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Rethinking Faculty Development and Assessment at Olin College: A Community-Oriented Design Process

ROBERT MARTELLO

CAITRIN LYNCH

MARK SOMERVILLE

LYNN ANDREA STEIN

VINCENT P. MANNO

Olin College of Engineering
Needham, MA

ABSTRACT

In 2012, Olin College initiated an effort to improve its faculty reappointment and promotion (R&P) system in response to a lack of alignment between faculty activities, the institutional mission, and the traditional assessment criteria defined in the faculty manual. Olin engaged in a six-step user-oriented design process that guided the academic community through a sequence of conversations and planning exercises. At the end of the year, Olin piloted an experimental system that redefined faculty responsibilities as a portfolio of activities to serve three overlapping purposes: developing students, building and sustaining the college, and achieving impact outside the college. These faculty responsibilities became the foundation of a new faculty development and assessment system that included additional developmental feedback, annual reports and reviews that generate evidence of faculty progress towards personal and institutional goals, and reappointment and promotion reviews that further reinforce the larger mission. Although the design process and the resulting faculty development and assessment system were responsive to Olin's specific context, we believe that the lessons learned from this experience can be applied to other institutions interested in aligning faculty assessment categories and feedback processes with individual and institutional priorities.

Key words: Faculty development, Faculty assessment, Community-oriented design process

INTRODUCTION

In 2007-2008, Olin College had many reasons to celebrate. Chartered a decade earlier with the mission of revolutionizing engineering education, Olin's physical infrastructure, curriculum,



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and institutional practices were still evolving even after the first students graduated in 2006. The founding faculty and staff worked tirelessly in these early years, and could point to significant achievements such as accreditation, curricular innovations, and graduating several classes of students. But unfortunately, Olin's increasingly contentious faculty reappointment and promotion process had reached a crisis by this point, threatening to overshadow the college's achievements and undermine its culture.

Although Olin does not offer tenure to faculty, its early R&P policies and processes followed common institutional best practices. Upon the conclusion of each six-year contract and when requesting consideration for promotions between Assistant, Associate, and Full Professor ranks, faculty presented a record of intellectual vitality (including research), teaching, and service. The faculty manual explicitly specified that strengths in one or more of these categories could not compensate for weaknesses in others. As Olin's first faculty cohorts began moving through the R&P process, tensions surfaced. The extremely high workload of the "startup" years, which emphasized innovative course development, institution building, and risk taking, did not align with the stated R&P priorities. Discussions between faculty and administration identified serious disconnects between the mission of the college, faculty aspirations and expectations, and the policies contained in the faculty manual. Faculty stress and disillusionment manifested in the form of angry conversations and meetings, de-prioritization of institution-building activities, and reduced engagement in activities (such as supervising undergraduate research) that faculty believed would "not count" towards promotion. In response, Olin initiated an R&P revision in 2012. A design process and experimental implementation of a new system took place over the next two years, resulting in changes to the faculty manual and ongoing modifications. While Olin's problems were rooted in its specific institutional culture, calls for changes to reappointment, tenure, and promotion systems are widespread across higher education institutions. A 2019 National Academies workshop entitled "Re-envisioning Promotion and Advancement for STEM Faculty" places Olin's 2008 crisis in a broader context:

Faculty in science, technology, engineering, and medicine (STEM) are expected to excel in their technical work, teaching, and professional service. Their career advancement is often determined by academic peers evaluating accomplishments in these three areas. Recently, however, there is a growing concern that the evaluation of those accomplishments and traditional incentive systems are misaligned with some of the values and missions of higher education institutions, such as student learning, public engagement, and innovative research. Debates about current advancement systems also point to a body of research on the negative effects of traditional advancement criteria on the academic environment



and workforce, including the influence of systemic and individual biases on the promotion and advancement of women and individuals from underrepresented populations. (National Academies. 2020, 1)

Olin's 2012 R&P revision continued a long tradition of institutional efforts to revise faculty assessment criteria, and a rich body of scholarship explores potential outcomes and approaches that these approaches might take. For example, in 1990 Ernest Boyer proposed a new approach to scholarship that greatly expands the traditional definition of faculty research (Boyer, 1990; Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff, 1997), and more recent investigations have posited the value of reforming faculty assessment systems to address goals such as internationalization (Redden, 2015), community engagement (O'Meara, Eatman, and Petersen, 2015), preventing institutional bias (O'Meara, 2014), interdisciplinary integration (National Academies, 2018), and many others. This paper describes the **community-oriented design process** taken by Olin's R&P Committee and Olin's resulting **shift from promotion and reappointment to faculty development and assessment**. A new conception of the relationship between faculty and the larger institution fostered conversations and initiatives at the individual and college-wide levels. We hope that Olin's R&P revision process and features of its new system might offer inspiration and guidance to others.

A USER-ORIENTED DESIGN PROCESS

Olin's change process was led by the Faculty R&P Committee with the support of the Provost and President. The committee consisted of full professors, associate professors, and an associate dean. Several of the members, including the chairperson, were faculty members who had recently experienced the R&P process. From the outset, the R&P Committee recognized the complexity and difficulty of its task. A college's R&P policies have critical implications for individual careers, livelihoods, and professional identities, and they affect the institution's reputation, financial viability, hiring and retention processes, and ability to carry out its mission. R&P stakeholders encompass faculty, administration, trustees, and other constituencies invested in the institution's success. Given the diversity of stakeholders and the sensitivity and importance of this topic, the committee decided to apply an intentional, collaborative, user-oriented design process with frequent interactions across the academic community. (For an overview of user-inclusive participatory design see Trishler et. al, 2018; for the origins of participatory design see Kuhn and Muller, 1993.) This six-stage process required significant time and effort to bring all perspectives and voices into the deliberations (see Figure 1).



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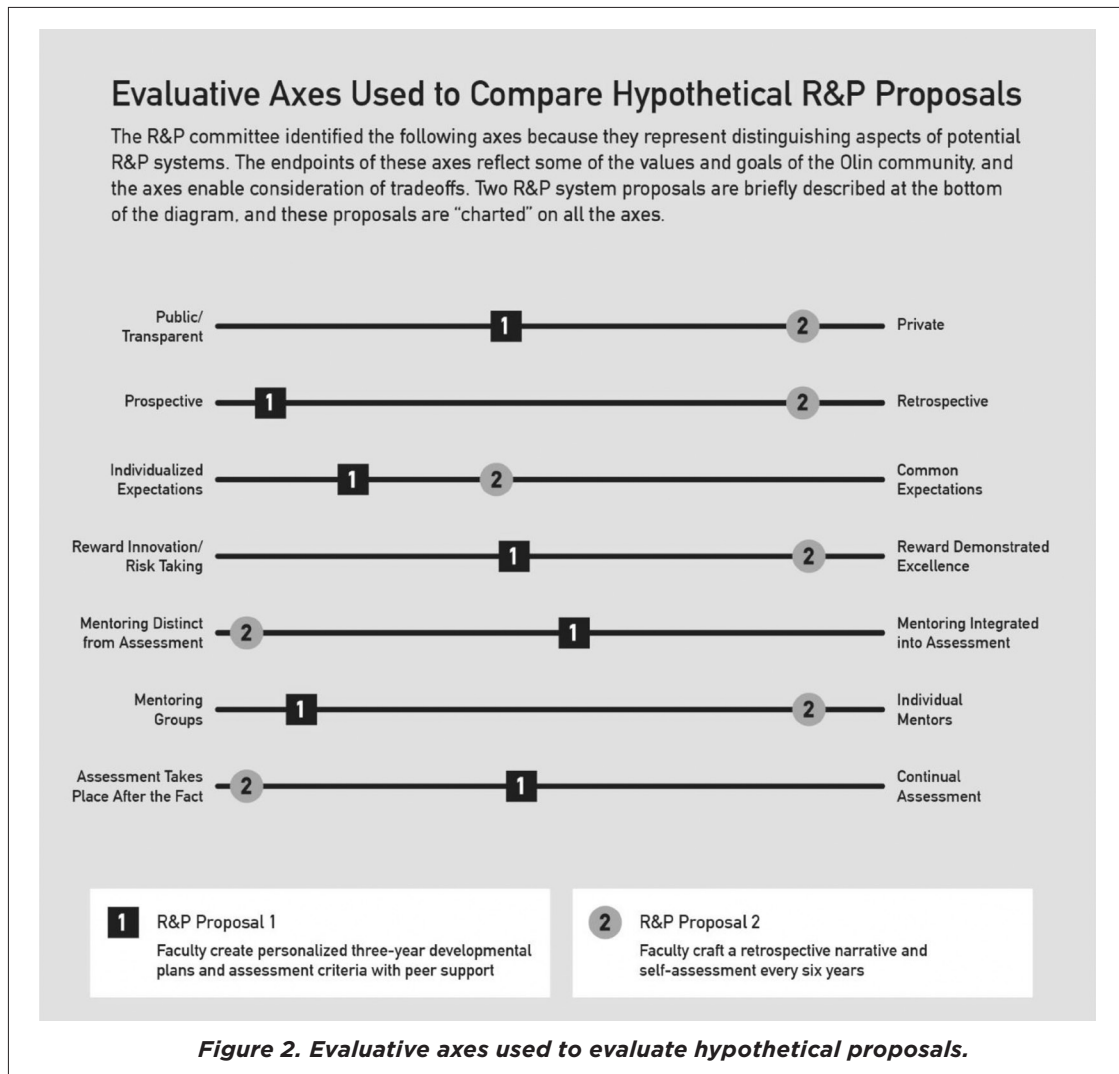


Stage one of the design process initiated a several-month **information-gathering period**, in which committee members interviewed faculty and administrators at other institutions; reviewed relevant educational literature and external faculty manuals; and read case studies of promotion, tenure, and professional development inside and outside the academy. The committee also solicited



the views of different Olin stakeholders by interviewing the President, Provost, several trustees, and nearly all faculty members; running structured discussions with small faculty groups; and conducting anonymous surveys. During this phase, the committee emphasized its intention to listen to and understand current perspectives instead of proposing possible solutions. Findings were shared with the community, both to emphasize the careful work underway and to continue inviting responses.

In stage two, the **synthesis and feedback phase** of the design process, the committee began synthesizing a set of potential values, constraints, and tensions associated with faculty R&P, even though the community’s views had not converged. The committee started distilling actionable messages from the wide range of stakeholder responses through a second round of workshop activities. One strategy involved creating various “axes” (see Figure 2) that juxtaposed possible values or





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program elements to facilitate analysis and comparison. For example, one axis ranged from *faculty assessment takes place after the fact* to *continual assessment*. Axes added tangibility to abstract value statements and highlighted real-world tradeoffs. To help process the outcomes of these workshops, the committee created several faculty “personas” – fictional but plausible embodiments of representative faculty perspectives, values, goals, and concerns. Although the stakeholders did not yet agree on all issues, they better understood the complexity of the challenge, and started using common language to express the goals and values that would shape an eventual new system.

The committee then initiated stage three, a **generation and co-design phase**, by creating “sketches” of several hypothetical faculty development and assessment approaches. The sketches spanned a range of possible R&P system approaches and priorities and mapped them onto the axes developed in the prior phase. These sketches included explanations of how each possible system might work from a logistical/process perspective, and narrative descriptions imagining a faculty member’s experience throughout their career. The committee ran a faculty retreat in which teams “play tested” and evaluated the sketches through the perspective of different personas as well as their own experience. The goal was not to select a single winning proposal, but rather to generate feedback, unearth underlying stakeholder concerns, and identify principles that could help define the constraints, objectives, and components of an eventual system.

The committee used this feedback to craft a final proposal and begin stage four, the **proposal and review phase**. The proposed R&P system (explained below) was shared with the community through another retreat that offered an opportunity for intensive discussion and feedback. This inclusive approach throughout the design process laid the groundwork for significant faculty and administration consensus on many of the main aspects of this proposal. By this point stakeholders understood the tradeoffs and values that informed the proposal and were eager to experiment.

The college then began stage five, a year-long **testing phase** in which proposed R&P system components were introduced and revised to the extent permitted by existing policies. These changes were treated as experiments run alongside the existing system to allow the community to refine the proposed changes before committing to them. For example, annual reports made use of new templates, and faculty coming up for R&P could elect to be evaluated under either the old or new criteria. This testing phase culminated in the introduction of formal revisions to the faculty manual to implement the proposed changes, replacing the prior guidelines with language that closely aligned the spirit of the new system with operational policies. The high level of community knowledge and buy-in, which directly resulted from the collaborative (rather than consultative) design process, led to unanimous approval of the changes by the faculty, Provost, President, and, ultimately, by the Board of Trustees.



Olin's ability to implement policy changes was aided by contextual factors such as its small size, innovation-centric mission, and relative lack of bureaucracy. Even so, this change process was challenging to implement, and the result is still a work in progress. Faculty and administration continue to engage in stage six, the ongoing **modification and improvement** phase. The details of the new system and some of the modifications taking place are explained in the next section.

OLIN'S MISSION-ALIGNED SYSTEM

Olin's design process culminated in the development of an integrated system of faculty assessment, development, and mentoring that incorporates feedback throughout the year, annual reports and reviews, reappointment evaluations at the culmination of each contract, and promotion reviews. The ideological core of Olin's new system is a new definition of the responsibilities of a faculty member. In the early years, Olin followed the practice of many institutions by establishing orthogonal "teaching, research, and service" faculty expectations. Under its new system, Olin defines faculty responsibilities as a portfolio of activities that collectively serve three overlapping purposes: **developing students, building and sustaining the college, and achieving impact outside the college.**

Olin's new system differs in several important ways from the research-teaching-service framing. First, while the traditional categories are activity-focused (faculty *perform* teaching, research, and service) the new system is **purpose-focused** (faculty teach for the *purpose* of developing students). This approach emphasizes the pursuit of outcomes that are meaningful to individual faculty while also advancing the institutional mission. Second, while the traditional framing suggests that research, teaching, and service are largely orthogonal and independent, the new system uses a Venn diagram (see Figure 3) to envision how the three purposes might overlap and reinforce each other via synergistic activities (e.g., doing research with undergraduates, teaching an innovative course that can be presented at an educational conference, etc.). And third, the new approach incentivizes faculty activities that are critical to the institution's mission and culture (such as community engagement or interdisciplinary integration) but might not align with traditional criteria. Overall, these three criteria attempt to **measure and incentivize what is valued**, rather than valuing and incentivizing what is traditionally measurable.

The new approach reframes reappointment and promotion as components of a broader faculty development and assessment system (see Figure 4). A successful development and assessment system must work holistically across different timescales to identify personal and institutional goals, align these goals with faculty activities, and gather evidence of outcomes and impacts. Olin's new system proposed several **formative feedback-generating check-ins** each year that might include lunch

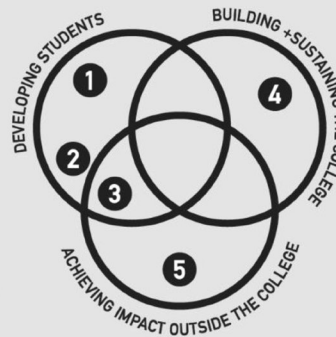


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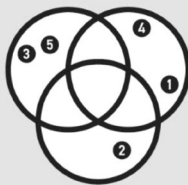
Purpose-Focused Faculty Responsibilities as Venn Diagram

Olin's R&P system is based upon the alignment of faculty activities with key components of Olin's mission. All faculty members identify up to six activities each year and place them on the Venn diagram shown below. Mentoring and evaluation conversations at annual reviews emphasize the faculty member's growth and impact across the three assessment categories. The following diagram illustrates how a faculty member's five major activities might appear on the diagram.

- 1 Teach three classes
- 2 Mentor undergraduate advisees
- 3 Research with undergraduates
- 4 Chair a college committee
- 5 Present at a professional conference

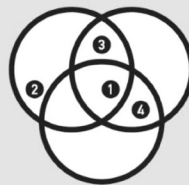


Evaluation of Three Faculty Members



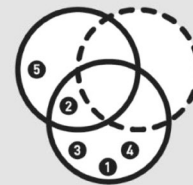
EXAMPLE FACULTY A
MISSION ALIGNMENT THROUGH
NON-OVERLAPPING ACTIVITIES

Faculty member A has made progress in all three assessment areas via a set of activities that each achieves a single goal.



EXAMPLE FACULTY B
MISSION ALIGNMENT THROUGH
OVERLAPPING ACTIVITIES

Faculty member B has made progress in all three assessment areas thanks to a set of activities that often achieve multiple goals. The three Venn diagram circles are populated with two or three activities each.



EXAMPLE FACULTY C
INCOMPLETE MISSION
ALIGNMENT

Faculty member C has made progress in only two of the three assessment areas: the "Building and Sustaining the College" goal (upper right circle) has not been addressed. The annual review conversation can focus on identifying one or more new activities or shifting existing activities in ways that address this component of the mission.

Figure 3. Venn diagrams that facilitate faculty evaluation and developmental conversations.



Faculty development and evaluation on different time scales

Olin offers a mixture of formative and summative assessments, operating on different timescales. The (nominally) six-year contract renewal and promotion process, with a year three "check-in" review, drives the overall system, but these events are supported by annual reports and reviews that serve dual developmental and assessment roles, as well as less formal mentorship conversations throughout each year.

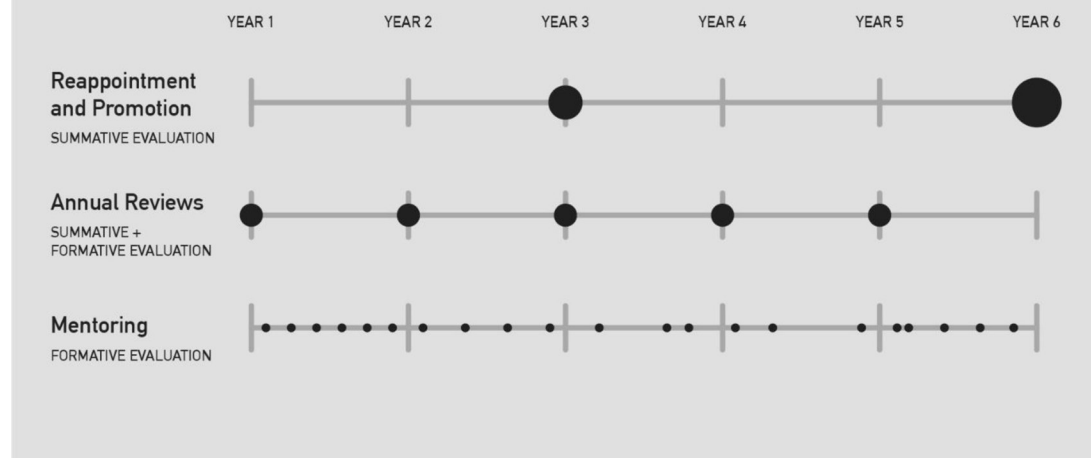


Figure 4. Timing of faculty evaluation and development interactions.

meetings among faculty peers, engagements among members of a teaching team, and mentorship meetings with a dean or senior faculty member. These meetings inform **yearly annual reports and review meetings with a dean**, in which faculty members reflect on their activities and achievements over the past year by employing the Venn diagram described above, set new goals for the following year, and receive feedback from members of the administration, typically the Provost and an associate dean. Finally, annual reviews feed into **longer-timeframe R&P reviews**. Although Olin does not provide tenure, the faculty R&P committee (consisting of an interdisciplinary mix of full and associate professors as well as an associate dean) is responsible for reviewing faculty for contract renewal every six years and promotion as appropriate. The R&P committee receives a dossier from individuals seeking reappointment or promotion and triangulates the information in the dossier with other sources of evidence such as annual review letters; solicited letters from qualified internal and external reviewers, community members, and collaborators; and teaching evaluations. This approach allows the committee to understand the individual's developmental trajectory, assess the individual's impact across the Venn diagram, and obtain insight into the individual's behaviors and accomplishments.

**LOOKING FORWARD, AND LESSONS LEARNED**

Olin's faculty development and assessment system is an imperfect work in progress. Although the relevant faculty manual R&P policies have not been revised since the approval of the new system, implementation practices evolve continually in response to faculty concerns and feedback. Some elements such as peer "mentoring circles" never succeeded and were replaced with new mentorship approaches such as reserving periodic faculty meeting time for peer-to-peer conversations. Annual report guidelines have changed to include new prompts to scaffold the reflection and evidence-gathering process, and the frequency of faculty-administration conversations increased to enable more check-ins and opportunities for feedback.

The overall success of Olin's R&P changes is hard to assess. The new system offered several immediate improvements compared to the stressful 2008-2010 conditions: faculty returned to their previously higher levels of participation in activities such as committee service and supervision of undergraduate research (activities they started dropping in 2008 after concerns about "what really counts") and general morale seemed to improve. But some faculty still experience confusion and stress when they face the prospect of reappointment or promotion, and many faculty request clearer assessment expectations or more frequent opportunities for reflection and conversation. Olin's R&P committee is currently contemplating a second pass through the design process to explore current stakeholder concerns and possible revisions to the system, including new faculty manual changes.

Olin's design process and resulting R&P system emerged in response to its unique history and culture. While the procedural and systemic details may not directly translate to other institutional contexts, several broader conclusions offer instructional lessons.

Change as a Design Process

Olin's early decision to frame change as a design process proved invaluable, resulting in more diverse ideas and perspectives as well as improved trust and buy-in from all stakeholders. Initially, the likelihood of successfully changing such a complex, high-stakes system seemed remote. The experimental, iterative process allowed the community to collaboratively test and revise early ideas and explore possibilities before committing. Converting abstract ideas (goals, values, operational principles) into concrete personas, axes, scenarios, and narratives allowed stakeholders to reach a shared understanding of how the system would operate in practice and gain confidence in the community's ability to effect change.

Holistic Faculty Development and Assessment

Throughout this process the committee evolved its sense of mission from "fix the R&P system" to "explore and design a larger system for faculty development and assessment." This broader framing



produced a holistic approach that attempts to align faculty hiring, mentorship and development, yearly reviews, and R&P assessments with the institutional mission. Olin's revised system uses personal and institutional values as the driving force behind faculty development and assessment. Olin's institutional values support faculty activities in areas outside the traditional research-teaching-service framework and emphasize faculty behaviors such as teamwork, risk-taking, and interdisciplinary integration. The Venn diagram visualization highlights Olin's purpose-focused assessment categories, incentivizes the pursuit of activities that fall within more than one category, and fosters developmental conversations that emphasize individual and institutional goals and values.

While Olin's new system is far from perfect, it represents an improvement over its prior policies, and the design process offers hope that continued change is possible. Across the academy, institutions deal with challenges of achieving diversity, equity, and inclusion; exhaustion of younger faculty and disengagement of experienced faculty; emphasis upon traditional performance criteria to the detriment of desired behaviors and activities; toxic work environments; and others. Many of these issues are exacerbated by misalignment between faculty and institutional expectations and assessment criteria (National Academies, 2018; National Academies, 2020; O'Meara, Eatman, and Petersen, 2015). An open and inclusive change process, directed at the implementation of a faculty development and assessment system that measures and incentivizes what is valued, rather than valuing and incentivizing what is traditionally measurable, can foster clearer communication and renewed dedication to personal and institutional ideals.

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AUTHORS



Robert Martello is a Professor of the History of Science and Technology at Olin College of Engineering and recently served as Olin's Associate Dean of Faculty. He received his PhD from MIT's program in the History and Social Study of Science and Technology, a MS in environmental engineering from MIT, and a BS in Earth, Atmospheric, and Planetary Science from MIT. Dr. Martello joined Olin during the institution's startup and has led efforts to re-imagine Olin's faculty reappointment and promotion, institutional outreach, curricular innovation, and student assessment approaches. His research, engineering education publications, and faculty development workshops explore connections between interdisciplinary integration, faculty teaming, student motivation, and project-based learning. He has been a member of the National Academies Study Committee on the Integration of Education in STEM, Humanities, and Arts, and also served on the National Academies Planning Committee for the Convocation on Promotion and Tenure. Dr. Martello is the author of *Midnight Ride, Industrial Dawn: Paul Revere and the Growth of American Enterprise*.



Caitrin Lynch is Professor of Anthropology at Olin College, where she teaches courses in anthropology, design, engineering, and entrepreneurship. She is the author of two books: *Retirement on the Line: Age, Work, and Value in An American Factory*, and *Juki Girls, Good Girls: Gender and Cultural Politics in Sri Lanka's Global Garment Industry*. She is also producer of the documentary film, "My Name is Julius." Dr. Lynch received her Ph.D. and M.A. in cultural anthropology from the University of Chicago and her B.A. in anthropology from Bates College. Dr. Lynch's research and teaching examine the dynamics of work and cultural values (with a focus on aging and gender) as well as the cultural dimensions of offshore manufacturing, plus a commitment to understanding social behavior in global contexts and a devotion to encouraging students to use qualitative



methods to think critically about the world around them. At Olin she is the chair of the Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences program as well as the chair of the Reappointment and Promotion Committee.



Mark Somerville is the Provost, Dean of Faculty, and Professor of Electrical Engineering and Physics at Olin College. He holds M.S. and Ph.D. degrees in electrical engineering from MIT, as well as an M.A. in physics from Oxford University, and BS and BA degrees from the University of Texas at Austin in electrical engineering and liberal arts, respectively. Somerville joined Olin during the institution's startup, and contributed to design of the college's curriculum, policies, externally-facing programs, the development of partnerships with different schools around the world. In addition to his work inside Olin College, Somerville has spoken and collaborated around the world on the design and development of new academic programs, as well as to the improvement of existing programs.



Lynn Andrea Stein is Professor of Computer and Cognitive Science at Olin College of Engineering. After a decade on the MIT faculty (1990–2000), Stein joined Olin College's founding faculty, co-creating innovative computing curricula and a college-wide laboratory for educational innovation, then led Olin's efforts to collaboratively transform higher education in America and throughout the world. Stein's computing research spans artificial intelligence, programming languages, and HCI: co-author of foundational documents of the semantic web, “mother” of humanoid robot and intelligent room, designer of personalized information systems. Stein pioneered simple robotics in the classroom, concurrency-first computing, and small-core CS curricula. As an international advocate for student-centered education and inclusive environments, she builds systems and programs for transformation.



Vincent P. Manno is Provost Emeritus (served as Provost and Dean of Faculty 2011–2019) and Professor of Engineering Emeritus at the Olin College of Engineering. He received a BS from Columbia University and MS and Sc.D. degrees from M.I.T. His fields of interest are engineering education, power generation, electronics thermal management and semiconductor manufacturing processes. At Olin, he led efforts to redefine faculty assessment and development, encourage curricular innovation, and develop collaboration partnerships with other institutions. Prior to joining Olin, Dr. Manno was Associate Provost and Professor of Mechanical Engineering at Tufts University.