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ADVICE

The Case for Requiring Professional Development

Investing in your people shows that you value them, which encourages them to stay and give you their best work.

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JANUARY 31, 2022



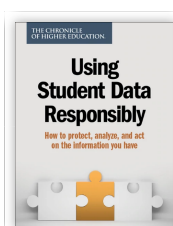


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It is the first thing to go when budgets get tight. It is the first thing we cancel when things get too busy, or we're short staffed. We feel guilty asking for it, but then we often don't take full advantage of it or share it with others later. Such is the enigma known as "professional development" for staff members and administrators.

In my 25 years in higher-education administration, I've seen philosophies on professional development vary wildly — not only from institution to institution, but even between divisions on the same campus. At some colleges, participating in professional development goes in the same category as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. At other places, requests to take time away from work for "PD" are greeted skeptically — as if you were asking for a paid week off to attend an Elvis-impersonator convention.

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Why should any of this matter to an institution? The obvious answer is that by investing in your people, you indicate that you value them, which encourages them to stay and give you their best work. That's especially important now, as a pandemic has inspired a lot of folks to [rethink their careers and their future](#) in higher education. On a recent consulting trip, conversation about the need for professional development came up everywhere I went. It's a topic on a lot of minds.

But there may be an even more important reason why colleges and universities should view professional development as in their best interest: It's a window to the outside world, without which institutions can grow strange and insular. Like Gollum, mumbling to the One Ring in the dark, institutions can stray from the ways of mainline higher education and develop cultures that are detrimental to their own survival.

So what counts as professional development? Essentially it's anything that enhances or updates your ability to do your job. It's building all sorts of leadership, financial, management, teaching, technical, diversity, equity, communication, or other skills. It could take an hour (a Zoom meeting), a day (a workshop), a week (a conference), or even a year (a fellowship or internship).

As for who participates (my focus here is on the staff and administration, although faculty members have their own programs in this realm), I have noticed a few patterns that seem almost universal:

- Those who ask for professional development the most, attend the most programs, whether they need to or not.
- Those who would probably benefit the most seldom ask.
- And of course, everyone waits until a conference is in a warm, exciting location.

The need is great. If you've spent any significant amount of time in higher education, you have probably witnessed dysfunction that you would not have believed possible in the world of higher learning — cultural norms that don't seem like they belong in the 21st century, and campus policies so out of line with good business practices that you can't quite figure out how no one has been sued yet over them. I recall a colleague's telling me that, at her former institution, unwanted advances were considered the norm, and putting up with them was seen as a badge

of loyalty. The most disturbing thing was that she did not seem at all outraged. In fact, she'd used it as an example of why loyalty is so important on a campus. Without the fresh air that comes from outside perspectives, it is all too easy for organizations to turn inward and begin to dry rot.

Sometimes an insular view does not become a moral or legal issue but merely a missed opportunity.

When employees have not kept current in their field, they operate in outdated ways that put their institutions at a competitive disadvantage. Colleges lose enrollment, revenue, alumni support, or prestige because they are perceived as behind the times, or because they do not deliver the level of service that constituents come to expect. Even in the past two or three years, I have consulted with institutions that rely on enrollment strategies in vogue when I was a student in the 1990s. It is sad to think about how much stronger and more competitive they could be if they had made the investment to keep up with the changes in the market.

In a conversation with Paul McGuinness, associate vice president for enrollment at Governors State University, near Chicago, he gave me an example of how this can happen: "When the budget impasse of 2014-15 happened in Illinois, institutions faced enormous cuts, and the first thing to go was professional development. Even when the funding started to come back, the commitment to professional development at many universities never did. If you are not doing those things on a regular basis, you are at a real disadvantage. You are stuck in what you used to know and you get left behind."

I particularly worry about certain campus offices filled with staff members who receive little or no training in higher-ed practices to begin with, and who spend their entire careers at one institution. I have nothing against longevity. Faithful service is a beautiful thing, and many employees have a strong desire for stability,

but organizations need their employees to keep growing and innovating to solve each new generation of problems. Without the ability to compare practices with others and receive feedback from colleagues outside of the organization, people tend to become guardians of the status quo, and gatekeepers for a labyrinth of policies that aggravate the students the campus is supposed to be serving and cost the college in lost opportunities.

Failure to connect your employees with professional development is dangerous to the health of the whole.

How can we do better? One move in the right direction: Broaden what we consider professional development. In the past, it almost always has meant attending conferences or receiving formal training. While valuable, those should not be the whole playbook. People learn better, and retain more, by doing than by hearing alone. Giving employees the opportunity to “do” in a new environment can be very powerful.

When I worked at Salisbury University, in Maryland, its vice president for student affairs, Dane Foust, used to set up his graduate assistantships as dual appointments — in, say, housing and admissions, or career services and financial aid. That gave both the student and the university the opportunity to try things out. The graduate assistants walked away with a better résumé and a better sense of where they fit. And the dual appointment created increased understanding between the two offices. I have seen the same kind of dynamic with athletic coaches who have a second appointment within other areas of student affairs or enrollment. Another option: Set up a summer staff exchange with a different institution.

The institution does not always have to be the initiator of professional development, however. Sometimes just supporting employee initiative is enough:

- If you are in a position to do so, say yes when staff members ask to join a local or regional professional association. If there isn't one, encourage them to create their own group of colleagues to compare notes with on a specific topic, such as users of a certain software product.
- Offer guidelines to help people prioritize work and development time.
- Challenge employees to find a professional mentor from another institution. Simply granting permission for people to connect regularly with a mentor, and perhaps send their mentors a bit of college swag, can underscore that you value professional growth.
- Many employees will have their own ideas of how they would like to grow. They may have opportunities to consult, write for a professional publication, or serve with an accreditation group. Support those interests — assuming there is no clear institutional policy against them or conflict of interest — and invite staff members to bring back what they've learned and share it.

That sharing doesn't happen nearly enough. When we attend more-traditional conferences and training, we need to make the most of it. If you're a manager, that means don't always choose the staff members who are most outgoing or most likely to jump at training opportunities. Rotate participation so that everyone, including the newest hires, gets a chance.

Then make the investment count by requiring participants to share a portion of what they have learned.

It might sound strange, but people don't intrinsically know how to get the most out of conferences (for an extensive guide on that very subject, [head here](#)). As Omicron declines, if you are a manager sending recent hires off to their first conference, have a conversation with them about your expectations. Should they attend sessions to learn content, speak with specific vendors, network, meet with special-interest groups to gather ideas, etc.? Give them a sense of what the after-hours

opportunities are likely to be. Also, consider the location and whether Las Vegas or Miami is *really* the best location to send them for a first conference.

The bottom line, I am increasingly convinced, is that professional development should not be optional. It should be required of all staff members and administrators. Institutions could:

- Ask people to participate in a certain number of hours annually, and to propose what options they think would be the best fit.
- Make professional development planning a part of your annual-review conversations.
- Help people internalize the expectation that all employees continue to grow, improve, and increase their value. People need to know that these experiences and programs are not just for the party people or the social butterflies. There are enough new modes of learning that everyone should be able to find something that can fit their comfort zone and institutional budget.
- Speaking of costs, pay the bill, or a good portion of it, out of institutional funds. Raise expenditures for staff development. For the many institutions facing a budget crunch, the proliferation of free or low-cost webinars has leveled the playing field for PD, allowing easy access for any employee to expertise and training. While the experiences vary in quality and provide a mostly passive experience, if chosen wisely, they can still be used as cost-effective elements in a staff member's overall development plan. Whatever the institution spends on PD will pay for itself in the long run.

At this point, you might be thinking, Does professional development really make *that* much difference?

"It absolutely does," says Reena Lichtenfeld, an executive consultant at Ruffalo Noel Levitz, a fund-raising and enrollment-consulting firm. "I meet with a lot of

universities. Each one is different, but the patterns are consistent. The campuses that commit to professional development retain their employees and get the most from them. The more people see what is out there, the more innovative they become, and the more likely they are to meet their goals over the long term.”

Don’t view professional development as a burden, but as your institution’s secret weapon to keep its competitive edge in tough times.

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