculty members in my dept have a clear understanding of what is required for a 1.0, 1.5, 2.0, etc. step increase," *by gender and by race/ethnicity*

	Men	Women		White	Asian	URM
Strongly disagree	16	20		18	17	16
Somewhat disagree	27	27		29	23	24
Neither agree nor disagree	16	15		15	18	20
Somewhat agree	30	25		27	31	24
Strongly agree	9	10		9	9	11

In response to the question asking if faculty agree with the statement, "Faculty members in my department are able to apply the standards consistently when reviewing candidates for advancement under the Step Plus system," 43% of all survey respondents disagree somewhat or strongly (Figure 2a), compared to 35% who agree somewhat or strongly. Again, the distribution of faculty who "disagree" and "agree" with the statement is quite stable across faculty rank, except that assistant professors are significantly more likely than others to positively assess their colleagues' ability to apply the standards consistently.

Figure 2a: "Faculty members in my dept are able to apply standards consistently when reviewing candidates under Step Plus" *overall and by academic rank*

	Overall	Assistant Prof.	Associate Prof.	Full Prof.
Strongly disagree	19	15	20	20
Somewhat disagree	24	17	28	26
Neither agree nor disagree	18	16	17	20
Somewhat agree	27	32	28	26
Strongly agree	8	13	4	7

The distribution of respondents across the disagree versus agree response categories does not differ significantly by faculty gender or race/ethnicity with one exception: women are more likely than men to "strongly disagree" with the notion that their departmental colleagues are able to apply standards consistently (Figure 2b), although this difference dissipates when the "strongly disagree" and "somewhat disagree" categories are combined.
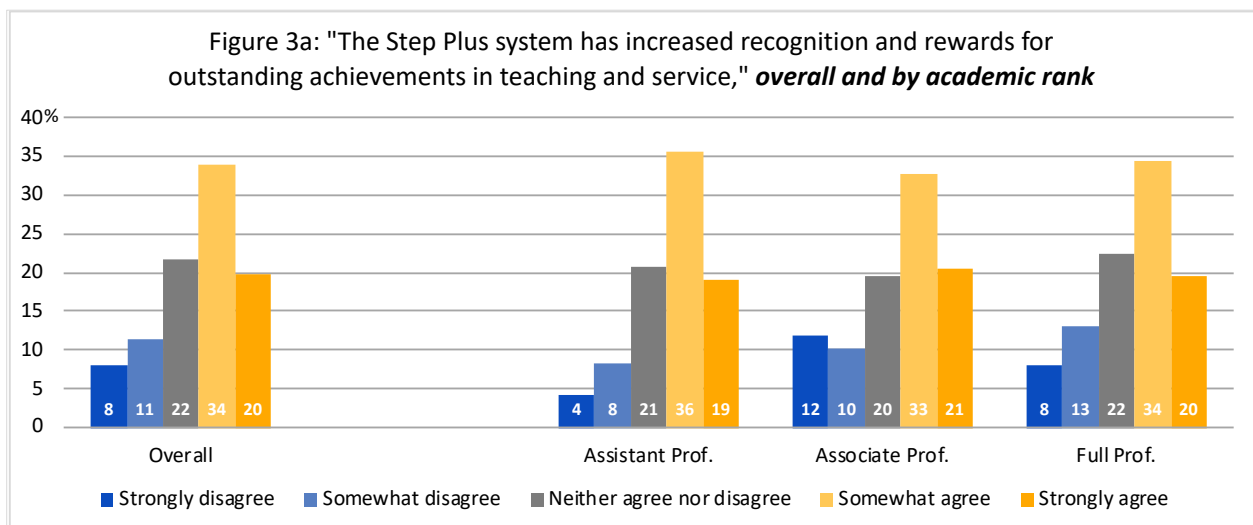
Figure 2b: "Faculty members in my dept are able to apply standards consistently when reviewing candidates under Step Plus," *by gender and by race/ethnicity*

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Men	16	26	19	29	8
Women	22	22	17	26	8
White	19	25	17	29	8
Asian	15	25	23	25	8
URM	19	20	21	25	9

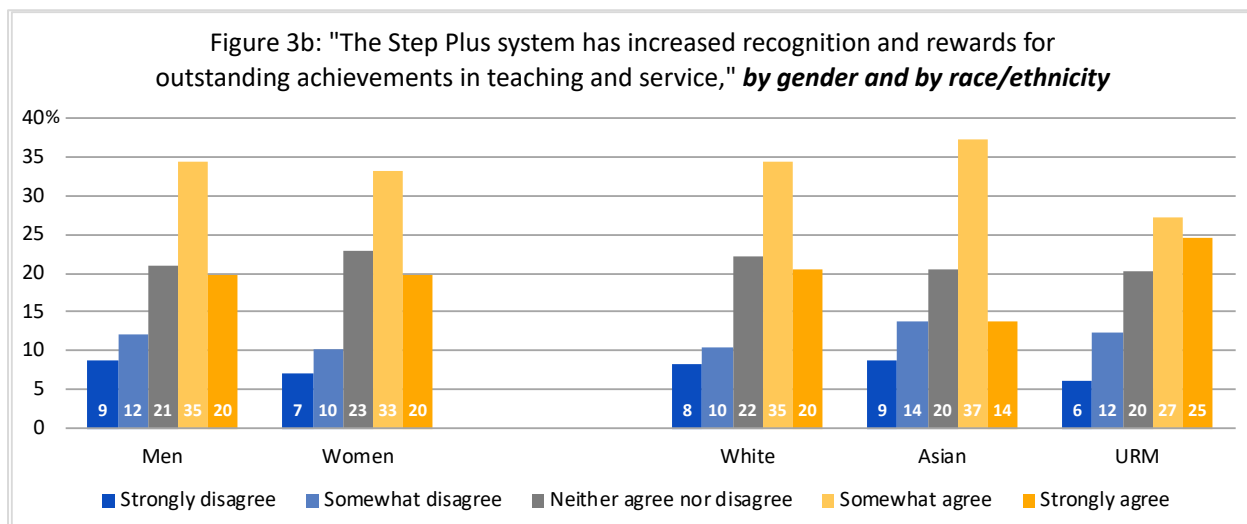## FACULTY PERCEPTIONS OF THE STEP PLUS SYSTEM IMPACT:

To assess faculty perceptions of the impact of the Step Plus system, faculty were asked their level of agreement with the following statement:

- *The Step Plus system has increased recognition and rewards for outstanding achievements in teaching and service.*

As the results presented in Figures 3a and 3b show, the majority of faculty agree that the Step Plus system has increased recognition and rewards for faculty who have outstanding achievements in teaching and service. Fifty-four percent of faculty report agreeing strongly or somewhat with this statement, compared to 22% who neither agree nor disagree, and 19% who disagree somewhat or strongly. A notable aspect of the results, however, is that 22% of all faculty respondents "neither agree nor disagree;" indicating that over one-fifth of faculty have seen no impact or are unable to assess if the Step Plus system has impacted how teaching and service are valued in the merit and promotion process.

Figure 3a: "The Step Plus system has increased recognition and rewards for outstanding achievements in teaching and service," *overall and by academic rank*

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Overall	8	11	22	34	20
Assistant Prof.	4	8	21	36	19
Associate Prof.	12	10	20	33	21
Full Prof.	8	13	22	34	20

The level of agreement with this statement about the effects of the Step Plus system is consistent across all the subgroups identified by rank (Figure 3a), gender and race-ethnicity (Figure 3b). The distribution for URM faculty is the only one that differs significantly from the – they are notably more likely to report that they "strongly agree" that Step Plus has increased recognition of teaching and service.

Figure 3b: "The Step Plus system has increased recognition and rewards for outstanding achievements in teaching and service," *by gender and by race/ethnicity*

Legend: ■ Strongly disagree ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Strongly agree

Category	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Men	9	12	21	35	20
Women	7	10	23	33	20
White	8	10	22	35	20
Asian	9	14	20	37	14
URM	6	12	20	27	25

FACULTY DESCRIPTIONS OF THE STEP PLUS EFFECTS & RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADJUSTMENTS:

The UC Davis faculty were also asked to *"Please describe how the Step Plus system has affected the advancement process in your department, and what, if anything, you would recommend be done differently."*

Responses to this question were open-ended, and a total of 538[2] faculty provided descriptions and/or recommendations. Results presented here are based on the coding and analysis of the verbatim responses.[3] Three broad categories of content emerged from the comments the faculty provided: descriptions of the impact of the Step Plus system on the advancement process; recommendations for how the system could be improved, and criticisms of the system or its impact.

Impact on advancement:

Of the 538 faculty who provided a response for this survey question, 337 (63%) offer specific feedback regarding how the step plus system has affected the advancement process in their department. Of these 128 faculty **(24%) report that Step Plus has positively affected the advancement process**, while 100 faculty **(19%) report that Step Plus has negatively affected the advancement process**. Another 98 faculty (18%) provide responses that were coded as neutral, including responses of "no opinion" on the system's impact, "too soon to tell," and those declaring that the system has had no effect on the advancement process. The "no effect" comments include responses specifying that the Step Plus system perpetuates disparities in advancement based on faculty assertiveness (e.g., "...the same individuals who were previously more likely to seek an acceleration, are now more likely to 'ask' for 1.5 or 2.0 steps"), and that excellence in teaching and service continue to be undervalued.[4]

Recommendations for change:

One hundred and twenty-two (122) faculty (23%) offered recommendations (specific or implied) for improving the Step Plus system. Of those who offered recommendations:

- 48% (59 faculty) suggest changes to **improve the clarity** of the Step Plus process and criteria for advancement, such as providing model achievement records that warrant accelerated step

---

[2] See Appendix Table 2 for response rates by rank, gender and race/ethnicity.
[3] Initial codes for this analysis were derived from the question posed in the COACH survey (i.e., positive impact, negative impact, recommendation). Following a grounded theory approach to data coding and management (e.g. Charmaz, 2006), open-coding techniques were also used in the initial round of coding in order to identify emerging themes in the data. Subsequent rounds of focused coding were then used to flesh out salient themes in greater detail and to identify meaningful relationships between codes and categories.
[4] Eleven responses (2%) were coded "unclear" because the respondents meaning could not be determined by the coder. These responses will be revisited during the axial coding process.

advancement, and the development of clearly defined guidelines for standards of "excellence" in all categories.

- 11% of faculty suggest that the process should be streamlined
- 9% suggest changes to the processes by which faculty vote on advancements

Most common criticisms of the Step Plus system:

Inconsistency and Confusion:

The two most prevalent criticisms of the Step Plus system are that it is confusing and inconsistently applied. These criticisms are cited by both faculty who are generally happy with the program (i.e., those reporting that the program has positively impact on advancement) and by those who are unhappy with the Step Plus program (i.e., those reporting that it has negative impact on advancement). Among these respondents:

- 158 respondents (29%) stated that they and/or their colleagues/department find the Step Plus system to be confusing or unclear, both in terms of the thresholds for step advancements and in what constitutes "normal" and "exceptional" productivity.

- 100 respondents (19%) stated that the criteria for advancing faculty is applied inconsistently. Reports of unequal application include inconsistency across time (e.g., standards have changed during the roll out of the program), across campus (e.g., departments apply the standards differently), across levels of evaluation (e.g., departmental interpretations differ from those applied by CAP), and within departments (e.g., criteria are applied inconsistently across faulty members).

Bias in the system:

Bias in the evaluation system was the third most common critique of the Step Plus system. Faculty report that disparities in application are the result of "department politics" wherein faculty who are disliked/less popular/not part of the "in" crowd receive less positive evaluations than those who are well liked within the department. Of those who reported bias in the system:

- 16 respondents (3%) stated that they feel there is gender and/or racial bias inherent in the Step Plus system.

- Of the 16 respondents who reported gender/racial bias: 15 reported that they perceive women to be disadvantaged, one respondent reported feeling that men are disadvantaged, 3 reported that they feel URM and/or women of color are disadvantaged in review for advancement in the Step Plus system.

Departmental Morale:

A total of 23 respondents indicated that the system had impacted departmental morale. Of these:

- 8 respondents (1%) indicated that Step Plus has resulted in increased departmental morale and/or increased incentive to be productive.

- 15 respondents (3%) indicated that they feel faculty morale has decreased as a result of implementation of the Step Plus system.

Additional Concerns:

An additional 25 faculty responses (5%) described concerns about the Step Plus program that are not directly related to its impact on faculty advancement. Most (12) of these comments describe concerns that the Step Plus program may negatively impact the reputation and standing of the University by de-emphasizing the requirements for research achievements on advancement and increasing the emphasis on teaching and service. The second most common comments expressed concerns about the time cost and work load related to the Step Plus system. Other concerns included the potential for the system to generate salary inflation.

FACULTY EXPERIENCE OF SERVICE NOT EASILY RECORDED OR NORMATIVELY REWARDED

To assess faculty experience with service that may be extra-ordinary in either intensity or type, the 2017 UC Davis COACHE survey included the following item: *"Some faculty engage in forms or degrees of university or community service that are not easily recorded or normatively rewarded. If this is your experience, please describe."*

301 faculty provided substantive responses[5] to this survey question. Responses to this question indicate a good deal of confusion or disagreement among faculty about what constitutes university service, and what constitutes personal volunteer activities.

Overall results from faculty responses:
The majority of faculty respondents (approximately 76%) reported that they do engage in forms of university or community service that are not acknowledged or rewarded. Among those activities identified as undervalued or poorly rewarded by the university, the most commonly cited in faculty responses were: **community engagement/outreach** (27%), **student or faculty mentorship and advising** (21%), **miscellaneous or informal service to the university** (18%), and **service related to teaching** (10%).

7 respondents (2%) reported feeling that that **the university does value service, and that it is adequately acknowledged and rewarded**. (e.g., *"I feel that our campus actually does a good job recognizing non-conventional forms of outreach and community engagement."*)

30 respondents (10%) stated that engaging in forms of university or community service that was not easily recorded or normatively rewarded had **not been their experience**. These respondents did not offer any information to determine, however, if this is because they feel their service efforts are properly acknowledged or because they do not engage in substantial service activities. (e.g., "*I don't have relevant experience.*")

Reflecting the difficulty of separating "service" from "volunteer activities," 10 faculty (3%) reported that they are uncertain or do not believe that their service to the community should be considered or acknowledged by the university. A number of the activities noted by these faculty, however, were cited by others are aspects of their service that are undervalued. (e.g., *"I spend significant time volunteering on a Board of Directors of a nonprofit. I don't think this has ever been acknowledged or valued formally by UC Davis. I'm also not sure that it should be."*)

Challenges:
23 faculty (8%) suggested that clearly defined **system of measurement** for recording service activities would improve the tracking and rewarding of service, though these faculty were also quick to acknowledge that devising such system would be difficult given the wide variation in forms of service. (e.g., *"It can be very difficult to evaluate level of effort, or value of effort, for the myriad forms of university and community service. I don't know how one fixes that. However, this seems to be an area where it is likely to create an uneven playing field. Lots of minor and inconsequential commitments can easily look more favorable than few important and major ones."*)

A number of faculty reported feeling as though a disproportionate share of undervalued service work at the university is shouldered by lower rank faculty (2%) and/or women and underrepresented minorities (1%). (e.g., *"There is still undue pressure placed on women and ethnic minorities to do most of the service work, yet penalties are given when research productivity is not as high as those who are able to produce more because of limited (or NO!) service responsibilities."*)

---

[5] A number of faculty responded "no" or "N/A" to this question. These responses were not included in this analysis.

APPENDIX: Custom Question Response Rates by Rank, Gender and Race/Ethnicity

Appendix Table 1: Response rates for closed-ended questions about faculty diversity

	Question Responses	Question Response Rate	Question Response Rate Among Survey Respondents	Survey Response Rate
Assistant	168	28%	67%	42%
Associate	204	40%	85%	47%
Full	528	42%	88%	47%
Male	533	36%	85%	42%
Female	425	46%	87%	53%
White	695	43%	88%	49%
Asian	137	28%	80%	35%
URM	114	38%	75%	50%

Appendix Table 2: Response rates for open-ended questions about faculty diversity

	Question Responses (Provided comments)	Question Response Rate	Question Response Rate Among Survey Respondents	Survey Response Rate
Assistant	83	14%	33%	42%
Associate	125	24%	52%	47%
Full	321	25%	53%	47%
Male	299	20%	48%	42%
Female	239	26%	49%	53%
White	417	26%	53%	49%
Asian	63	13%	37%	35%
URM	58	19%	38%	50%