Northeastern 2025: Faculty of the Future

The Context: Northeastern 2015

Northeastern’s 2006-2007 Academic Plan led the university to substantial new investments: the university recruited 502 new tenured and tenure-track faculty members between 2006 and 2015, many of them in senior ranks or with interdisciplinary appointments. Over that same period Northeastern increased the total number of full-time faculty members in all categories from 884 to 1405.

New investments in faculty success include the launch of the Center for Advancing Teaching and Learning Through Research (CATLR), the NSF-funded ADVANCE program to support women in the STEM disciplines (now institutionalized as the university-wide Office of Faculty Development), and the Tier 1, Tier 2 and Tier 3 internal grant programs for research. In addition to these university-level programs, the colleges under the university’s hybrid budget model have made significant new investments of their own in faculty support.

The Vision: Northeastern 2025

Northeastern in 2025 will have a faculty that reflects the diversity of the world. The university's faculty will include traditional disciplinary scholars as well as an increasing number of faculty who work across the boundaries of academic disciplines. The university will diversify the kinds of expertise represented in the faculty ranks and forge stronger relationships with community and industry by engaging faculty with flexible and non-traditional appointments, including faculty whose appointments are split across academia and industry, professors-of-the-practice, and other non-tenure-track faculty who will play a distinctive role in research, pedagogy, service, and community engagement. Novel systems of support will aid in the recruiting, development, promotion, and retention of its faculty.

(1) Promoting Diversity

Diversity at all levels of the university is an unquestioned priority in the university’s strategic plan and will remain so through 2025 and beyond. In 2025, the university will be composed of faculty that reflects the diversity of the world. This will be achieved through a number of methods, including:
● An explicit goal to recruit and hire diverse faculty at all levels. Achieving this goal will be facilitated in a number of ways, including (1) the evaluation of candidates based on measures of genuine quality that look beyond the traditional markers or proxies for quality, such as degrees from elite institutions, and (2) the constitution of hiring committees that, as much as possible, reflect the diversity of the candidates we seek to attract.

● An explicit plan for identifying and addressing obstacles to the development, promotion and retention of a diverse faculty. Underrepresented minority faculty often face unique challenges and pressures in the years leading up to tenure, which may affect retention rates and erode the investment the university makes in the initial recruitment and hiring process. Specific issues include the fact that minority faculty may be asked to carry a disproportionate burden of service work in representing the perspective of diversity on committees, and they may face an increased demand to serve as mentors, either formally or informally.

● An intentional focus on increasing the hiring and retention of underrepresented minorities from the US context to address the extremely low proportion of US African-American, Latino, and Native American faculty.

● An intentional focus on increasing overall diversity not merely in aggregate but at the unit level, recognizing that different units often face quite different diversity challenges (e.g. women in STEM fields).

(2) Moving Beyond Disciplinary Boundaries

Numerous fields are already traditionally interdisciplinary, and Northeastern has an exceptionally strong interdisciplinary focus in many of its research centers and institutes. Moving forward, there is an increasing and inevitable trend for faculty in numerous other fields to work across the traditional boundaries of academic disciplines.

1 Among Northeastern’s tenured and tenure-track faculty, 0.5% are American Indian or Alaska Native, 11.5% are Asian, 3.5% are Black or African American, 3.4% are Hispanic or Latino, 5.3% are “Non-Resident Alien” (in the language of the legal category required for reporting purposes), 3.6% unknown, 0.5% report “Two or more Races,” and 71.7% are White. The same figures for all full-time faculty (both tenure-line and full-time non-tenure-track) are 0.4% American Indian, 8.3% Asian, 3.8% Black or African American, 2.9% Hispanic or Latino, 5.7% nonresident, 4.6% unknown, 0.8% two or more, 73.5% White.
Northeastern will address the attendant challenges and support these efforts through a number of methods, including:

- creating alternative university-wide structures to help faculty and students work across traditional college boundaries;
- revising curricula and course assignments to encourage faculty and students to work within and across disciplines, and providing support for pedagogical experimentation with the assistance of units like CATLR;
- improving communication at all levels across academic units with respect to issues with, and best practices for, cross-unit appointments and initiatives;
- implementing training initiatives to help faculty and students conduct research at the intersection of different academic disciplines;
- facilitating connections between faculty and industry partners who are operating in the geographic areas where we already have regional and global campuses;
- establishing awards for interdisciplinary team research;
- valuing excellence and depth in light of a push for breadth; and
- revising promotion policies and performance metrics to fit new interdisciplinary environments, including finding ways to assess faculty achievement in team-based scholarship and research.

(3) Flexible and Non-traditional Faculty Appointments and Engagement

While traditional faculty will likely remain at the heart of Northeastern in 2025, the university will engage faculty with flexible and non-traditional appointments in order to leverage talent in research, pedagogy, service, and community engagement as widely as possible. The university’s faculty and students will also engage in research and study potentially spanning academic institutions. Example of such flexible and non-traditional faculty appointments and engagement include:

- faculty appointments split between academia and industry;
• faculty appointments split across academic institutions; and

• opportunities arising from collaboration/consortia among departments across universities, which could lead to beneficial cross-fertilization. This may include sending graduate students and faculty more routinely across institutions to leverage the expertise of faculty from other institutions in areas in which one’s home institution does not have the depth of expertise or capabilities for a given research or creative endeavor.

Additionally, the university will continue to engage professors-of-the-practice and other non-tenure-track faculty who often play a distinctive role in research, pedagogy, service, and community engagement by drawing on different forms of expertise and working environments, and by building productive ties with non-academic organizations.

In support of such non-traditional faculty appointments, the university must establish a plan to actively recruit, develop, promote, and retain such non-traditional faculty whose teaching, service, research and creative activities may not fall under standard categories of assessment.

(4) Faculty Support Systems

In an effort to aid recruitment and retention efforts of all faculty throughout the entire university, Northeastern will continue to develop its already strong system of support in the areas of research, teaching, and service. In addition, the university will develop and/or strengthen programs that help faculty build and maintain a healthy work-life balance and to develop roots in the Northeastern community and in the Boston area. Examples of such programs include:

• The construction and rollout of a comprehensive database of competencies that would help to navigate questions that faculty might face in the areas of teaching, research, and service.

• The continuation and further development of workshops and mentoring events that bring together faculty from across the university such as: book clubs, thought leadership conversations, and interdisciplinary mentoring teams.
• As the city and its environs become increasingly unaffordable, the establishment of programs that would help faculty with the purchase of homes through interest-free loans, down payments, or other means.