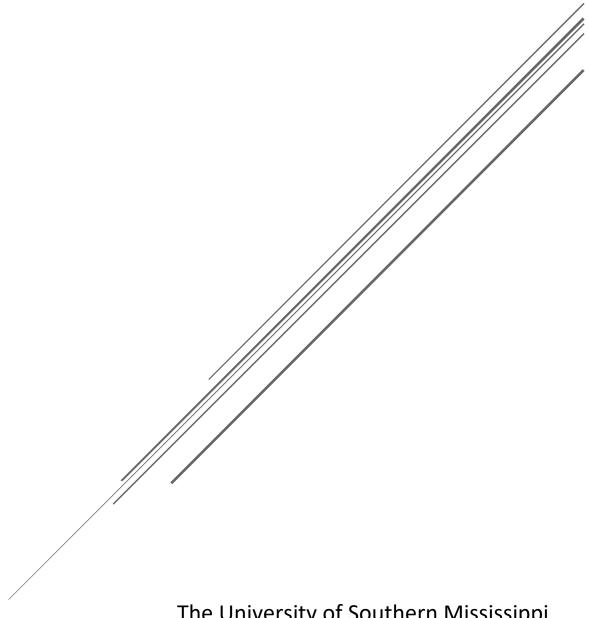# USM PROVOST FACULTY FELLOW SPRING 2024 PROJECT #2

Written by Michelle F. McLeese, PhD

The University of Southern Mississippi

Presented to Provost Lance Nail, PhD

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

BACKGROUND

During the Fall 2023 semester, the Office of the Provost at The University of Southern Mississippi (USM), made a call for the first two inaugural Provost Faculty Fellows. One fellowship, titled "Recruiting and Retaining Representative and Successful Faculty" sought a permanent full time faculty member (not in a senior administrative role) to propose and then carry out, a project that would address the challenge of recruiting and retaining representative and successful faculty at The University of Southern Mississippi. This individual (the author of this report) was paid a $6,000 stipend over the course of the Spring 2024 semester and asked to deliver a final report with recommendations, at the conclusion of the project. This document details and reports on the project, the process, the findings, and recommendations made to the Office of the Provost at the University of Southern Mississippi.

METHOD

Semi-structured interviews were conducted over the Spring 2024 semester with full time, permanent USM faculty. This method was chosen because it allowed for one-on-one dialogue with faculty to better understand their experiences (including how and why they came to work at USM, the successes they have experienced and witnessed as faculty, as well as the challenges and/or problems they have experienced and witnessed as faculty at USM). Interviews occurred virtually or face-to-face depending on interviewee preference. All interviewees received a $25 Amazon gift card for participating in the interview.

SAMPLE

Interviewees were selected randomly from a complete university roster of full time, permanent faculty at USM across titles, colleges, campuses, and racial/ethnic groups. A sample of 12-20 individuals was desired. To achieve this, a total of three sampling frames were created and at least two emails were sent to each faculty member.

In the first sampling frame, 20 faculty were emailed; nine of the 20 responded agreeing to be interviewed. In the second sampling frame, 11 additional faculty were emailed; six of the 11 responded, agreeing to be interviewed. In the third sampling frame, five additional faculty were emailed; one of the five responded, agreeing to be interviewed. Thus, after three sampling frames, a total of 36 faculty were emailed and of that 36 faculty, 16 faculty responded and agreed to be interviewed. This yielded a total response rate of 44%.

The majority of the sample, eleven faculty (68.75%) were female; five faculty (31.25%) were male.

Regarding race and ethnicity, eight faculty (50%) identified as white (non-Hispanic), four faculty (25%) identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, two faculty (12.5%) identified as Black/African Americans, and two faculty (12.5%) identified as Hispanic.

When it came to age, one faculty member (6.25%) was under the age of 30, four faculty (25%) were between ages 30-39, four faculty (25%) were between the ages of 40-49, five faculty

(31.25%) were between the ages of 50-59, and two faculty (12.5%) fell between 60-69 years of age.

Thirteen faculty (81.25%) were on the Hattiesburg campus while three faculty (18.75%) were on Gulf Park campuses/branches/centers.

Faculty also came from various ranks/tracks, and colleges. Two faculty (12.5%) were lecturers, two faculty (12.5%) were instructors, four faculty (25%) were assistant teaching professors, three faculty (18.75%) were associate professors, and three faculty (18.75%) were full professors.

Regarding college, eight faculty (50%) were based in the college of arts and sciences, three faculty (18.75%) were in the college of education and human sciences, three faculty (18.75%) were in the college of nursing and health professions, and two faculty (12.5%) were in the college of business and economic development.

Interviews ranged in time from 21-47 minutes and were conducted in person or virtually (depending on individual interviewee preference). Interviews were conducted from early March through mid-April of the Spring 2024 semester. Fourteen of the 16 interviews were conducted via the Zoom platform, while two interviews were conducted in person in faculty members' offices.

Interview questions were designed to better understand faculty experiences at USM. Three main topics examined were 1) Faculty stories of how they came to apply and then choose to remain at USM, 2) Successes and/or benefits they experience as USM faculty, and 3) Challenges and/or problems they experience as USM faculty. (See Appendix A for a full copy of questions asked and topics covered.) This project was reviewed and approved by the USM Institutional Review Board (IRB #24-0091).

ANALYSES

After interviews were conducted, the author and one graduate student transcribed each interview in Microsoft Word. Then, each file was reviewed by the author and identifying information was removed/redacted. Afterward, each file was imported into the analytical software program, NVivo. The researcher then used the software program to assist in tagging and organizing the major themes and codes of the interviews so that it would be clearer what patterns were evident in what interviewees said. The software is helpful in terms of organizing, storing, and marking sections of text and then labeling or "coding" them.

The coding approach used comes from that outlined by Saldaña (2021) where codes are meant to help "capture" the essence of data provided by interviewees. The author first read through each transcript and conducted initial coding (also called "free coding") where data are broken down into discrete parts and then examined for similarities and differences (Saldaña 2021:148). Each transcript was broken down into sections based on the main topics in the interview guide (USM history/stories, USM faculty benefits/successes, and USM challenges/problems). Next, a second round of coding was conducted, called "in vivo" coding, which focused on specific words or

phrases used by interviewees. Finally, a third round of "focused coding" was performed to help categorize all data in common categories or themes.

These interviews yielded six main findings: 1) USM Story/History (how faculty came to work at the university), 2) Faculty Benefits (all successes or positives about being faculty at the university), 3) Faculty Challenges (all the problems or concerns tied to being faculty at the university), 4) Mentorship Experiences (faculty experiences of mentorship, or lack thereof, and whether those with mentorship had 'passive' or 'active' mentorship experiences), Community v. Culture at USM (faculty defined community and/or culture and characterized their views of the community and/or culture of the university), and Advice to Self and Future Faculty (faculty pointed to what they would tell new faculty and/or themselves when they were first starting as faculty) .

Additionally, faculty were also asked as to whether they had ever considered leaving USM and why/why not.

RESULTS

There were six main findings that emerged from faculty interviews: *USM Story/History, Faculty Benefits, Faculty Challenges, Mentorship, Community v. USM Culture* and *Faculty Advice to Self and Future Faculty.* Within each finding, several codes emerged. Each finding is further detailed below.

Faculty Story/History

Faculty stories or history examined how faculty came to USM; there were six main reasons faculty shared that led them to USM: 1) having had a tie or connection to USM as a student (undergraduate, graduate, or both) prior to becoming a faculty member, 2) someone encouraged them to apply for a position or job opening at USM, 3) they were from Mississippi originally or were already living in Mississippi and working at USM was desired, 4) they were attracted to the specific program or position for various reasons (reputation, location, etc.,), 5) USM was the first to make an offer for the position and/or the interview experience was pleasant, and 6) specific grant(s) or research opportunities were a motivating factor.

Eleven faculty (68.75%) had a prior tie/connection to USM prior to becoming a faculty member.

Seven faculty (43.75%) were encouraged by someone else to apply for a job or consider working at USM.

Six faculty (37.5%) already lived in, or were from, Mississippi.

Four faculty (25%) were attracted to USM because of a specific program or position.

Three faculty (18.75%) said that they were on the job market, considering a wide range of options but USM was the first to make an offer and their interview experiences were pleasant.

Two faculty (12.5%) said that a specific grant or research opportunity motivated them to come to USM.

Faculty Benefits

When it came to the benefits of being faculty at USM, faculty mentioned three main reasons they enjoy being faculty and why they remain at Southern Miss: 1) love of their students and teaching, 2) feeling supported at USM, and 3) the autonomy and/or flexibility they have in their positions/roles.

Fifteen faculty (93.75%) said that a major benefit of being faculty (and one main reason they remained at USM) was that they loved the students and especially teaching students. These faculty characterized their teaching experiences with students as rewarding. For instance, faculty cited their enjoyment of seeing students grow academically and socially. Some faculty even characterized teaching students as a vocation or calling.

Thirteen faculty (81.25%) said that a benefit of being faculty (and a main reason they stay at USM) was feeling supported. Faculty felt supported in varying ways. For instance, some faculty said they felt they had support from their specific programs and/or schools. Other faculty did not felt supported from other offices, or units (e.g., Dean's office, graduate school, student affairs, etc.,).

Some faculty specifically pointed to having financial support (e.g., money to travel to conferences, facilities/equipment for research) and/or professional support whether that be professional development opportunities (e.g., ACUE workshops, Quality Matters, Center for Faculty Development (CFD), workshops on promotion and tenure, etc.,). In fact, six faculty (37.5%) specifically mentioned the variety of programming and opportunities offered for faculty in the Center for Faculty Development (CFD) and especially ACUE (Association of College and University Educators) courses and certificate offerings.

Ten faculty (62.5%) said a benefit of being faculty at USM, and a reason they remained was autonomy and/or flexibility. Faculty stressed the importance of having autonomy in teaching, research, and service and appreciated not being micromanaged. Specifically, faculty said that autonomy allows for creativity, encouraged the trying of new things, and experimenting with new tools, techniques, and ideas. Flexibility was also discussed by faculty especially in the development of curricula, course design, course delivery, research resources, and schedule flexibility.

Faculty Challenges

When it came to challenges of being faculty at USM, faculty had five main concerns: 1) lack of institutional and/or financial support, 2) lack of social support, 3) being underpaid, 4) having teaching challenges, and 5) problems of turnover with people regularly leaving/not staying.

Eleven faculty (68.75%) said that lacking institutional and/or financial support was a major concern they had. Specifically, of this group, four faculty (36%) said they were concerned by a

lack of communication, or unclear communication, four faculty (36%) felt that the university was constantly in a state of "we are doing our best" but this was not enough to fix the constant lack of finances, and three faculty (27%) said that outdated university processes that took too long and/or failure of the university at large to adapt or make changes to be more efficient, were problematic. For instance, the faculty concerned with outdated practices and processes pointed to reimbursements of faculty, staff, and students taking entirely too long and the fact that many processes that were "on paper" should have become digitized long ago.

Eight faculty (50%) pointed to a lack of social support as a major challenge or concern. Specifically, of this group, faculty said they felt devalued as a result of not being heard in their complaints of too high a workload. Additionally, too high of a workload means that faculty cannot cultivate/build connections with others (e.g., community) because they are having to always work. Some in this group also said that not being included in decision making (in leadership from the program to the university), communicated a lack of value of them. And, not having mentorship made some feel disconnected or lost.

Eight faculty (50%) stressed that being underpaid is a big challenge. Although most said they do not do the jobs they do "for the money," it is stressful especially in light of increasing costs and increasing demands (workload). Some mentioned that a related challenge is seeing that USM cannot compare (in salary/compensation) to peer institutions (and even institutions in the state of Mississippi) and this made them want to leave and go elsewhere. A couple of faculty members said that this major gap in pay made it difficult to want to remain loyal to USM and that it is the job of the administration to ensure faculty are fairly compensated.

Five faculty (31.25%) discussed how teaching challenges were problematic. First, some faculty pointed to students not being prepared for college and how this impacts the faculty's ability to serve students because it means additional workload on top of already high teaching loads. Second, this means that faculty struggle to adapt to needed course offerings (e.g., having to keep changing course offerings because of too many or too few students, new preps last minute, loss/change in personnel, etc.,). All of this has an impact on what happens (or doesn't) in the classroom. Additionally, a few faculty mentioned that most faculty do not come in knowing how to teach and need time to adapt, adjust, and cultivate that teaching. This makes taking professional development courses (e.g., ACUE) important but there isn't really time when faculty are already having to adapt to course loads, offerings, preparation of material, and meeting students where they are.

Three faculty (18.75%) noted that turnover is very challenging in general. Though faculty mentioned the turnover in faculty being a problem because it means having to find new faculty to teach (and often on a short timeline), they especially pointed to the issue of turnover among staff. This presents not only the problem of keeping staff operations efficient and going smoothly, it also lowers morale (for staff and faculty). These faculty recognized that this project was specifically about faculty but were emphatic that it is not fair for staff to also be underpaid—they also need a voice and fair compensation.

Mentorship Experiences

USM faculty discussed their experiences with mentorship at USM and it became clear that where mentorship existed, it was very important. However, mentorship did not always take the same form, and faculty did best with "active" or "engaged" mentorship as opposed to "passive" or less engaged mentorship.

Thirteen faculty (81.25%) said they had an official mentor(s) assigned to them, while the remaining three (18.75%) did not.

Of the thirteen faculty who had mentors, nine (69%) said they had mentors who were engaged and involved in their professional and social development—in short, "active" mentors.

Active mentors would reach out to faculty and check in on them academically as well as socially. They would have coffee or a meal once in a while to see how work was going (research, teaching, service); at times active mentors would encourage involvement in extracurricular activities (or strongly suggest decreasing involvement in service to protect research/scholarship or focus on feedback to improve teaching). Several faculty kept mentioning the importance of timelines and milestones (e.g., annual evaluations, promotion and tenure dossiers/timelines, feedback on manuscripts or research ideas, professional development, and more). Active mentors were not "hand holders" but rather were actively engaged in the academic and social well being of the faculty mentee. And while less mentorship may be needed or expected post-tenure, active mentors would be appreciated post-tenure and post-promotion by at least a couple of faculty. A couple of recurring themes in this group included the sentiment that these faculty would not be where they are today (professionally) were it not for their mentors. Furthermore, these faculty seemed to reminisce over memories and situations where their mentors made them feel connected to information, resources, and others—all of which have played a role in their current (or upcoming) success in persistence, promotion, etc.,

The remaining four faculty (31%), had official mentors, but these mentors while available for help or to answer questions, were much more "hands off—in short, "passive" mentors.

Passive mentors were known to be there for the faculty member (there was an official assignment and it was clear they were the "mentor") but were less engaged and really were informal mentors. The burden to reach out for help and know what to ask was on the mentee. This in and of itself was not a problem per se, but these faculty noted that as 'new' faculty, they did not always know what to reach out about, or when to do the reaching out. For instance, one faculty member mentioned that they really needed someone to help guide them on the future promotion and/or tenure process but they were not currently getting that help (their mentor was not in the same role/promotion track). A couple of other faculty missed the sense of collaboration and community that they found previously in their graduate studies and were not sure how to regain that, especially as the 'new' faculty member in a program or unit of faculty who had more seniority. And yet at least one faculty member pointed to the fact that while they had an officially assignment mentor, this person was a "nice person" but was not a 'good' mentor.

Finally, three faculty (18.75%) did not have an official mentor assigned though they would have benefitted from some kind of mentorship and thus had to just figure things out on their own. In a couple of cases, the faculty member was hired into a more senior role or position and did not have a mentor because of their seniority, or because there was a lack of available mentors in that field/area. In one case, the faculty member was hired before any mentorship structure existed in their unit/program so no one in that area was officially 'mentored.'

Community and USM Culture

Conversations of community and USM culture revealed some patterns in definitions and characterizations.

Regarding community definitions, faculty said that to them personally, community meant having support, being supported, and knowing you have support from those around you. Specifically, seven faculty (43.75%) mentioned support being important for community. And of those seven, six (85.7%) said that feeling connected and/or like they belonged was especially important. Faculty also said having similar or shared values were important but not required.

Eleven faculty (68.75%) indicated they did feel they had a community at USM (although in varying degrees, ways, and places). Six faculty (37.5%) specifically pointed to community they gained from attending and/or participating in ACUE (Association of College and University Educators) courses offered by the Center for Faculty Development (CFD).

Those faculty who indicated they did not really feel they had a community at USM talked of difficulties, disconnections, or feelings of separation. For several faculty, some challenges appeared to be tied to generation and/or age differences around teaching, scholarship, and/or service. In other cases, challenges stemmed from feelings of isolation because of the global Covid-19 pandemic (being stuck in a home office, being disconnected from a different branch/campus, and feeling a time pinch because of a higher workload without time to actively seek others out.

When it came to USM culture specifically, eight faculty (50%) said USM culture had positive and/or supportive elements. Six faculty (37.5%) said USM culture was challenging and/or lacking support in some ways. At least a few faculty felt USM culture had both positive AND negative components, and four faculty (25%) were either neutral or did not wish to comment/discuss USM culture.

Those who characterized USM culture as positive and/or supportive said they viewed the culture as positive or supportive because people at USM want to help others, to be "inclusive," and the culture "feels like home" both because some have a history with USM and because of community outreach and/or connection(s).

Conversely, those who characterized USM culture as negative and/or lacking support pointed to a lack of interactions with others (some tied to the aftermath of the covid-19 pandemic, others tied to reorganizing or restructuring of units/programs). For instance, a faculty member said that sometimes their school felt "too big" and had too many different disciplines that made relating to

other colleagues and their respective fields, difficult (academically as well as socially). Another negative aspect of culture that was raised included a culture of 'elitism' (especially between and among tenure track, teaching track, and instructor/lecturer track positions) and how this made some faculty feel devalued for what they did/their role. Several faculty participants also characterized a culture of pressure, intensity, and/or "survival" mode in response to challenges of turnover, workload, and/or decreases in enrollment (within their units and/or at the university at large).

Advice to Self and Future Faculty

Two main categories of advice emerged from faculty when asked what they would tell future faculty and/or themselves when first beginning as faculty: 1) be active/get involved and 2) think of yourself/take care of yourself.

Faculty said being active/getting involved was an important piece of advice they would give to new faculty and themselves as new faculty. Specifically, nine faculty (56.25%) said make connections (academic and social) with others and seek resources; four faculty (25%) said it was important to know what is expected of you (especially as it pertains to your role/position and promotion/tenure requirements) and to seek out opportunities; three faculty (18.75%) said to speak up and have a voice, and two faculty (12.5%) said to explore Hattiesburg and learn more about it and what it has to offer especially for those not from Hattiesburg, from Mississippi, or the deep South).

Faculty also said that thinking of yourself/taking care of yourself was another important piece of advice they would give to new faculty and themselves as new faculty. Specifically, three faculty (18.75%) to ask yourself why ae you here and what is your purpose; three faculty (18.75%) said to hang in there and be willing to learn and grow; three faculty (18.75%) said to listen and be open-minded; and two faculty (12.5%) said to set boundaries and trust yourself.

A few faculty offered advice in retrospect that they would change if they could including negotiating better salaries/start-ups, asking themselves to seriously consider if they really wanted to live in Mississippi in the long-term, and one faculty member said that given the chance again, they would not have chosen to come to USM.

Faculty were asked whether they ever considered leaving USM and why.

Seven faculty (43.75%) said they did not consider leaving USM because they loved being at USM, had family close by they wanted to stay near, were planning to retire in Mississippi in the next few years, and overall enjoyed the family feel of the campus/community and being at Southern Miss.

Nine faculty (56.25%) said they had considered leaving at one point or another but for six of those faculty (67%), they either did not feel they could realistically leave (family obligations, lack of funds/money to do so, unable to start over) or they just did not feel compelled to get on the market and actually look. However, three faculty (33%) of the nine faculty not only thought

of leaving, but disclosed that they had applied in the recent past for other university positions, or, were currently on the market and looking to leave USM.

CONCLUSION/FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

The University of Southern Mississippi (USM) is a state institution steeped with rich history, tradition, and longevity. Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 full time faculty over the Spring 2024 semester, by a fellow faculty member to better understand more about their individual faculty experiences.

Interviewees provided information and perspectives that helped to uncover some important data on what led faculty to The University of Southern Mississippi (USM), what positive experiences they have had as faculty, and what challenges they have experienced as faculty.

Additionally, faculty provided important insights on their personal definitions of community and their characterization of the culture at USM (or the lack thereof), experiences with mentorship (or lack thereof), and their advice to future faculty and earlier selves. This information not only yielded rich findings but served as the foundation for the following recommendations:

1. A follow-up assessment in the form of a faculty survey should be created and launched (preferably as soon as possible). In this survey, categories examined in interviews should be included and options to remain completely anonymous (including the choice to answer, or refuse to answer, demographics and affiliations with specific programs/departments, schools, and locations/campuses), are crucial.
2. Mentorship experiences should be expected to be broad, however, it became clear in these interviews that some individuals have had much better experiences with mentorship than others. For the majority of interviewees who had positive and "active" mentorship experiences, they discussed feeling better adjusted, happier, and overall persisted in overcoming challenges when faced with them in their roles. Mentorship alone will not help individuals to feel supported, but this is likely one way to help build strong and positive communities at the university level and within schools and programs. Thus, recommendations include building and/or improving community at the university, college, and school levels; this should be delegated to existing leaders (administrators, deans, directors, etc.,). It should be noted that mentorship does not necessarily have to be focused in an 'academic' context. This is one way and has value. However, new faculty to the university (even when not new to academia), also benefit from mentorship and community.
3. Faculty are significantly underpaid. While this was not the ONE thing mentioned by all faculty, it was evident that the lowered pay is noticed and communicates a lack of value especially as it pertains to the important work (and increasing load of work) expected of faculty. Since the completion of this project there have been discussions of merit-based pay for faculty. While this is an important step in the correct direction, it should be recognized that it will need to only be the beginning. Efforts and initiatives to increase faculty pay and compensation will need to be prioritized, and regularly, in order to recruit and retain successful faculty.

4. Faculty also pointed to high workloads as a challenge; this is not only putting them at risk of burnout, but leads to feeling undervalued, overwhelmed, and frustrated. Workloads that are too high or only continue to grow (even incrementally), will lead to resentment. Workload inequity such that some have less work while others have more (in similar roles, positions, etc.,) are also problematic.
5. Perceptions of community and culture are important; while most faculty indicated they felt they had some form of community at USM, it was clear that not all faculty felt the current USM culture was positive and/or supportive. Thus, it will be important to continue to work on ways to improve upon, and in some cases, create positive communities and culture(s).
6. Finally, although outside the scope of this project, assessments (e.g., interviews, surveys, or both) that examine USM Staff need to be created and launched; this will help to address the issue of turnover currently impacting staff (and concerning faculty who also see staff turnover as a cause for concern).

LIMITATIONS

A couple of limitations exist with this project. First, time was a limitation as the project had to be completed by the end of the Spring 2024 semester. However, because one of the future recommendations is to launch a survey, it is hoped that more will be learned of faculty with a survey that can capture a larger sample of faculty. Second, although sampling was random, the person conducting the research was a faculty member. On the one hand, while this may have encouraged some faculty to participate, it may also have discouraged others from participating.

REFERENCES

Saldaña, Johnny. 2021. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers.* 4th ed. Los Angeles,
   CA: SAGE Publications.

APPENDIX A

Spring 2024 Faculty Interview Question Guide

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview, learning more about your experiences at USM as a faculty member. As a reminder, you are only asked to answer questions you are comfortable answering and are free to skip/pass any, and to end the interview at any point in time. Although your identity will be known to me and the research team (including 1-2 grad students assisting with transcription), your identity will be kept confidential and NO identifying information will be shared in any presentation of *any* of these data.

The USM IRB has approved this project IRB# 24-0091

Do you have any questions or concerns about the informed consent? (If no, proceed)

Before we begin are you willingly participating in this interview? (If yes, proceed)

Begin recording: Do I have your permission to record this interview? (If yes, proceed)

OPENING:

I'd first like to begin by asking you your name, pronouns, and official title at USM.

What discipline/program are you in? What school and college are you in?

Topic 1: History at USM/Your USM story

1) How long have you been at USM?
2) What motivated you to accept a job offer at USM? (probe for specific attractions or benefits). Why Mississippi? (probe for details)
3) How were you recruited to join USM? (probe for details)
4) What did you most (and least like) about how you were recruited? Why?
5) How do you define community? Do you feel you have community here at USM? Why/why not? How would you define the culture of USM? Why?

Topic 2: Benefits/Pros to being a USM faculty member

1) What things do you most enjoy about being a faculty member at USM? Why?
2) What keeps you at USM? Why? (probe: research, teaching, service)
3) In what ways has the university/college/school/program enhanced your experience as a faculty member? Why? (probe for each level as interviewee is comfortable doing so)
4) What have your experiences of mentorship been like at USM? (probe specifics)

Topic 3: Challenges/Cons to being a USM faculty member

1) What things do you see as most challenging about being a faculty member at USM? Why?
2) In what ways could the university/college/school/program improve your experience as a faculty member? Why?

3) Do you ever think of leaving USM? Why/why not? (If yes, probe for things program/school/college/university could do to change this.)
4) What (if anything) would you change at USM? Why?

CLOSING:

As we wrap up, think of the topics we've just discussed, have I neglected to ask anything? Is there anything you'd like to add or expand upon that we have already covered?

What advice would you give to future faculty who have just arrived to USM? Why?

If you could go back to yourself when first arriving at USM, what would you tell yourself? Why?

Demographics:

How do you identify when it comes to race/ethnicity?

How do you identify when it comes to sex/gender?

How old are you?

This concludes our interview. Thank you for your time!