



Professional Development in Higher Education Survey

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Overview

Academic Impressions is the only organization that conducts in-depth studies of professional development specific to the higher-education sector. Our third such study was conducted in December 2017, collecting survey data from 2,577 participants from hundreds of non-profit institutions of higher education—including faculty, frontline staff, and academic and administrative leaders. 46% of participants have management or supervisory roles. 33.5% were baby boomers (over age 50), 39% were Gen X (ages 36-50), and 27.5% were millennials (age 35 or younger).

Three key findings have emerged from the data:

- 1. Professional development has a significant impact on turnover.** 71% of higher-ed professionals report that more access to professional development would increase their likelihood of staying at their current institution.
- 2. Quality of supervisory support for professional development is highly predictive** of job satisfaction, perceived opportunities for growth at the institution, and whether staff report that their department has a culture supportive of professional development and growth.
- 3. A departmental culture that is supportive of learning and professional development** is closely tied to job satisfaction, retention, and perceived opportunity for career advancement.

Yet, while most study participants (88%) concur on the importance of professional development, we also found that many departments and units do not have processes, structures, and support in place to be planful about their training investments or optimize the return on professional development. Frequently, there aren't clear incentives or accountability for pursuing professional development.

We believe, based on these data, that in higher education, many institutions have both room for improvement in investing in professional development more planfully—and much to gain by doing so. Institutions that act on these findings may realize opportunities to build staff capacity, improve employees' job satisfaction, and limit turnover

We share these key findings in the pages that follow.

1. The Impact of Professional Development on Turnover and Staff Retention

Across all demographics and institution types, higher-ed professionals confirm the importance of access to new learning and professional development opportunities—with 88% of all respondents saying this access is either “extremely” or “very” important to them as employees, and less than 3% saying that it is “slightly” or “not at all” important.

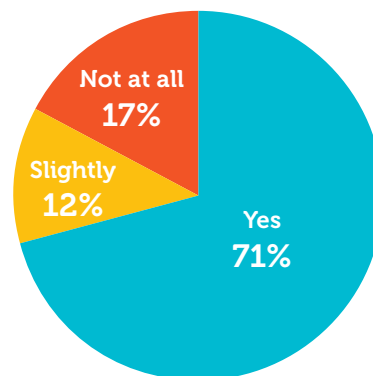
How important is access to new learning and professional development opportunities to you as an employee?



This mirrors findings from research conducted across other sectors. For example, in their 2016 *Employee Job Satisfaction and Engagement* report, the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) found that 86% of employees rate professional development as either “important” or “very important” to their job satisfaction. While all generations of employees report that professional development is important, this was found to be especially emphatic among younger employees (millennials and Gen X), and the proportion who selected “very important” increased by 9 percentage points between 2005 and 2015.

In our study, we also asked:

If you had more access to professional development and learning opportunities, would this increase your likelihood of staying at the institution?

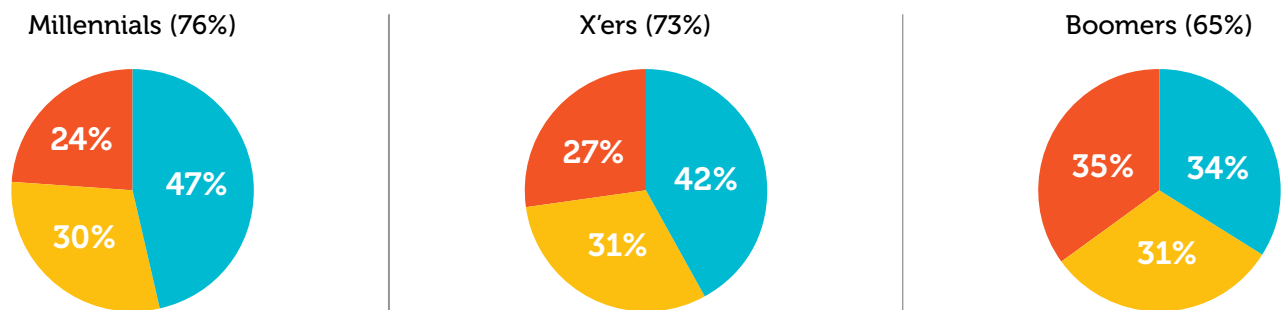


71%...

struck us as a very telling statistic. We saw slight differences across generations of employees, with 76% of millennials (staff aged 35 or under) saying improved access to professional development would increase their likely retention, compared to 65% of boomers (staff over age 50). In fact, fully 47%—nearly half—of millennials say that increased access to professional development opportunities would be “extremely” or “very” likely to increase their retention. While younger and mid-career professionals attach more importance to professional development than older professionals, nearly 2 out of 3 baby boomers still report that increased access to professional development would positively impact their retention.

If you had more access to professional development and learning opportunities, would this increase your likelihood of staying at the institution?

- Extremely or Very
- Moderately
- Slightly or not at all



Note: Percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding. Responses were provided on a Likert scale, with 1 = “not at all,” 5 = extremely.

Similarly, in the corporate sector, Better Buys’ 2016 survey *The Impact of Professional Development*, which divided respondents into two cohorts—those with access to many professional development opportunities, and those who reported having limited access and found that 75% of employees with more PD access say they are likely to stay with their organization for 5 more years, compared to only 56% of employees with fewer PD opportunities.

This consistency across sectors suggests that there may be lessons that institutions of higher education can be learn from successful corporate-sector efforts to provide staff with more professional development planning and with increased learning and development opportunities. Our findings also suggest that higher-ed units, departments, and institutions that are facing high staff turnover may want to assess whether they are providing sufficient access to and support for their employees’ professional development.

2. The Importance of Supervisory Support for Professional Development

Gallup's report *State of the American Manager: Analytics and Advice for Leaders* found that only one third of American employees are engaged in their jobs, and that the quality of supervisory support, communication, and management accounts for 70% of the variance in employee engagement. Polling more than 1 million employed U.S. workers, Gallup concluded that 75% of workers who voluntarily left their jobs did so because of their bosses and not because of the position itself—"employees don't leave companies, they leave managers."

Similarly, our survey of higher-ed employees finds that supervisory support is critical to employee job satisfaction, advancement, and retention. Even as 71% of higher-ed staff say that increased access to professional development opportunities would increase their likelihood of staying at the institution, **supervisory support for professional development was the single most predictive indicator of whether employees feel supported in learning, satisfied with their jobs, and able to grow and advance at their institution.**

Yet, less than 1 in 3 employees report that their unit leaders engage them frequently in conversation about their professional development and growth:

Supervisor Support

% who say their supervisors always or frequently model investment in their own PD.



% who say their supervisors frequently engage them in conversation about PD and growth.



% who say their supervisors provide ongoing support to follow through on what they have learned.



Statistically, these three items were also highly correlated with each other. And when we averaged these three variables into a single leadership support score, we found that this score was highly predictive of whether employees consider their organization to have a learning culture ($r = 0.59$), whether they are satisfied with their jobs ($r = 0.51$), and whether they see a clear path for growth at their institution ($r = 0.45$).

While this is true across all employees, we found that it was even more pronounced for millennial staff (age 35 or under). Millennials whose supervisors “frequently” or “always” engage them in regular conversation about their professional development and growth are:

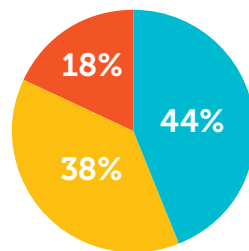
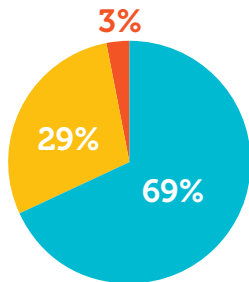
- 20 percentage points more likely to see a clear path for growth at their institution.
- 25 percentage points more likely to be satisfied with their job.
- 21 percentage points less likely to say that they are “extremely or very” likely to leave.

Snapshot: Importance of Supervisory Support for PD, for Millennials

When Supervisors DO engage in regular dialogue about PD

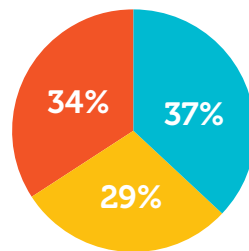
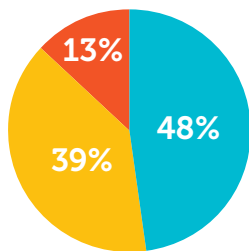
When Supervisors DON'T engage in regular dialogue about PD

How satisfied are you with your job?



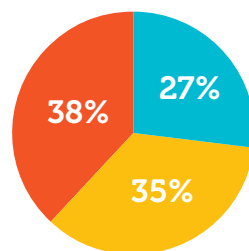
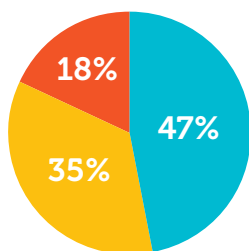
● Extremely or Very
● Moderately
● Slightly or not at all

How likely are you to look for another job outside of this institution?



● Slightly or not at all
● Moderately
● Extremely or Very

To what extent do you agree with the statement: “I have a clear path for growth at this institution.”



● Agree/Strongly Agree
● Neutral
● Disagree/Strongly Disagree

Due to rounding, totals may not add up to 100%.

3. The Difference that Fostering a Culture of Professional Development Makes

We asked survey participants, “Would you describe your department or unit as having a culture that is devoted to professional development and growth?” and we offered examples of what might illustrate such a culture: “e.g., seeking out new ideas, learning from other units/institutions, and not getting trapped by how we have always done things.”

The good news for higher-ed institutions is that 2 out of 3 employees (67%) would describe their department as having such a culture. The bad news, conversely, is that 1 in 3 (33%) would not. This is important, because responses to this question were strongly predictive of whether employees also said they were satisfied with their jobs, likely to stay at the institution, and whether they saw a clear path for growth at their institution.

In fact:

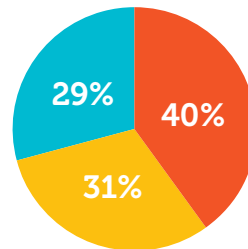
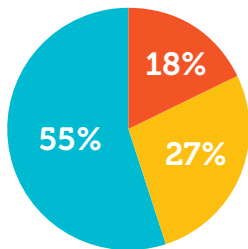
- Staff whose departments *do* have a learning culture are three times as likely to report job satisfaction, with 66% saying they are “extremely” or “very” satisfied with their job, compared to only 22% of staff whose departments do not have a learning culture. Similarly, staff at departments with a learning culture are *six times* less likely to report extreme job dissatisfaction, with only 5% saying they are “slightly” or “not at all” satisfied with their job, compared to 30% of those whose departments do not have a learning culture.
- Staff whose departments *do* have a learning culture are more than three times as likely to report that they have a clear path for growth at their institution, with 45% of these staff agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement, compared to only 13% of their peers whose departments do not have a learning culture. And at departments with a learning culture, only 21% would disagree that they have a path for growth at their institution, compared with 57% at departments that lack a learning culture.
- Staff whose departments *do* have a learning culture are two times less likely to report that they will probably leave their institution, with only 18% saying that they are “extremely” or “very” likely to leave, compared to 40% at departments that lack a learning culture.

Similarly, the Society for Human Resources Management’s 2016 study of employee engagement and satisfaction across all sectors found that desiring better opportunities for career advancement was the third most prevalent reason for employees to leave their organization (after compensation and benefits). It is likely that similar holds true in higher education. Our study illustrates that when staff believe that their department has a culture supportive of learning and professional development, job satisfaction is higher, they are more likely to see a path for growth, and turnover is significantly less likely.

Participants who said their dept./unit DID have a culture of professional development & growth:

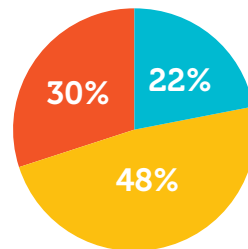
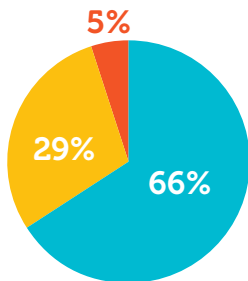
Participants who said their dept./ unit did NOT have a culture of professional development & growth:

How Likely are you to look for another job outside this institution?



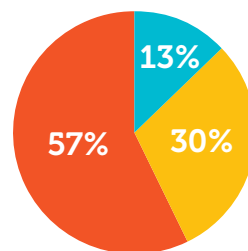
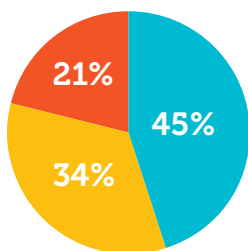
● Extremely or Very
 ● Moderately
 ● Slightly or not at all

How satisfied are you with your job?



● Extremely or Very
 ● Moderately
 ● Slightly or not at all

To what extent do you agree with this statement: "I have a clear path for growth at this institution."



● Agree/Strongly Agree
 ● Neutral
 ● Disagree/Strongly Disagree

The Anatomy of a Learning Culture

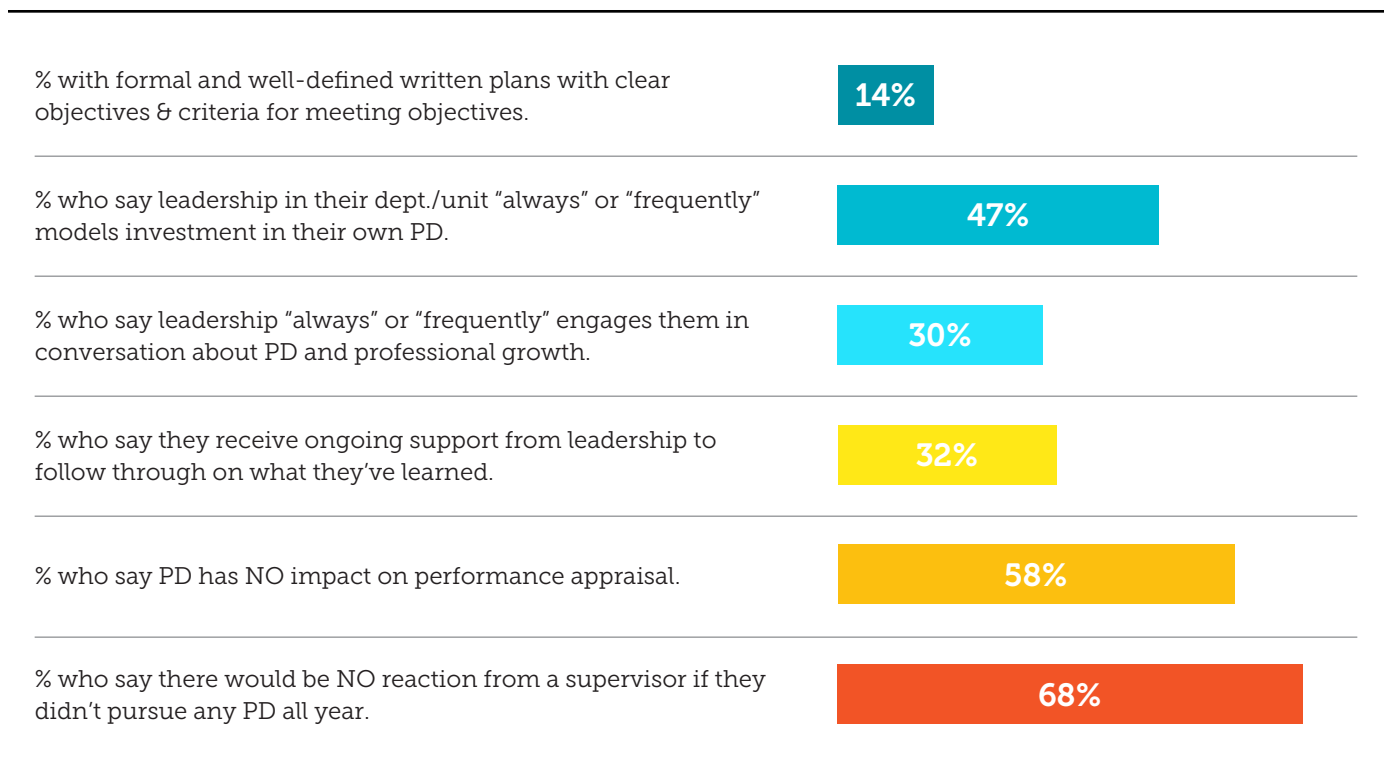
Departments that operate as healthy, thriving learning organizations demonstrate shared characteristics:

1. Supervisors work with staff to develop written and intentional learning plans.
2. Supervisors provide consistent support for professional development, building the capacity of their people and ensuring that their teams learn and grow.

3. Expectations around PD are embedded in the onboarding process.
4. Employees are encouraged and supported in sharing what they learn, and what they learn during professional development activities becomes integrated into the culture and processes of the organization.
5. There are clear incentives and accountability for professional development.

We asked a number of questions to determine the extent to which these five characteristics of learning organizations are in place at post-secondary institutions. We found that across all institutions—even those whose employees say that professional development is made available and encouraged by their department leaders or supervisors—there is limited follow-through on professional development, professional development isn’t accounted for in performance appraisal, professional development plans are rarely formalized or written down, and departments are taking steps to ensure that they see the return on investment on professional development activities that they could be.

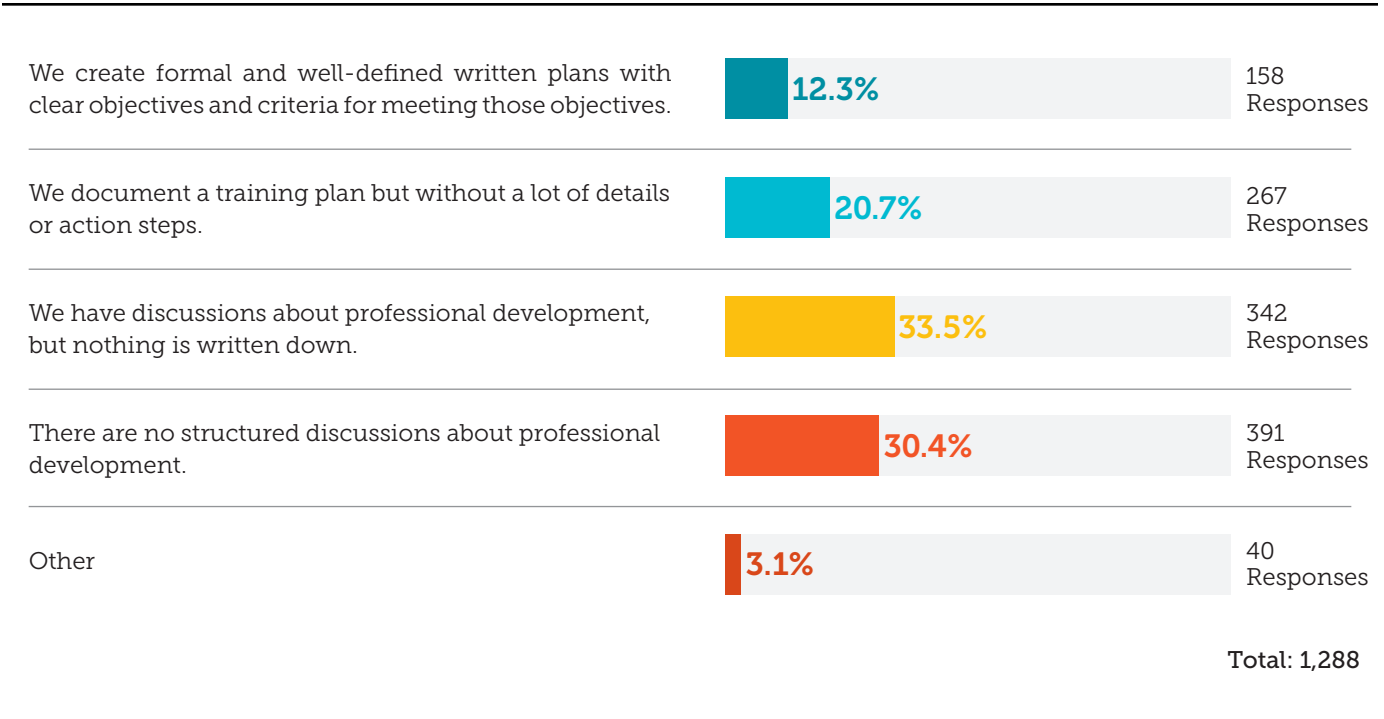
Some stark findings:



What follows is a closer look at how employees in higher education report that their departments measure up under each of the five areas listed above.

1. Defined Learning Plans

Only 12% of faculty and staff report that their departments create formal and well-defined written plans, and over 30% report that there are no structured discussions about professional development at all.



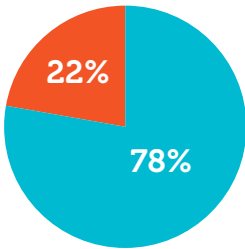
Even when there is a plan, that plan is rarely carried out or supported. Among those who do have professional development plans, only 3% report “excellent follow-up” on these plans, and 44% report little or no follow-up on their professional development plans.

2. Supervisory support

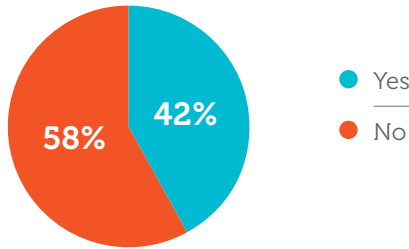
See page 4 above for a discussion of the importance of supervisory support for professional development. We will add here that supervisors and department chairs in higher education tend to believe that they are offering more support than faculty and staff report receiving.

For example, when asked whether their department supports a culture of professional development and growth, we see stark differences in the responses offered by department leaders versus staff:

Department leaders said:

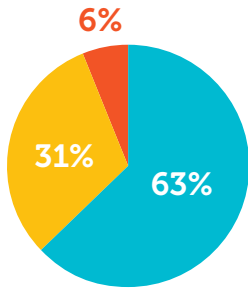


Staff said

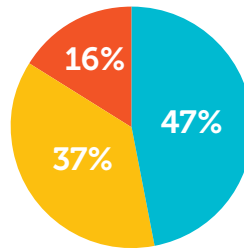


When asked if department leaders model investment in their own professional development:

Department leaders said:



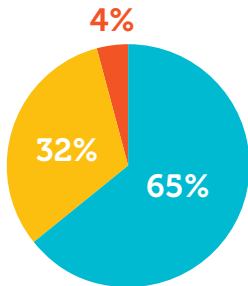
Staff said



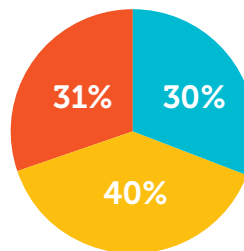
- Always/Frequently
- Occasionally
- Never/Rarely

When asked if department leaders engage employees in conversation about their professional development and growth:

Department leaders said:



Staff said

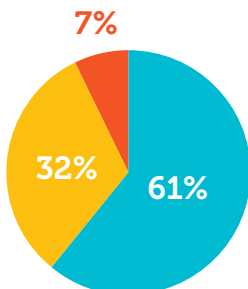


- Always/Frequently
- Occasionally
- Never/Rarely

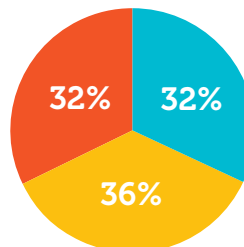
Due to rounding, totals may not add up to 100%.

When asked if department leaders provide ongoing support for members of their unit to apply what they are learning in their work:

Department leaders said:



Staff said



- Always/Frequently
- Occasionally
- Never/Rarely

We also invited participants to assign a letter grade to how well their unit or department helps them build their capacity and expertise. 25% of all participants gave their units failing grades, with only 13% assigning their unit an A.

Among those who assigned a failing grade to their unit's support for professional development, 35% were dissatisfied with their job, 73% said they had no clear path for growth at their institution, and 47% said they were very or *extremely* likely to seek a job outside the institution.

3. Onboarding new faculty and staff

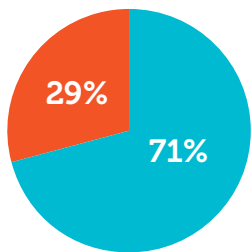
The Chronicle's *Great Colleges to Work For 2017* survey found that barely half of higher-ed employees feel that new employee orientation prepares new faculty, staff, and administration to be effective (53% at small colleges, 55% at mid-sized colleges, 58% at large universities, and 54% at community colleges report orientation effectiveness), and barely 6 in 10 employees report that they are provided the resources needed to be effective at their job (59% at small and mid-sized colleges, 63% at large institutions, and a slightly more positive 68% at community colleges).

Academic Impressions' study of professional development in higher ed provides additional nuance to help us understand where onboarding processes are failing to prepare new employees adequately for their work. While 71% of new employees report that after onboarding, they know how to access professional development, only half have specific expectations set for professional development during their first year.

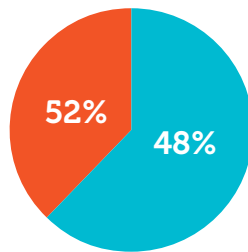
Setting expectations during onboarding



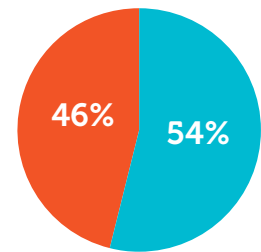
Employees know the steps to take to get access to professional development.



Specific expectations are set for participation in professional development during the first year.



New employees are introduced to an intranet or digital learning platform with training resources.



This was true both for professional staff and for part-time and adjunct faculty. Faculty, however, were 10 percentage points more likely than staff to be introduced to an intranet or digital learning platform with training resources during onboarding.

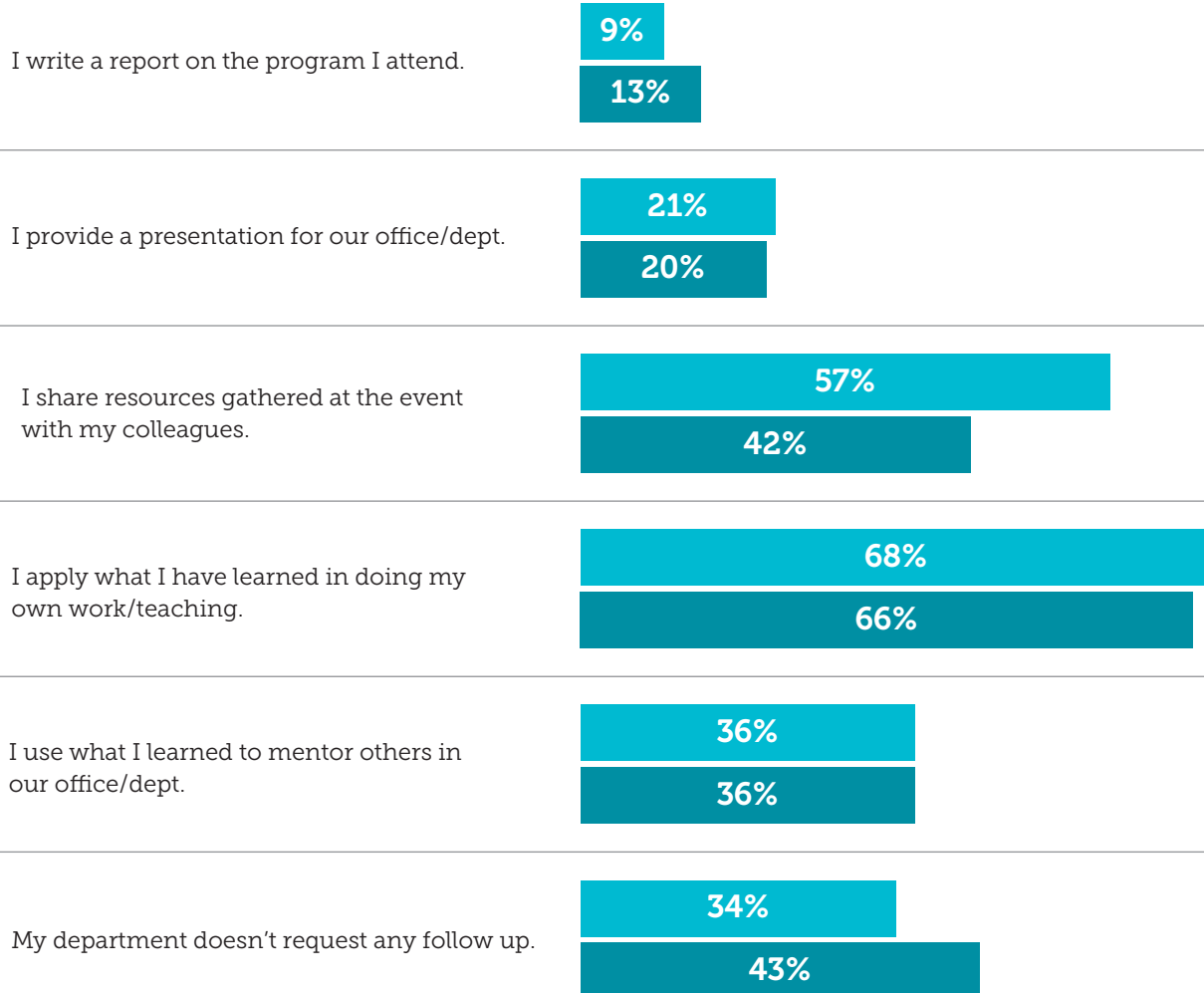
In short, while employees are nearly unanimous in finding professional development to be important to their job, there is rarely a written professional development plan, many department leaders provide only limited support for pursuing and getting optimal return on professional development, and expectations for ongoing professional development are not always discussed when onboarding and training new employees.

4. Fostering a learning culture

Professional development activities are only useful if employees are empowered and supported to use and implement what they have learned—so we asked the question, “After participating in professional development, what opportunities do you have to share or apply what you have learned?”

Opportunities to share learnings after professional development

● Staff
● Faculty



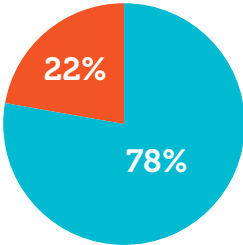
Strikingly, over one third of staff and just over 43% of faculty say their department doesn't request any follow-up after professional development. This parallels the finding that 1/3 of participants would not describe their unit as having a culture that is devoted to professional development and growth.

Two thirds of both faculty and staff work to apply what they learn in doing their own work or teaching. This is good news, as it indicates that supervisors and department chairs have strong opportunity to tap into their team members' desire to apply and share what they have learned. This is especially the case with millennial staff, who are more likely to share resources gathered with their colleagues (62%) and to apply what they are learning to their work (72%).

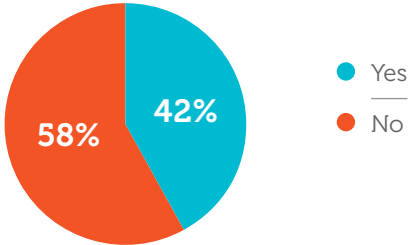
Notably, department members are far less likely than department leaders to believe their units have a culture supportive of learning and professional growth:

Does the department support learning and growth?

Department leaders said:



Staff said



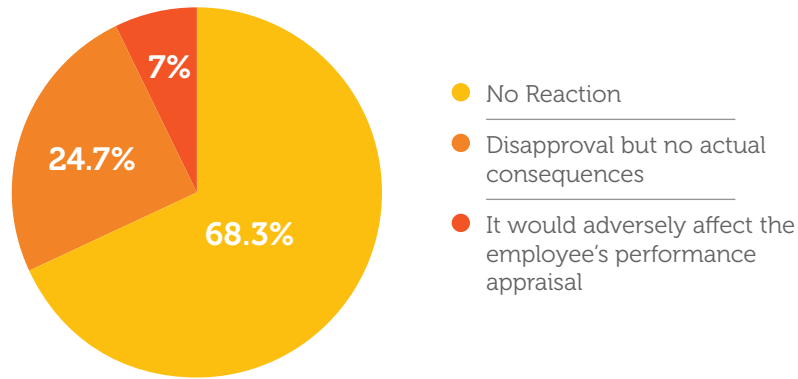
This gap might close if more departments requested structured follow-up after professional development activities, and if department leaders encouraged more than an average 57% of staff and 42% of faculty to share resources gathered at these activities with their colleagues.

5. Incentives and accountability

We asked three questions to help determine how consistently professional development is incentivized, and whether there is formal accountability for undertaking professional development.

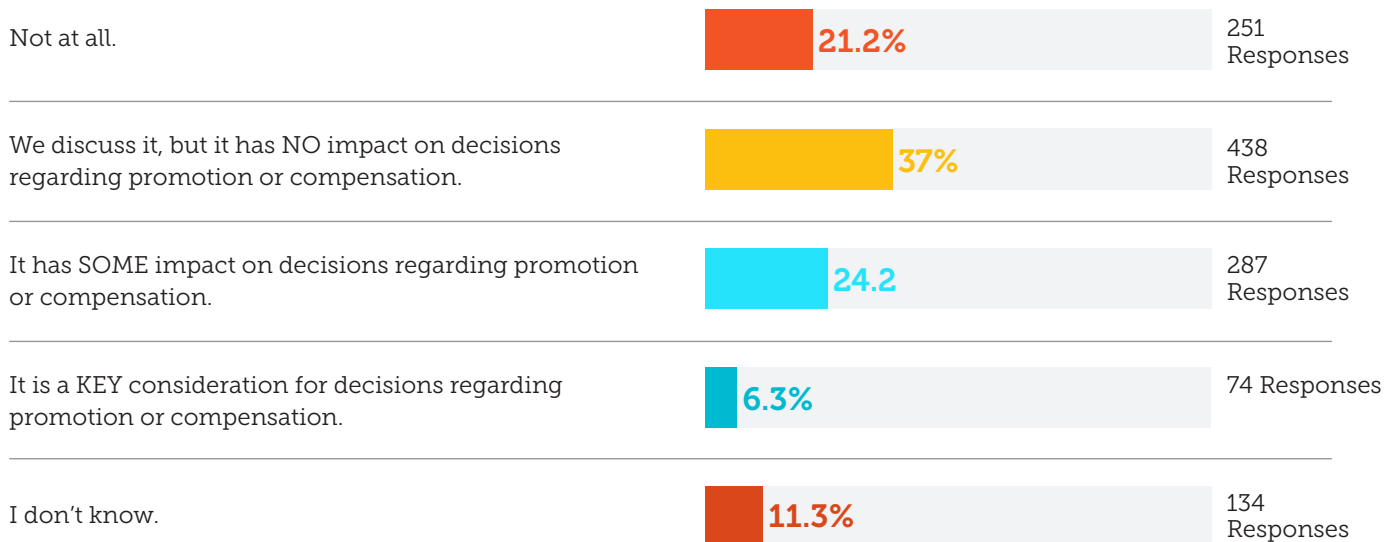
Reaction if no professional development is undertaken

We asked higher-ed employees what reaction they would anticipate from their department or unit leadership if they were to pursue no professional development in a given year:



Performance appraisal

Does participation in professional development factor into performance appraisal? 21% say not at all, and 11% don't know whether it impacts their performance evaluation or not. And less than one third report that professional development activity is a factor in decisions related to promotion and compensation.

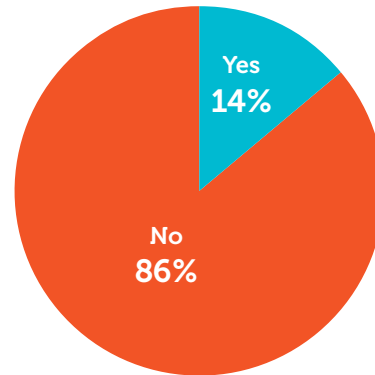


Total: 1,185

Departmental recognition

Third, we asked:

Does your unit or department offer any awards or public recognition for participation in professional development or significant strides made in a unit member's learning and development?



In most units, although employees and department leaders alike say that professional development is important, there is little planning around investments in professional development and little formal accountability or recognition for pursuing it. Until professional development objectives and plans are formally discussed, followed up on, and accounted for in performance appraisal, and until department leaders support the implementation of professional development plans at each step, it is unlikely that higher-ed institutions are going to realize full return on their investments in the professional development of their staff.

Conclusion

Professional development matters. Staff who are employed at institutions of higher learning want their institutions to invest in their own ongoing learning and professional development—and that investment is closely correlated with employees’ job satisfaction, perception of a clear path forward at their institution, and self-reported likelihood of retention. 88% of all higher-ed employees report that professional development is crucial to their job satisfaction.

Yet many units and departments at higher-ed institutions lack the structures and processes to support their members’ professional development planfully and effectively. To establish departmental cultures that are supportive of their members’ learning and development—and that see less turnover, these elements are needed:

- Supervisors and department leaders need to engage their team members in regular, frequent, ongoing dialogue about their professional development objectives and steps.
- Department leaders need to work with staff to document these objectives and steps in a written professional development plan or written learning plan for each team member.
- Professional development planning should begin as a part of the onboarding for new team or department members.
- Staff need to be encouraged to share what they learn from professional development opportunities with their colleagues. There needs to be both time and processes in place to ensure that professional development isn’t treated as a “one and done” activity, but instead contributes meaningfully to the future effectiveness of both the individual and their team or department. This philosophy needs to drive selection of professional development activities, preparation for them, and follow-up.
- There need to be incentives and accountability in place for professional development. Actions taken to build the capacity of an individual or of the department need to be accounted for in performance appraisal.

While supervisory dialogue about professional development is key, we know from our conversations with hundreds of managers and department heads at post-secondary institutions that taking on a supervisory or leadership role at a college or university rarely comes with formal training on how to be an effective supervisor and how to lead a team, unit, or department.

This lack of training has an impact. In this study, you can see that impact in the percentage of staff who do not feel supported or engaged in their professional development—and in the wide gap between the support that department heads report providing and the support that staff report receiving. **We recommend not only that departments develop more planful and measured professional development and learning initiatives, but that they also seek ongoing training for those in leadership and management roles.**

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