

Peer to Peer Conversation: Executive Summary

Purpose/Rationale:

For many *faculty, the reasons for joining an academic community go beyond salary and more instrumental considerations like scholarly recognition or student evaluations. In many cases the impulse to engage in the tasks of research, teaching, and service stem from a deeper sense of calling, passion, or commitment to foster change. Yet, at times the institutional and role requirements for faculty can obscure or diminish the energy behind this sense of higher purpose and vocational mission. When faculty become disconnected from the deeper wellspring of calling or passion, the levels of cynicism, burnout, or loss of agency can increase. Job satisfaction plummets along with connections to the wider academic community. In contrast, some faculty on the same campus never experience a diminished sense of purpose and commitment to teach, research, create, or serve. They maintain a high degree of internal integrity and vitality with respect to the daily tasks for faculty. Yet, at times even this group of faculty might find it difficult to stay focused on the calling, passion, and personal mission that drew them to academia. Or they may wonder what the next five years will look like as they move deeper into their career and advance through the faculty ranks.

*Throughout this document, the word “faculty” includes all tenure and non-tenure track faculty of any rank.

The primary purpose of the Peer to Peer (P2P) conversation is to provide a platform for faculty to talk about the challenges or uncertainties they experience regarding their institutional role. The P2P conversations are intended to promote growth and flourishing over a faculty career and to build relational culture and climate on campus. When enacted with integrity and fidelity, the P2P conversations will increase the likelihood that faculty at DU will find new or deeper ways to experience the life-giving elements of their teaching, research, and service. Minimally, it is anticipated that faculty who initiate P2P conversations will acquire resources and new ideas for solving professional challenges, make productive changes, or deepen practices that support faculty in personal/professional areas that matter most to their work at DU. Given their collaborative nature and shared problem-exploring format, the P2P conversations will foster the cultivation of intentional, collegial networks that stretch across and even beyond campus. As these social networks grow, faculty will likely feel an increasing sense of meaningfulness in their work and belonging to the DU community. Their sense that they are valued at the university will also likely increase. These benefits would impact the entire campus ecosystem and ripple through its relational networks, be they faculty-student, faculty-staff, departmental, unit, or interdisciplinary.

During a Peer to Peer (P2P) conversation, individual faculty identify an area/key question of practice and invite a small group of faculty members and staff—who may or may not know each other—with relevant expertise to engage in a confidential 2-hour conversation around this question, conundrum, or problem. P2P conversations can address *functional/strategic* topics

related to research, teaching, or service as well as *conceptual/philosophical* questions about work-life balance or finding meaning and purpose at different stages of one's career. A faculty member initiating a P2P conversation can invite colleagues or staff from across campus or potentially other institutions (via direct invitation) depending on the topic and needed expertise. Sample P2P topics could include:

- How might I advance in rank while remaining an engaged scholar, teacher, and member of the DU community? Or, I'm a full professor and wondering about ways to remain passionate about teaching, scholarship, creative activity, and service.
- What was my teaching, scholarly, or service highlight in the last three-years, and how might that experience impact my next three-years at DU?
- How might I use my passion for research/scholarship/creative activity as a seed source for award winning teaching?
- I want to start (grow) my family/relationships, but I'm concerned that my career will suffer. How can I accomplish both with integrity and fidelity to my sense of what it means to be a professor? What do I need to consider when making choices?
- What are my aspirational horizons over the next three-years? How do I pursue those goals that are partially visible but still just beyond my sight, grasp, or professional trajectory?

The P2P conversation structure is customized to the DU community. However, much of the content and process is modified from professional development strategies developed by the *Center for Courage and Renewal* as well as articles and books from educator, social activist, and scholar Parker J. Palmer. The Center for Courage and Renewal (<http://www.couragerenewal.org/>) is an internationally recognized organization offering workshops, consulting programs, and retreats for teachers, physicians, social workers, clergy and other members of the helping professions for several decades. The mission of the Center "is to create a more just, compassionate and healthy world by nurturing personal and professional integrity and the courage to act on it." Their trademarked "Circle of Trust"© approach to professional development is intended to "cultivate the heart and soul of leadership, encouraging people to lead and act with courage on their true callings; develop trustworthy relationships; cultivate practices to sustain themselves and inspire others for the long haul; and work together to transform the institutions they serve." Additional resources supporting this approach to faculty peer to peer conversations are included in the references at the end of this document.

The P2P conversations are patterned after discourse communities that seek wholeness, shared commitment to individual/community wellness, and an enduring trust in the power of individuals to discern life-giving choices. As such the P2P conversations may feel awkward and uncomfortable compared to more typical conversation patterns in academia which often feel competitive and individualistic. Although the 2-hour conversation might result in clear next steps or solutions, it is also likely and even preferable, that the conversation will generate additional questions and inquiries that mark the professional path forward.

Timing/structure:

Ideally, faculty should initiate a P2P conversation at least every three years for the purpose of sustaining a vibrant intellectual and professional trajectory within the DU community. Faculty are encouraged to convene a P2P conversation at the following benchmarks: within three years of initial appointment, within three years after promotion to Associate Professor, and within three years after promotion to Professor. These recommendations apply to faculty in all benefitted faculty series, including Tenure Line Professorial Series, the Professorial Series in University Libraries, the Teaching Professor Series, the Clinical Professor Series, the Professor of the Practice Series, and the Research Professor Series.

A P2P conversation are most effective with three committee members (CM) plus the faculty convener (FC) who is hosting the conversation. Committee members may hold any rank from any of the DU faculty series or staff with relevant expertise as defined by the faculty convener. Additionally, a committee member may hold appointments outside of DU. The main criteria for CMs is a capacity to listen instead of direct problem solving, and expertise that either helps refine the question under examination or can offer new angles and insights yet to be considered.

Format:

The P2P conversation is best experienced as a 2-hour process, and the following text provides a brief outline and suggested elements and stages for that process. A more detailed conceptual explanation and detailed practical considerations are included in *Peer to Peer Conversations Manual/Best Practices* a document of best practices for faculty hosting P2P conversations. The manual is available on the Faculty Senate website.

The first step is initiated by the Faculty Convener (FC) and consists of a reflective process around professional goals/aspirations/conundrums.

Although it is not required, the FC is encouraged to write a one- or two-page document articulating ideas, questions, and considerations for the P2P committee. The reflection can take a more traditional academic format of research questions and sub-questions; or it might resemble a reflective essay exploring themes around professional satisfaction and uncertainties; or the P2P one page document can simply take the form of a description of questions and goals for the conversation. The format is less important than the goal of refining the question or problem under consideration for the faculty convener. The FC is encouraged to distribute this document to the three Committee Members (CMs) to help focus their feedback during the P2P conversation.

The one-two page planning document can include the following:

- A list of 2-3 questions that the FC would like to discuss with the CMs. The fewer the questions the better so as to keep the CMs focused on the essential elements of your

question, conundrum, or problem. These questions can be concrete and specific, like how to move from one rank to another, improve student learning, or increase your rate of publications. Or these questions can be more abstract and philosophical. Such questions might address how to regain your passion for teaching/research, establish a better balance between your love for your profession and your care for others, or identify elements of a meaningful faculty life after promotion? What was your scholarly, service, or teaching high point in the last three years? When as a faculty member did you feel most alive and connected to the reason you became a professor?

-What is the essence of the professional question(s) you are examining as you lean forward into your career at DU? How might this question invite collaboration, connection, and expanded community at DU? One way to approach this topic is to write as if you were in an elevator and had only a limited time to express the question to a colleague.

-What have you always wanted to explore or experience as faculty but have never tried? What elements/opportunities or people exist on the DU campus to initiate that desire?

-What are your concerns and opportunities as you advance from one rank to another? What changes in your professional/personal life do you anticipate as you move from assistant to associate professor? What will keep you engaged and alive as a member of the DU community post full professor promotion? In your last five years pre-retirement what would you like to experience, accomplish, or contribute to DU and your professional community?

In the second step, the Faculty Convener reaches out to three Committee Members

The potential CMs (some may decline the invitation to participate for personal or professional reasons) can be faculty of any rank or staff of any position. When inviting the CMs, FCs should consider potential CMs listening ability, capacity to ask questions that open up the investigation instead of closing it with predetermined solutions, previous experience with the question under examination, willingness to work collaboratively, and the ability to synthesize or extend discussion. All three CMs need not hold similar views with respect to the question under consideration. In fact, selecting CMs with contrasting expertise or experiences can increase the effectiveness of the P2P conversation by adding diversity and unexpected insights that open up the potential for professional growth and flourishing. Select CMs who can meet you at the core of the question you are seeking guidance for and who have the capacity to set aside professional identity in service of your question. That may mean that the best CMs are close colleagues, but it might also mean that the best CMs reside outside your immediate social/academic networks. Faculty Senate can provide a list of faculty across campus who self-identify as CMs or have participated successfully in the process.

A quick strategy for recruiting supportive CMs includes:

-Ask your potential CM a question about teaching, scholarship, or service that hits close to the question you are considering for your P2P conversation. Have frank conversation

with potential CMs to see to what extent their interests and expertise (personal or professional) fit with your reason for hosting a P2P conversation.

-Ask your likely CM to explain their experience or expertise with the question you are holding. Look for the following attributes. Do they exhibit a basic ability to talk complexly and reflectively about their experience? What is their level of curiosity around exploring the question you are asking?

-What is their affect? Is the person projecting a sense of generosity? Do they have a generative spirit that invites a fullness and engaging richness?

The above questions are not intended as a sort of litmus test by which to sort out good from bad listeners; everyone is capable of effective listening in a P2P conversation. Instead, the questions are intended to help the FC make conscious choices about CMs and to signal the qualities of listening unique to a P2P conversation.

The third step is finding a time and suitable space for the two hour P2P conversation.

The qualities of a good space will include a quiet atmosphere and privacy, natural light, contemplative and inviting feel, and comfortable seating. Although the conversation could occur at a coffee shop or pub the potential distractions might detract from overall outcome of the P2P conversation. The FC and CMs are encouraged to array themselves in a rough circle facing each other. Writing or note taking materials might also be helpful for capturing the questions or observations made by either the FC or CMs.

The fourth step begins with introductions for the purpose of establishing a sense of shared purpose to serve the question of the Faculty Convener (FC).

Introductions can be as simple as name, unit affiliation, and what understandings/knowledge each CM brings to the conversation. The FC distributes a list of suggested norms for the conversation that are quickly discussed and agreed to (see *Peer to Peer Conversation Manual/Best Practices* document for Norms Handout). This process may take 10 minutes or less to complete.

The Faculty Convener offers a brief (10-15 minute) overview of the problem, issue, or conundrum under investigation. Ideally the committee members will have a general familiarity with the question, having previously received a copy of the one-two page overview written by the FC. A brief moment of silence follows the FC's presentation to allow for a deepening of the question under investigation. The Committee Members are invited to begin asking questions aimed at bringing additional clarity or insights to the question at hand. It is helpful at this stage of the conversation if CMs refrain from offering solutions or advice. Rather they should focus on asking questions that broaden the nature and complexity of the question at hand (see *Peer to Peer Conversation Manual/Best Practices* document for suggested questions). Later in the process, the CMs may, at times, offer direct advice, but even then CMs should resist offering advice, which has the tendency to cut off or limit the conversation. The goal is to explore and

examine the question to its fullest potential instead of moving toward a quick resolution and conclusion.

The question asking phase of the process may last about 1.5 hours. To aid in this process, it is suggested that committees adopt a strategy of using open-ended questions (see *Peer to Peer Conversation Manual/Best Practices* document for Open-ended Questions on strategies for framing open-ended questions). Allow for silence by providing wait time between questions, which allows for deep listening to occur for both the FC and the CMs. Committee members might consider taking notes or drawing images that come to mind during the discussion. At the end of the P2P conversation all notes should be given to the FC, for confidentiality and to help the FC remember important moments in the P2P conversation.

Two hours may seem like too much time; however, experience suggests that committees should meet for the full time to allow for intentional, deep, and spontaneous interaction. After the first hour the conversation may slow down and seem to run its course. But with a willingness to hold silence and wait, the conversation will likely continue but from a deeper place of understanding and engagement. Think of this process less like a back and forth conversation and more like a series of questions that lead to deeper questions of meaning and purpose.

During the last 15-20 minutes of the conversation, committee members might share an affirmation, a word of encouragement, or final summary point about the FC's question. The tone of these final reflections is along the lines of a "what-I-heard-you-say" or next-steps. The FC can express thanks and appreciation for the committee members and their insights. Any written documents or notes taken by the CMs should be given to the FC. Close with a reminder of the norm of confidentiality. The CMs and FC can talk about their personal experience of hosting or participating in a P2P conversation but each committee member should not share what other members said or experienced.

The final step is an invitation for the Faculty Convener to write a one-page summary of the conversation.

This short document may include key questions that were asked, possible steps to follow, and any questions that were raised that are still unanswered. This document is primarily for the benefit of the faculty convener, but if warranted it can be sent to the Committee Members with an understanding of confidentiality.

References

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