

Academic Work Life Survey: A Preliminary Overview of Responses

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Prepared by Institutional Research & Planning

About the survey

In Fall 2016, Cornell's office of Institutional Research & Planning administered an Academic Work Life (AWL) Survey. The 2016 survey included all employees in academic positions¹ hired prior to November 1, 2015 and holding at least a 50% appointment (N=2,921). There are three major constituencies in the AWL survey

- **TTT faculty:** Tenured and tenure track faculty holding a professorial rank of assistant professor, associate professor or professor.
- **Academic professionals:** Academic employees providing instruction or engaged in research and/or extension work. Titles include lecturers, research associates, and extension associates.
- **Academic short term:** Academic visitors and other employees on a non-renewable term contract. Titles include postdoctoral fellows and visiting professors.

A total of 1,602 academics completed some portion of the survey, yielding an overall response rate of 55%. Response rates differed significantly across titles, with 60% of TTT faculty, 55% of academic professionals, and 40% of academic short term responding.

This was the third administration of this survey, though prior surveys included only TTT faculty (and thus the survey was known as the Faculty Work Life Survey). The original effort was an initiative of Provost Biddy Martin's Advisory Committee on Faculty Work Life in 2004, resulting in a 2005 survey. The plan to repeat the survey every five years was set with the first administration, though the survey was delayed one year in this third administration.

¹ Academics employed in the library (i.e., archivists and librarians) were excluded from this survey population; they were invited to complete the 2016 Cornell Employee Survey.

Overall satisfaction

The 2016 AWL survey began by asking all respondents a question on overall satisfaction, with slightly different wording depending on the respondent's position:

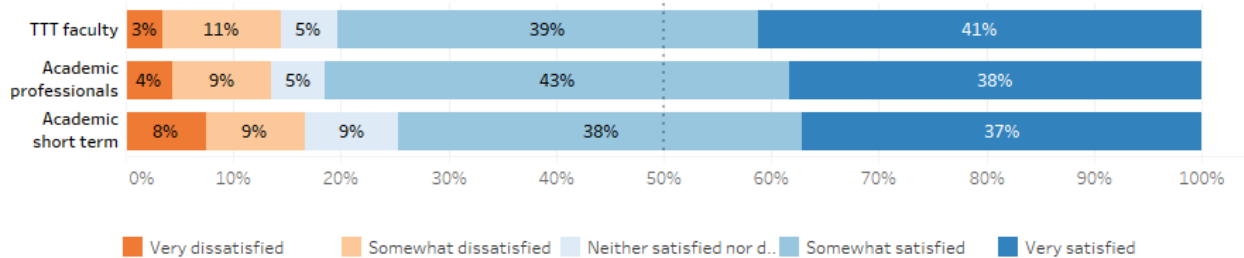
Overall, how satisfied are you being a faculty member at Cornell?

Overall, how satisfied are you being an academic at Cornell?

Both versions of the question offered a 5-point response scale where 1 was "very dissatisfied" and 5 was "very satisfied."

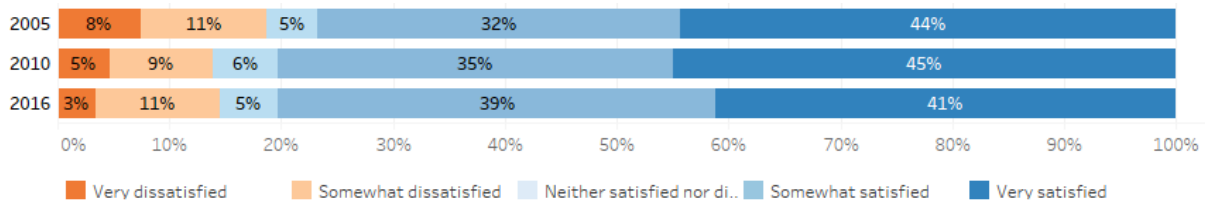
As illustrated in Figure 1, roughly 80% of respondents indicated they were "very satisfied" or "somewhat satisfied" with their position at Cornell. There is some variation across the three subgroups in the survey, with academic short term employees slightly less satisfied with their positions than the other two populations. As illustrated in Figure 1, 80% of TTT faculty, 82% of academic professionals, and 74% of academic short term reported that they were at least somewhat satisfied.

Figure 1. Overall satisfaction by survey population



The distribution of responses for TTT faculty is close to the distribution observed in 2005 and 2010 when 76% and 80% of TTT faculty said they were at least somewhat satisfied (see Figure 2). Indeed, there was not a statistically significant change in the average satisfaction level of TTT faculty between 2010 and 2016, even though the percentage of TTT faculty responding that they were "very satisfied" was lower in 2016 than in the previous two administrations. Specifically, 41% of faculty said they were "very satisfied" in 2016 as compared to 45% in 2010 and 44% in 2005.

Figure 2. Overall satisfaction among tenured and tenure-track faculty: 2005, 2010, and 2016



These results for faculty were also quite similar to the results for *nonacademic* employees as gleaned from the 2011 and 2016 administrations of the Cornell Employee Survey. In 2011 and 2016, 80% and 81%, respectively, of *nonacademic* employees reported that they were somewhat or very satisfied (results not shown here).

For further analysis on faculty satisfaction—including an examination of how satisfaction varies by sex, rank, race and other factors—see the IRP report titled “Overall Satisfaction among Cornell Academics, 2016.”

Other general measures of affinity for work at Cornell

Respondents were also asked two other items that may measure the sense of affinity that academics have for their work at Cornell. The first of these, worded slightly differently for TTT faculty and others, was:

All things considered, if you had to do it all over again, would you choose to be a faculty member at Cornell?

All things considered, if you had to do it all over again, would you choose to be an academic at Cornell?

Both versions of the question offered a five-point response scale where 1 was “definitely not” and 5 was “definitely would.”

Finally, the last closed-ended question of the entire survey asked:

If a candidate for a position similar to yours asked you about your department or unit as a place to work, would you:

Not recommend your department or unit as a place to work

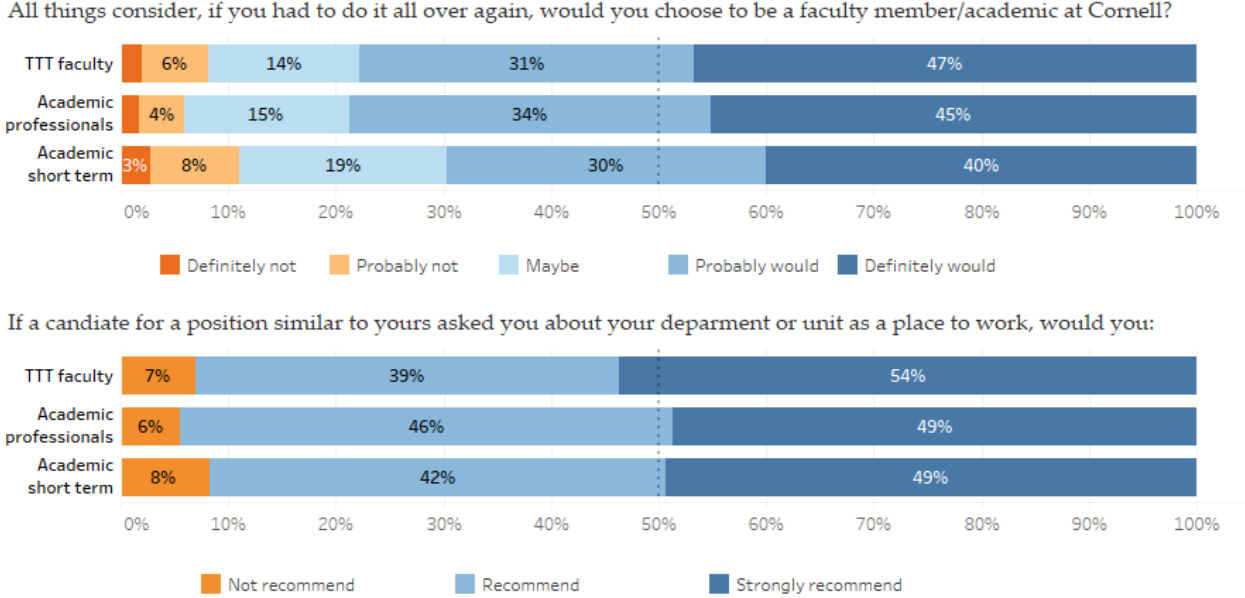
Recommend your department or unit with reservations

Strongly recommend your department or unit as a place to work

About half of all three groups would “strongly recommend” their department as a place to work, without reservations, and between 40% and 47% of these three subgroups say that they “definitely would” do it all over again (detail not

shown). The correlations between measures are at or above about 0.5 suggesting all three measures tap highly related sentiments.

Figure 2.5. Additional measures of academics’ affinity for their work at Cornell

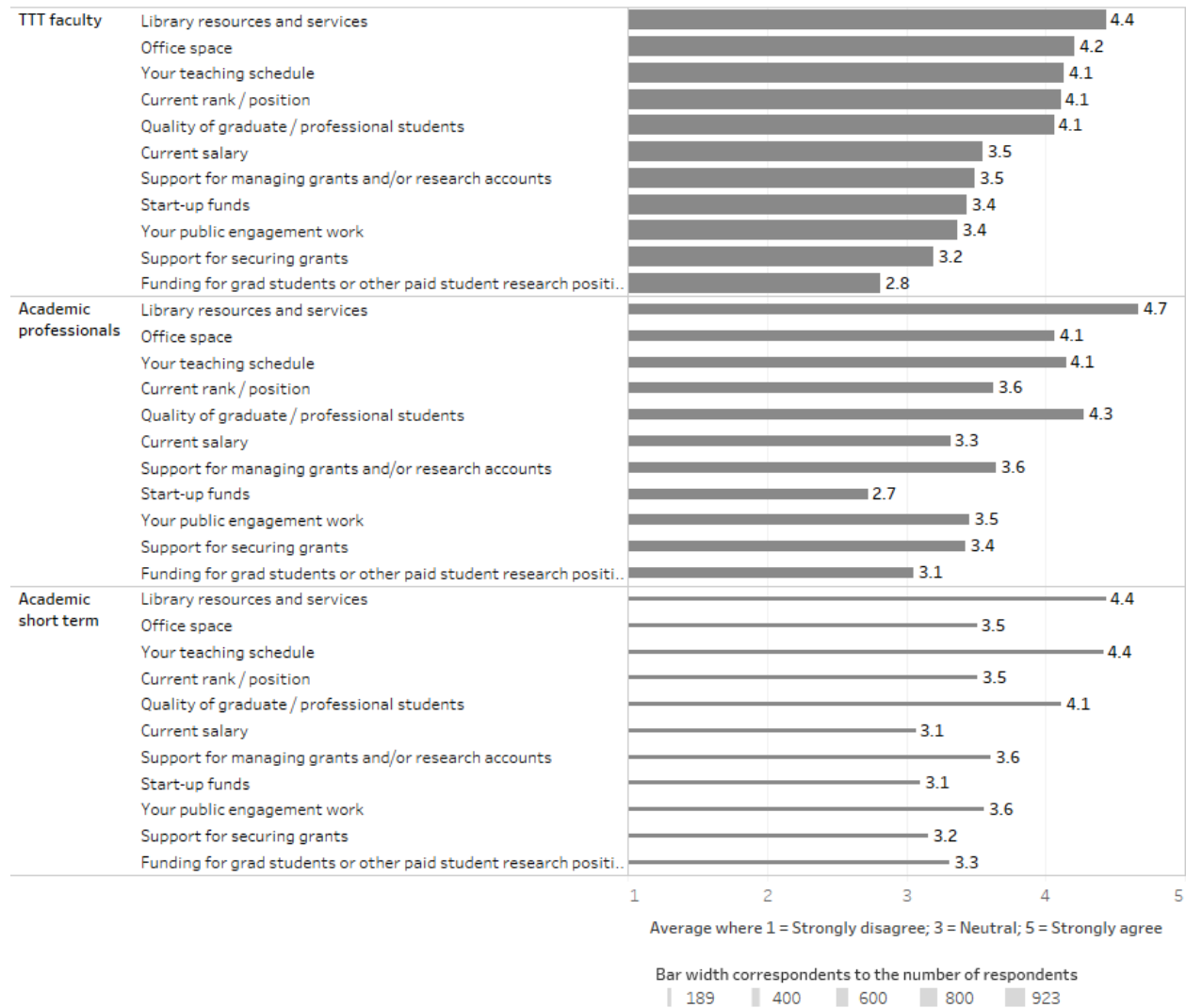


The survey also included a measure asking about intentions to leave Cornell that is correlated with overall satisfaction at somewhat lower levels (that is, at values less than 0.4). Intent to leave is examined later in this report (e.g. Figure 8).

Satisfaction with specifics

The AWL Survey asked respondents to rate their satisfaction with more detailed aspects of their jobs and the resources that support their work. A selection of some of those items is represented in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Satisfaction with various resources or aspects of work, mean responses by subgroup



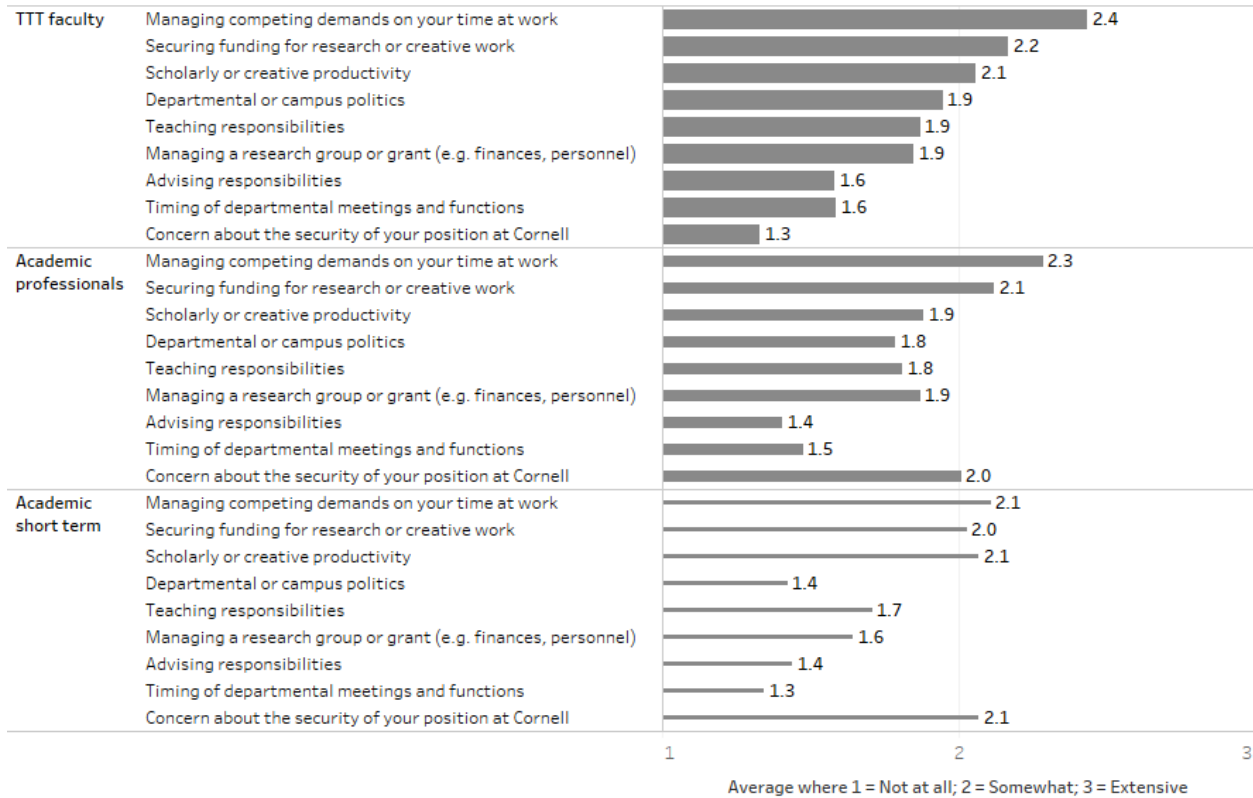
Consistent with prior administrations of the Faculty Work Life Survey, responses to the 2016 AWL Survey indicate very high levels of satisfaction with the library (with average satisfaction for all three survey populations at or above 4.4 on a five-point scale), and lower levels of satisfaction with indicators touching on finances including: current salary, start-up funds, support for securing grants, support for managing grants, and funding for graduate students.

A fuller exploration of those measures, their correlates, and how they have changed over time is included in the IRP report titled “Overall Satisfaction among Cornell Academics, 2016.”

Sources of Stress at Work

Survey respondents were asked to indicate “the extent to which each of the following aspects of work has been a source of stress for you over the past twelve months.”

Figure 4. Sources of stress at work, mean responses by academic subgroup



Among the items in the survey, “managing competing demands on your time at work” was the most stress-inducing among TTT faculty and academic professionals, and among the top handful of stressors among the academic short term (see Figure 4).

Working Climate of Academic Units

One section of the survey asked academics about “your work climate.” Specifically, academics were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with a series of statements. They were further instructed that “For items asking

about ‘my chair/director/dean’ please use the position to whom you directly report as your point of reference.”²

Consistent with the generally positive affinity for working at Cornell described above (see Figure 5), the overall picture of the working climates of units could be described as favorable. For example, 77% of TTT faculty agree that “my department is a good fit for me” and that they can “navigate the unwritten rules of being a faculty member at Cornell.” Similarly, 80% of TTT faculty “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” that Cornell demonstrates a strong commitment to diversity. Analogous numbers are quite similar for academic professional and academic short term employees.

Only one item in this bank of questions had a mean assessment among TTT faculty of less than three on a five-point scale:

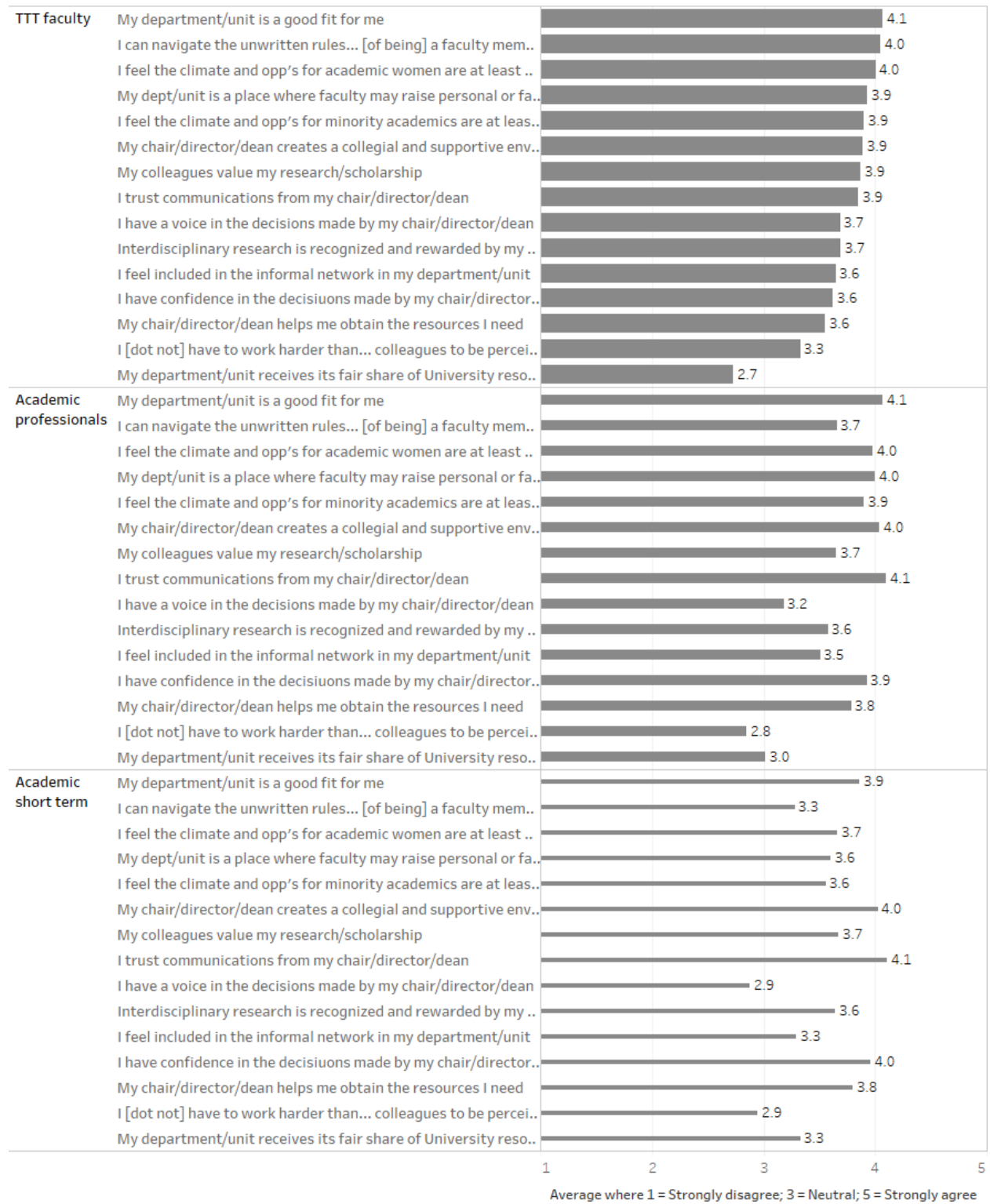
My department/unit receives its fair share of University resources

As illustrated in Figure 5, the mean value among TTT faculty was 2.7. Close to half of TTT faculty disagreed to some extent with the statement: 18% said they “strongly disagree” and 29% said they “somewhat disagree.” Another 23% said they neither agreed nor disagreed.

A fuller explanation of these climate measures, their correlates, and how they have changed over time is included in the IRP report titled, “Working Climate for Cornell Academics, 2016.”

² The structures of Cornell’s schools and colleges vary. While most faculty report to department chairs, some may report to directors, and others—such as those in the Hotel School or the Law School—report directly to their deans.

Figure 5. Indicators of working climate, mean responses by academic subgroup



Views of Central Administration and Cornell's Direction

Cornell's 2016 Academic Work Life Survey included several questions related to central administration's decision-making. These include the following three items:

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about governance and leadership at Cornell? "Central administration" refers to Cornell's president and vice presidents as well as the provost and his direct reports.

I have confidence in the decisions made by central administration.

I trust the communications I receive from central administration.

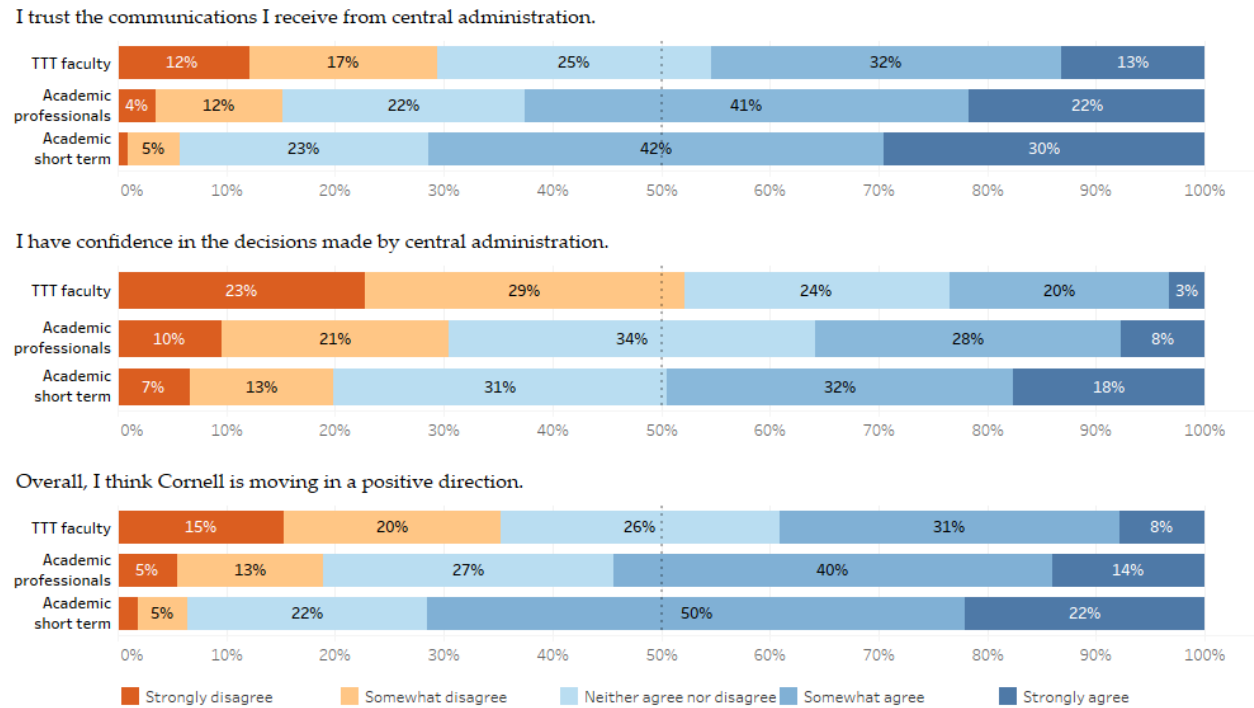
Overall, I think Cornell is moving in a positive direction.

This is the first time these three questions were asked of Cornell's faculty, but these items were borrowed directly from the 2011 Cornell Employee Survey, a survey administered to nonacademic staff and academic professionals.

The distribution of responses from the three survey groups in the 2016 AWL Survey is illustrated in Figure 6. With respect to each item, TTT faculty had less positive assessments than academic professionals, who in turn had less positive assessments than academic short term. For each item, less than half of the TTT faculty report that they agree with the sentiment.

Among these items, TTT faculty were most inclined to agree with the statement, "I trust the communications I receive from central administration": 45% of respondents indicate that they agree with that statement. In contrast, only 23% of TTT faculty agreed that they have confidence in the decisions made by central administration.

Figure 6. Views of central administration and Cornell's direction



Because this is the first time this particular bank of governance and leadership questions was asked of Cornell's faculty, it is difficult to know whether the pattern of responses to these items among TTT faculty reflects something significant about this moment in Cornell's history or is an indication of a more enduring disposition among faculty. The 2016 AWL survey was administered following a sustained period of budgetary pressure and consequent budgetary adjustments resulting from the 2008 financial crisis. Moreover, the offices of the President and Provost had been in transition for much of the preceding two-and-half years, with three different individuals occupying each office. Additional major transitions underway include the launch of the Cornell Tech campus in New York City and the creation of the Cornell College of Business. Because this unusual confluence of major events makes it challenging to discern the source of faculty concerns, further inquiry will be important.

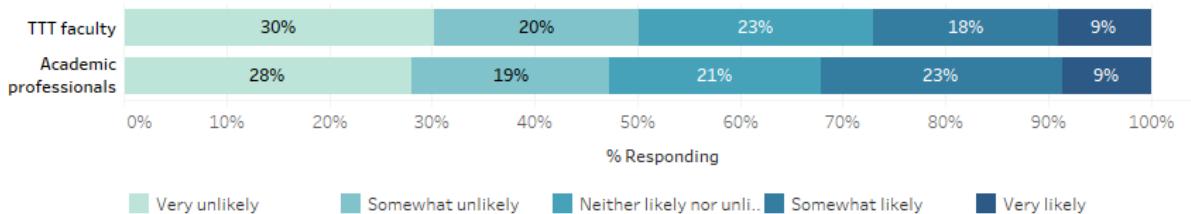
Intent to leave and reasons to do so

The two subgroups of long-term employees in the AWL Survey—TTT faculty and academic professionals—were asked the following item:

In the next three years, how likely are you to leave Cornell?

Responses were on a five-point scale ranging from “very unlikely” to “very likely.” Nine percent of both groups said they were “very likely” to leave (see Figure 7). Half of TTT faculty and 47% of academic professionals indicated that they were somewhat or very unlikely to leave in a three-year time frame.

Figure 7. Estimated likelihood of leaving Cornell in the next three years



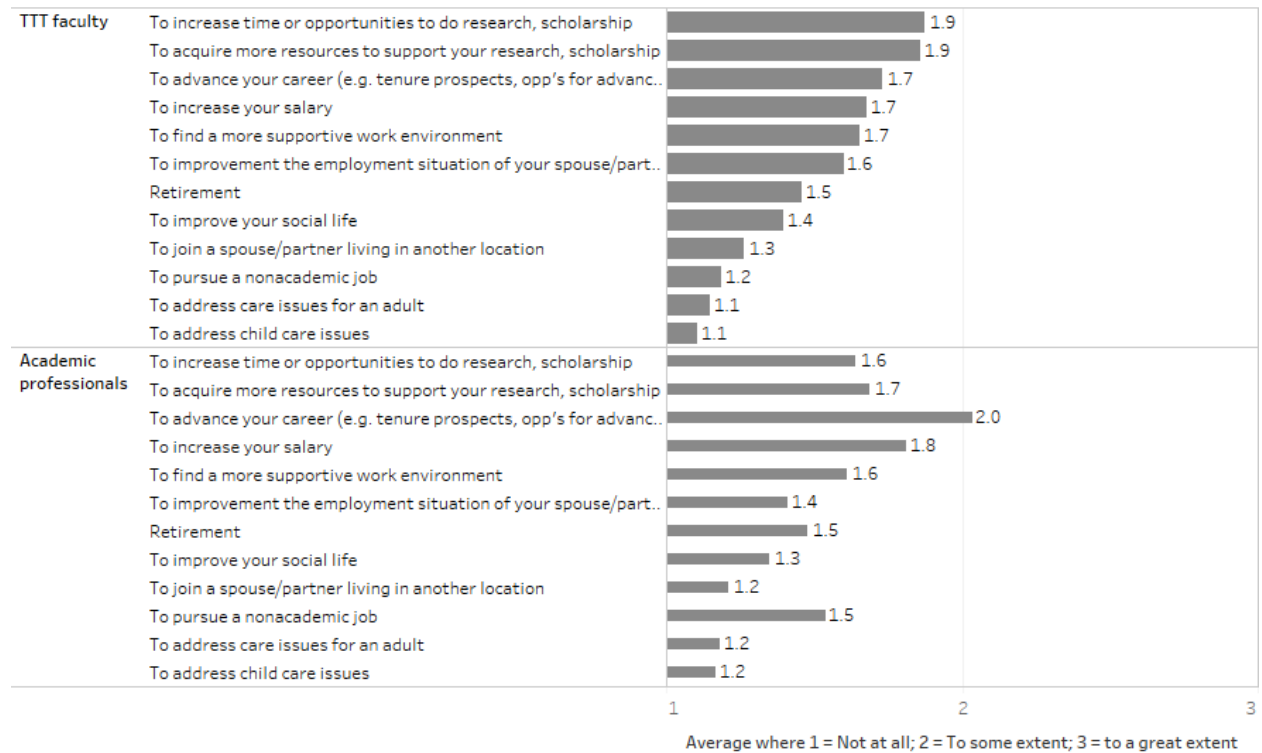
Following the item on the likelihood of leaving, respondents were asked:

To what extent, if any at all, have you considered the following as reasons to leave?

Responses were on a three-point scale ranging from “not at all” to “to a great extent” with a “not applicable” option.

As illustrated in Figure 8, the most important reasons to leave Cornell relate to advancing one’s scholarship, advancing one’s career prospects and increasing one’s salary. Personal and family issues figure less prominently across both populations.

Figure 8. Reasons to leave Cornell, mean responses by subgroup (excluding not applicable)



Additional reports

This overview of responses provides a very preliminary look at some of the data from the fall 2016 administration of the Academic Work Life Survey. Additional analyses of the AWL Survey data may provide more nuanced analyses of responses that: shed light on trends in certain indicators over time; highlight differences in academic experiences or views by gender or race or discipline; or illuminate interrelationships between and across different variables in the survey. These topical reports will be shared on the Institutional Research and Planning website when available and appropriate.