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Always reforming: Exploring agile methods for innovating faculty evaluation structures

Abstract

Christian higher education institutions in the U.S. face a challenge in reconciling traditional faculty evaluation with the need for an agile, adaptive response to a changing educational landscape. This is complicated by wider debates over prestige, mission drift, and governance. A pilot study found that while faculty are open to agile teaching methods, they are hesitant to incorporate them into formal promotion and tenure processes. The paper argues that the theological mission of these institutions offers a unique case study in how they balance strategic adaptation with missional identity.

Keywords

agile, evaluation, promotion, mission, higher education

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Ständige Reformen: Erforschung agiler Methoden zur Innovation von Strukturen zur Bewertung von Lehrkräften

Zusammenfassung

Christliche Hochschuleinrichtungen in den USA stehen vor der Herausforderung, die traditionelle Bewertung von Lehrkräften mit der Notwendigkeit einer agilen, anpassungsfähigen Reaktion auf ein sich wandelndes Bildungsumfeld in Einklang zu bringen. Dies wird durch breitere Debatten über Prestige, Missionsdrift und Governance erschwert. Eine Pilotstudie ergab, dass die Fakultät zwar offen für agile Lehrmethoden ist, jedoch zögert, diese in formelle Beförderungs- und Berufungsverfahren zu integrieren. Der Artikel argumentiert, dass die theologische Mission dieser Einrichtungen eine einzigartige Fallstudie dafür darstellt, wie sie strategische Anpassung mit ihrer missionarischen Identität in Einklang bringen.

Schlüsselwörter

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1 Introduction

“*Ecclesia reformatata, semper reformanda*”, a Latin phrase that emerged from the Protestant Reformation and made popular by Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, is a reminder that the church at large should embrace a willingness to change its practices to stay true to scripture (Perisho, 2017). Translated as “the church reformed, always reforming,” the idea is that the church needs to be consistently moving back to God’s Word while the world consistently draws away from it (Buice, 2021). Many Christian higher education institutions (HEIs) are church-related and have mission statements that reflect their faith-based purposes, often rooted in some way to advancing the kingdom of God. HEIs can be considered engines of innovation (Shahsavari et al., 2020), yet it is unclear whether Christian HEIs are willing to be “always reforming” in that sense. This echoes wider organizational theory debates about whether higher education institutions, particularly those with religious mandates, innovate in ways that reinforce or erode their core identity (Marginson & Considine, 2000). This paper focuses on the areas of faculty evaluation and promotion structures as potential processes to reform by considering the adoption of agile methods. The adoption of agile methodologies, which prioritize flexibility, continuous improvement, and student-driven application, directly challenges the reliance on standardized, high-stakes, end-of-cycle metrics that dominate traditional faculty evaluation processes. Considering agile methods for evaluation necessitates a shift from metrics focused solely on individual output and fixed objectives to a collaborative, process-based evaluation that incorporates evidence of adaptability and mission-aligned innovation.

The U.S. has a vast and diverse higher education landscape, which includes approximately 900 religiously affiliated colleges and universities. Within this landscape, Protestant Christian HEIs represent a distinct subculture, with many often perceived as politically and socially conservative and often grappling with how to integrate traditional beliefs with modern academic and cultural demands. This study is situated within this context, examining how a theological commitment to “reforming” might

facilitate or hinder the adoption of innovative pedagogical and organizational practices. Christian HEIs, while distinct in mission, operate within a prestige economy like secular institutions in which rankings, research outputs, and funding competitiveness shape institutional reputation (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003). One question is whether agile-inspired reforms to evaluation might support or undermine an institution's position in this prestige hierarchy or whether adherence to prestige is even relevant at all.

In the context of Protestant Christian higher education in the United States, faculty rank, promotion, and tenure have typically followed traditional practices as outlined by the *American Association of University Professors* (AAUP), primarily to safeguard academic freedom (American Association of University Professors, 2025b). Yet, a study of tenure criteria found that there is a “discrepancy between traditional success criteria and faculty’s understanding of worthwhile labor” (Dengate et al., 2019, p. 1).

Recently, there has been an emerging call for educational organizations to consider unique educational pathways rooted in agile methodologies (Avdoshin et al., 2021). Agile methods in education

“place high value on the principles of adaptability, collaboration, achievement of learning outcomes, student-driven inquiry, demonstration and application and continuous improvement” (Krehbiel et al., 2017, p. 109).

Agility is simply the ability for the professor to adapt pace or structure quickly to help students learn (Hulshult & Krehbiel, 2019). Specifically, researchers have called for educators to “take the risk and experiment with agile principles in the area of teaching/learning, evaluation and administration” (Kamat & Sardesai, 2012, p. 55). While agile concepts have been translated to education settings (e.g., Otero et al., 2020; Krehbiel et al., 2017; Stewart et al., 2009) and are often described in terms of teaching and learning, there remains a gap in understanding how faculty could be evaluated when implementing these principles.

This study connects the theological call to be “always reforming” with the organizational mandate for strategic adaptation. By focusing on faculty evaluation, this paper explores the core tension of organizational theory. Specifically, whether Christian HEIs will allow the pressures of the prestige economy to dictate their structures, or whether they will enact an agile-inspired institutional reform that re-centers their evaluation practices around their missional identity.

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the following research questions:

RQ1: *What are the perceptions of agile values and principles from the faculty’s perspective?*

RQ2: *Are faculty open to a new rank and tenure process, especially one that is based on agile pedagogical methodologies within the context of their institutional mission?*

1.2 Theoretical framework

Organizational theory offers the essential lens to analyze how higher education institutions (HEIs) adapt and manage change (Astley & Van de Ven, 1983). HEIs are specific, complex organizations whose strategic direction often emerges from the tension between their mission and operational enterprises (Siegel & Leih, 2018). Strategic management in HEIs demands continuous capacity building by aligning resources and processes with the institutional mission (Toma, 2010). Observable variations in practice are necessary for organizational change (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995).

This study is situated within this organizational theory and strategic management framework to understand the paradox of adopting agile pedagogical methodologies as a new practice within traditional promotion and tenure structures. Specifically, organizational theory informs RQ1 by focusing on faculty buy-in as a prerequisite for true organizational shift (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995) as faculty are key participants whose understanding of agile directly influences its adoption as a variation in

practice. This lens is crucial for examining faculty perception and willingness to change, noted in RQ2, as it considers whether the adoption of agile is viewed as a coherent strategic adaptive response or merely an isolated innovation. Further, the study is positioned within organizational theory debates about prestige competition and mission drift (Brewer et al., 2002).

2 Research context

There are challenges associated with the processes for promotion and tenure, and the concept of evaluation elicits stress for many HEI faculty members. The promotion structure often lacks alignment with the institutional mission and there is room for innovative practices rather than strict adherence to a traditional approach.

2.1 Faculty evaluation in the United States

Nezhad (2019) argued that the faculty promotion structure

“is one of the most important components of vitality and performance improvement, training and retention of faculty members and also is an essential part in the academic success of faculty members, institutions and universities” (p. 119).

Per the American Council on Education et al. (2000), annual faculty reviews are common for non-tenured faculty, with more rigorous, high-stakes assessments conducted during a promotion review typically occurring in the sixth year. The process generally involves a hierarchy of assessing bodies such as a status committee, the dean and or department chair, and ultimately the provost (American Council on Education et al., 2000). In terms of tenure and promotion, the higher education reward structure has historically placed great value on individual research excellence which has therefore influenced how work time is allocated and informed faculty perceptions of which parts of their work are valuable (Dengate et al., 2019). Yet, there is an overarching sense of trepidation felt by many regarding the pressures associated

with advancing in rank and obtaining tenure in higher education (Vaishya et al., 2025). It is important to note other systems of tenure vary greatly from North American models in terms of terminology, requirements, and timelines, with some European countries having multiple pathways and others having no legal tenure at all (Enders, 2015). These contrasts emphasize the degree to which U.S. promotion practices are bound up with prestige signaling (Altbach, 2016). By situating Christian HEIs within this comparative framework, it becomes clear that their reliance on traditional U.S.-style models of evaluation may inadvertently tether them more tightly to standards of prestige than to their stated missions.

2.1.1 Challenges

One of the most prevalent sources of stress reported by higher education faculty is the expectation of research and its dissemination (Vaishya et al., 2025). Kwon and Denlinger (2020) called for a change in incentive structures and wrote,

“Perversely, publications also function as a crucial metric of success in the academic community because of their direct links to notoriety, academic advancement, and recognition by extramural funding agencies and are responsible for the publish-or-perish mindset pervasive in the academic community” (p. 730).

The concept of inconsistency between what a faculty member’s evaluator expects and what they are evaluated by or against can be another area of frustration for academic faculty. For instance,

“over the last few decades, RPT [review, promotion, and tenure] processes have generally increased the value placed on research, at the expense of teaching and service, which often results in an incongruity between how faculty actually spend their time vs. what is considered in their evaluation” (Schimanski & Alperin, 2018, p. 1).

Bass (2022) argued that traditional administrative structures, shaped by history and tradition, operate in silos that are misaligned to the needs of the current digitally immersed generation of students, and others have contended that the tenure system

“is outdated, and even potentially detrimental to the academic enterprise” (Helms, 2015, p. 3). Ultimately, promotion processes pay partial attention to activities like teaching and scholarship yet neglect the importance of other activities, indicating the need for a comprehensive and balanced approach to advancement processes to more effectively cover the various types of participation in institutional activities (Shahsavari et al., 2020). An agile-inspired evaluation, for example, would offer a framework for better covering the various types of institutional activities by valuing the faculty’s adaptability and demonstration of learning application. It would offer a structural means to align the reward system with the multifaceted nature of faculty work.

2.2 Mission, strategic management, and organizational change

An organization’s mission is central to the implementation of any strategic initiative (Susanto et al., 2023). Good governance based on a well-defined mission is a key factor in strategic management, leading to organizational sustainability (Oliveira et al., 2021). In any vision for organizational change, there must be clear alignment with the mission (Errida & Lotfi, 2021) as well as buy-in from the change participants and recipients – in this context, faculty – who are instrumental in the change process (Counts et al., 2021). The results of a 2019 study exploring mission statements across 250 HEIs worldwide found some missions are more student-focused and some are more society-oriented, yet all focus in some way on the institution’s specific values (Breznik & Law, 2019). For Christian HEIs particularly, there is risk of mission drift in which theological identity succumbs to external prestige pressures. This is well articulated in Burtchaell’s (1998) classic, *The Dying of the Light*, in which the author describes catastrophic outcomes for institutions who drifted from their Christian missions. Agile-informed evaluation structures might provide a way of resisting such drift by tying professional advancement more explicitly to mission enactment rather than to conventional markers of status.

2.3 Agile methodologies in education

The original agile concept includes a list of values and principles created as a framework for software development (Beck et al., 2001). With proven effectiveness in software development, educators sought to adapt the principles to teaching and learning contexts and initially found them effective for teaching subjects such as engineering and math (Duvall et al., 2017). In the educational context, this translates into concrete pedagogical and organizational practices such as iterative projects, flexible course structures, and responsive feedback (Krehbiel et al., 2017). Therefore, the key operational principles being explored for faculty evaluation include adaptability, collaboration, achievement of learning outcomes, student-driven inquiry, application of learning, and continuous improvement. Early attempts at agile pedagogies resulted in a high level of acceptance and compliance by students (Ranjeeth et al., 2014). Indeed, a 2023 study of agile practices in university classroom settings found that students find the approach to be flexible and beneficial to their learning (Kampa & Bakke, 2023). Importantly, a measure of faculty perceptions also expressed high levels of satisfaction with student performance and an intent for continued use of agile in their teaching (Krehbiel et al., 2017). Ultimately, agile teaching methods enhance student learning (Poe & Mew, 2021; Hulshult & Krehbiel, 2019).

Pedagogically, agile methods sit at the crossroads of constructivism and ecological approaches in education theory (Fitsilis et al., 2023; Ranjeeth et al., 2014). That is, agile is a student-centered approach where students work collaboratively and reciprocally in project- and problem-based learning. Institutions that are responsive and flexible in their curriculum design are better prepared for changing market demands (Dhir et al., 2024). Despite proven effectiveness and strong support for agile methods in education from both students and faculty, there remains a gap in understanding whether faculty would be willing to be evaluated by these principles.

3 Methods

This pilot study was designed to explore faculty perceptions of agile methodologies in teaching and evaluation. A small-scale, convenience sample of 18 participants was recruited from various HEIs across the US, having used social media links to generate a snowball effect. The methodology is best described as a qualitative exploratory study to provide insights and initial perspectives that can inform a larger, more robust study. A limitation of convenience sampling is the possibility of selection bias, and the findings reflect the perspectives of a self-selected group of participants. The data were collected via a 22-question Google Form survey that included both Likert-scale questions and open-ended qualitative questions. That is, “agile methodologies” in the context of teaching and evaluation were defined and operationalized for survey participants drawing statements from Stewart’s et al. (2009) Agile Manifesto in Education and Krehbiel’s et al. (2017) Agile Teaching and Learning. Specifically, they were presented with statements described in section 3.1.2. This study was approved by the principal investigator’s Institutional Review Board and all participants provided informed consent before participating.

While the sample size of 18 is not generalizable in quantitative statistical research, it can be considered adequate saturation for exploratory qualitative research (Henink & Kaiser, 2022). Therefore, quantitative data was used to increase the usefulness of qualitative findings (Sauro, 2015). Almalki (2016) supported this dual approach provided a suitable process is designed in the direction of a specific purpose. The authors utilized computer-assisted data analysis by using artificial intelligence (Google, 2025) to complete the qualitative coding as outlined by Bryda and Sadowski (2024).

3.1 Results

The findings are a result of qualitative open-ended questions. Themes emerged and, when analyzed together with quantitative results, informed the following discussion section.

3.1.1 Demographics

There were 18 participants in the study, 12 of which were female. The faculty rank of all participants was as follows: 61.1 % associate professor, 27.8 % full professor, and 11.1 % instructor. Of all participants, 55.6 % were tenured. Their years of experience as faculty ranged from eight years to 40 years. Over 60 % of participants had some degree of non-instructional or administrative release time in their credit load.

3.1.2 Quantitative questions

Table 1 shows the average score, based on a 5-point Likert scale, with five being the highest, for the extent to which participants agree with agile value statements about teaching and learning in higher education.

It's important to prioritize student-centric learning (e.g. group activities) over traditional lectures for active participation and exploration.	4.06
Iterative projects with deliverables throughout the semester are more effective than end-of-semester projects.	3.89
Student-centric learning prioritizes student activity and effective pedagogy. Said differently, flexible syllabi and increased instructor access, like email feedback, foster collaboration and active learning.	4.17
Rigid course structures, schedules, and delivery methods hinder adaptation to diverse student needs and class dynamics. Said differently, flexible teaching, responsive feedback, and adaptation are crucial for effective learning.	3.89

Table 1: Agile values

Table 2 shows the average score, on a 5-point Likert scale, with five being the highest, for the extent to which participants would prefer to be evaluated (and promoted) by adherence to agile principles (as opposed to traditional measures of teaching, scholarship, service).

Adaptability over prescriptive teaching methods	3.78
Collaboration over individual accomplishment	3.39
Achievement of learning outcomes over student testing and assessment	3.94
Student-driven inquiry over classroom lecturing	3.56
Demonstration and application over accumulation of information	4.22
Continuous improvement over the maintenance of current practices	4.06

Table 2: Agile principles

The mean score for the extent to which participants agree with all agile value statements about teaching and learning in higher education was 4 on a 5-point scale. The mean score for the extent to which participants would prefer to be evaluated by adherence to all agile principles was 3.82 on a 5-point scale.

3.1.3 Qualitative questions

Several themes were identified from the results of each open-ended question. When asked about the pros and/or cons of agile values and principles regarding faculty evaluation and promotion, participant answers yielded the following themes: challenges and opportunities in adopting a student-centered adaptability, complexity of measuring teaching effectiveness, and the flexibility in applying agile principles. For example, one participant said,

“Faculty would have to agree with leadership that these values and principles align with the university’s vision and mission. I think universities would have to redo Tenure/Promotion standards, which in my experience is easier said than done.”

When asked about what they like or dislike about a traditional approach to their own evaluation and promotion, the following themes appeared: the mismatch between evaluative metrics and the multifaceted nature of their work, transparency in the evaluation process, and the impact of the current system on institutional values. For example, one participant said,

“Dislike most everything. Current practice at my school lacks multiple touch points, lacks review on in-person and online content, and much more.”

When asked about what kind of evaluation measures they envision working well, participant answers yielded the following themes: faculty agency in the evaluation process, comprehensive and holistic evaluation, and enhanced transparency and lower-stakes evaluation. For example, one participant said,

“A more holistic approach where everything you do counts towards promotion. For instance, my administrative tasks such as accreditation and running the entire program, don’t fit into one of the three traditional roles.”

When asked to describe how their institution’s mission is used in the evaluation process, the following themes were put forward: the wide spectrum of missional integration, the prominent role of faith-based missions, and the potential for increased accountability. One participant said, “I think we focus on our mission of learning and service a lot but could hold faculty more accountable.”

4 Discussion and limitations

The results will be discussed within the context of the research questions and limitations associated with the study.

4.1 Research question 1

The first purpose of this research was to explore faculty perceptions of agile values. Are faculty embracing a willingness to adapt and reform their teaching methodologies? The faculty did indicate that there are perceived benefits for learning when engaging agile methods, envisioning positive impacts on creativity and a variety of ways to demonstrate student understanding. This was supported by the mean scores presented in Table 1 and Table 2 which did not contradict any open-ended responses. However, they also recognized that a change in the way they approach teaching to be more flexible or student-centered would increase the complexity in measuring the effectiveness of those approaches. While most faculty did appreciate the avoidance of rigid course structures and the value of varied pedagogies and assessments that come with an agile approach, they emphasized that there would need to be flexibility in applying agile methods since there are already widely accepted best practices for teaching and learning that are especially dependent on the context of each discipline.

4.2 Research question 2

The second purpose of this research was to investigate whether faculty would be open to a new rank and tenure process, especially one that is based on agile pedagogical methods and within the context of their institutional mission. The faculty did, firstly, express their frustrations with the current system for promotion and tenure across all three traditional measures of teaching, scholarship, and service. For teaching, participants noted a lack of formal recognition of innovative teaching practices. Regarding scholarship, participants highlighted a disparity in the perceived value of certain types of scholarship. For service, respondents were concerned with

the ambiguity in its weight toward promotion despite its importance for shared governance and institutional operations.

As to whether they would be open to a process based on agile methodologies, results were not as specific. Agile methods are related to pedagogy, yet there is a perception that teaching is not generally as highly regarded as scholarship. So, participants relayed a desire for alternative models of evaluation that could include specialized tracks or self-defined weighting to emphasize their individual contributions to teaching innovations.

As to whether they would be open to an evaluation process within the context of their institutional mission, the findings were nuanced. A significant portion of participants experienced only superficial engagement with the mission in faculty evaluation, but for faculty at faith-based institutions, the faith-based tenets of the mission served as a central criterion. The data highlighted an opportunity for institutions to foster greater accountability and deeper engagement with their stated missions. Mission-aligned contributions for tenure seemed to be meaningful for participants but there is a potential for more consistent application in evaluation processes. Indeed, “it would be better to negotiate publicly-supported innovations on the basis of agreed institutional mission” (Marginson & Considine, 2000, p. 296).

Based on these findings, it was apparent that while faculty may embrace the spirit of “always reforming” in their individual teaching practices, the institutional structures of promotion and tenure remain a significant barrier. This reflects a broader paradox in organizational theory in that institutions espouse innovation and adaptability yet remain constrained by legacy systems tied to prestige and external legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Although agile methods can be seen as an adaptive response that has the potential to engender new structures, the findings reveal a disconnect from strategic behavior, as faculty do not perceive the adoption of agile methods as part of a broader institutional strategy for change. This gap indicates that the innovation is currently pedagogical, not institutional. Bridging this disconnect requires leveraging the theological culture and promotion structures of Christian HEIs to drive a

more cohesive strategic change toward a new model of the university that consciously resists the external pressure of secular prestige norms and is instead structured around the mission of *semper reformanda*, resulting in a distinctive competitive strategy. The new model is therefore defined not by its mechanism, but by its internal coherence where evaluation, mission, and pedagogy are tightly aligned.

4.3 Limitations

The most significant limitation was the small sample size as it limits generalizability. Likewise, the use of convenience sampling could have introduced biases in the participant pool, such as faculty already frustrated with tenure processes or more interested in innovation.

5 Implications and future research

This exploratory study underscores the enthusiasm for a student-centered approach to learning. The perceived mismatch between faculty evaluation metrics and the broad scope of faculty work, the undervaluing of teaching relative to research, and the inconsistent consideration of administrative roles all contribute to a widespread dissatisfaction with traditional promotion and tenure processes. While an agile, mission-focused approach is one potential pathway, HEIs would need to consider its implementation. It is acknowledged that continuous adaptation places additional demands on educators (Perry et al., 2021), so it would be important to appreciate such challenges in the evaluation process. Likewise, while agile approaches to teaching appear to be efficacious across the globe, “teachers need to have enough professional experience and confidence when they start collaboration in this format” (Holvikivi & Hjort, 2017, p. 616). One opportunity would be to intentionally align promotion criteria with missional objectives across teaching, scholarship, service, and administration. In addition to self-reflection on mission integration, measurable criteria could include any innovation or project that advances the mission. Such an alignment

would not only resist mission drift but also offer Christian HEIs a distinctive competitive strategy within the global higher education market by differentiating themselves through mission-consistent innovation rather than pursuit of secular prestige norms. This transition toward a new model also implies a fundamental shift in governance, moving faculty evaluation and institutional management toward more agile, responsive, and expertise-driven structures, ultimately aligning with a strategic vision for institutional adaptation.

Faculty status decisions are typically made by the faculty themselves as part of the shared governance structure in which academia operates (American Association of University Professors, 2025a). Researchers have argued that management of education and research should be left to those savvy in management to be agile in a rapidly changing environment (e.g., Bass, 2022; Marginson & Considine, 2000). Part of becoming an agile institution, beyond teaching and learning, may mean going beyond faculty evaluation practices and reimagining the governance structure entirely. Institutions are already innovating pedagogical strategies and policies as part of their approach to the integration of artificial intelligence (Alqahtani & Wafula, 2024), so now may be an opportune time to consider innovations in faculty evaluation or governance as well.

5.1 Future research

Various avenues for future research emerged from this study. While the research questions were approached from an exploratory perspective, a future large-scale study could consider a regression analysis to investigate how faculty perceptions vary (if at all) depending on variables like age, years of experience, rank, and whether or not they are tenured. A larger and more representative sample is crucial to validate this initial exploration. Research examining the impact of explicitly mission-aligned promotion criteria on faculty morale, retention, and institutional effectiveness would also be valuable. If they exist, exploring case studies of institutions that have implemented innovative systems could provide practical models for reform for institutions considering strategic organizational change.

6 Conclusion

This exploratory study offered interesting initial insights into faculty perceptions of agile methods in the context of Christian HEIs. It highlighted a tension between institutional mission and institutional practice. Although limited by a small sample, this study suggested that while faculty embrace the principles of student-centeredness inherent in agile methodologies, a true reformation of promotion structures requires a willingness to move beyond traditional metrics. Embracing a mission-focused approach can help Christian HEIs align their evaluation processes with their core values and strategic direction. The admonition toward *semper reformanda* in faculty advancement structures calls for an innovative reimagining of how contributions are valued, or even governed, ultimately empowering institutions to more effectively advance their distinct missions in a changing educational landscape. The connection between the concept of continuous reformation and the adoption of innovative methodologies provides a compelling launchpad for future, larger-scale studies to provide the depth of insight needed to achieve thematic saturation and offer a nuanced investigation of this topic. Ultimately, the study contributes to organizational theory in higher education by demonstrating how Christian HEIs can serve as test cases for balancing prestige-seeking behaviors with missional identity, highlighting opportunities that are relevant beyond faith-based institutions.

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