

Why Professional Development is a Strategic Priority During a Time of Rapid Change

Research Report | *Academic Impressions, May 2020*

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Context

Historically, institutions have often frozen or cut professional development (PD) budgets during periods of financial distress, limiting their capacity for learning and identifying solutions at the very moment that capacity is most needed. Today, more than ever, institutions need to take the opposite course. Investing in PD—in your people, in their capacity and their growth—also sends a powerful leadership message. This message provides stability amid uncertainty; offers a way to move forward, keep connected and engaged, and take action; and encourages a growth mindset, even and especially in the midst of crisis. As Melissa Morriss-Olson, provost at Bay Path University, puts it:

"We're leading in tough times. I think that boards and their presidents often clench when things get tough, and the innate instinct is to cut back and go into the bunker until things get better. That is exactly the wrong response. It is virtually impossible to cut one's way to greatness. Leaders need to fight this natural instinct and find the courage to pull up and go to the balcony in the midst of daily pressures that are extraordinary and unprecedented. This is a time to be reaching outward rather than inward – gathering new ideas, connecting people who can surface and implement creative solutions, and investing in the professional development and leadership capacity of our people."

As the sector reels from unprecedented challenges, leaders can respond with either a "scarcity mindset"—reacting passively to factors outside their control, such as state budgets, demographic shifts, or a pandemic—or a "growth mindset," focusing on those factors within their control, leveraging the full skills and capacity of their academic workforce to find new solutions, networking and engaging actively across the sector to identify and share strategies for confronting both persistent and new challenges, and investing and reinvesting in their people. In a sector dedicated to producing learning, the academic workforce itself is the institution's key strategic resource, and adopting a systemic and intentional approach to developing the capacity of that workforce is a strategy for strengthening the institution's capacity and resilience both during and after a crisis.

It is with this philosophy and optimism that Academic Impressions wishes to share key findings from its third continent-wide survey of attitudes and implementation of professional development in higher education.

The Research

Demographics

In December 2019, Academic Impressions surveyed 2,452 higher-ed professionals from 642 post-secondary institutions in the U.S. and Canada. About half of the total respondents (1140 or 46%) said that they control or influence spending on PD for faculty or staff other than just themselves. More than half of respondents (1303 or 53%) were full-time administrative staff; 18% (451) were non-academic managers or directors; 13% (320) were faculty (mostly full-time); 9% (215) were mid-level academic administrators such as chairs or directors; and 6% (156) were deans, vice presidents, cabinet members, or worked in the President's office. As shown in the following demographics table, respondents were diverse in terms of age, race/ethnicity, and gender:

Demographics	N	%
Age		
Under 35	536	22%
36-50 years	1046	43%
Over 50	853	35%
Gender		
Female	1878	77%
Male	511	21%
Transgender Male	2	<0.1%
Transgender Female	0	0%
Non-binary or other	14	<1%
Prefer not to answer	27	1%
Race or Ethnicity		
American Indian or Alaska Native	31	1%
Asian	118	5%
Black or African American	236	10%
Caucasian	1808	74%
Hispanic or Latin	151	6%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	16	1%
Other racial/ethnic identity (e.g., African, Arab, Caribbean, Filipino, Italian, Middle Eastern, Russian, West Indian, etc.)	42	2%
Prefer not to answer	102	4%

Findings

The findings from this third iteration of the survey confirm and augment [previous findings](#) (from surveys conducted at the end of calendar years 2015 and 2017) and support a strong case for leaders at institutions of higher education to provide department-wide or enterprise-wide support for the professional development of their faculty and staff. The findings also suggest that professional development is important to employees and their institutions for reasons other than what traditionally has been believed. The survey data allow for the deconstruction of several longstanding myths about professional development in higher ed.

This report will share eight key findings that, collectively, can have a significant impact on how higher-ed leaders understand and utilize professional development in building the capacity both of their faculty and staff and of their departments as a whole. These findings are as follows:

1. Faculty and staff want PD to improve their effectiveness—not simply to secure a promotion or pay raise.
2. For many faculty and staff, dialogue with their department heads about PD is more important than funding for PD.
3. Dialogue about PD between department heads and employees contributes directly to job satisfaction and employee retention.
4. Faculty and staff perceive many barriers to asking for PD.
5. Proactive outreach from leadership is especially critical to support PD for women and under-represented groups.
6. Faculty and staff commonly believe that there are “no funds for PD,” even when funds are available.
7. Practices such as individualized PD plans and integration of PD into the performance review cycle make a significant difference in job satisfaction.
8. Even incremental progress toward systemic support for PD makes a measurable, significant difference.

Finding #1. Faculty and staff want PD to improve their effectiveness—not simply to secure a promotion or pay raise.

Higher-ed leaders frequently subscribe to a number of myths about what motivates their faculty and staff to seek PD. For example, 37% of department heads report that they refrain from conversations with their faculty and staff about PD because their department lacks opportunities for upward mobility, and 14% express concern that their vocal support of PD could lead to the expectation of a promotion or a raise.

But when *faculty and staff* are asked what motivates them to ask for PD, career advancement is not their primary objective:

Reason to Seek PD:	% “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” that this would drive them to ask:
The PD will help make me more effective in my role	91%
I want to learn something interesting and new	83%
The PD will help me advance in my career and/or get a promotion	74%
The PD is connected to a pressing issue for our unit or institution	72%
I would like to visit the city where the event is hosted	31%

While career advancement is certainly one motivator, it matters less than the desire to learn and improve the effectiveness of their work. The majority of the academic workforce does not perceive PD as primarily an avenue to career advancement but as a means to improve their work and advance their unit. Even in units that lack strong vertical career ladders, faculty and staff report that PD remains of critical importance to them. Notably:

- 84% of higher-ed employees say that access to new learning and professional development opportunities is either “very” or “extremely” important to them.
- 73% of faculty and staff say that more access to professional development and learning opportunities would increase their likelihood of staying at the institution. 43% say that increased access to PD would be “very” or “extremely” likely to increase that likelihood of retention.

Even if resources are tight and even if there isn’t an immediately apparent vertical mobility within the organization, higher-ed employees still see dialogue with leadership about their PD as crucial and beneficial to their work and to their personal and professional growth.

Finding #2. For many faculty and staff, dialogue with their department heads about PD is more important than funding for PD.

Not only do employees desire PD strongly, but they desire dialogue with their department heads about their professional development. In fact, this dialogue is even more important to them than the degree of access to PD funds. Consider how they responded to a choice between these two scenarios:

<p>Limited access to PD funds, but my supervisor or department head engages me proactively in regular conversations about my growth, development, and career objectives.</p>	<p>Generous access to PD funds, but my supervisor or department head does not engage me in conversations about my growth and development; I’m left to plan PD on my own.</p>
<p>51.2%</p>	<p>48.8%</p>

More than half (51%) preferred the first scenario; they would rather have the regular conversations with their supervisor or department head, even if PD funds are limited.

Yet only one third (33%) of faculty and staff confirmed that their supervisor frequently or always engages them in conversation about their professional development. Clearly there is a significant gap between the support that faculty and staff desire in order to improve the effectiveness of their work and the support that is being provided. Importantly, the key to that support is not funding for PD but ongoing dialogue with leadership about professional development opportunities, plans, and objectives.

Finding #3. Dialogue about PD between department heads and faculty and staff contributes directly to job satisfaction and employee retention.

Reviewing findings that have proven consistent across three iterations of the survey, Academic Impressions was able to construct a structural model with six subscales to explore the survey data more deeply. Using this model, we confirmed that leadership support for PD (comprising three variables: *regular dialogue with employees about their PD; provision of ongoing support after pursuing PD; and employees perception of whether their supervisor or department head models their own PD*) is not only predictive of job satisfaction; among all the items we researched, it was the most predictive factor. Leadership support for PD is more predictive of job satisfaction than:

- Perceived access to PD.
- Perceived barriers to PD.
- Whether employees perceived alignment between their professional development and departmental objectives.
- Whether employees believed their department had a learning culture that is open to new ideas and supportive of challenging “the way we do things.”

Despite the often-quoted maxim that “culture eats strategy for lunch,” we found that the impact of departmental culture on job satisfaction was more indirect. The employee’s perception of the departmental culture, the degree to which PD and departmental objectives are aligned, and the extent to which there are barriers to PD are all mediated through employees’ perception of the quality and extent of the dialogue they have with their supervisor about PD.

Job satisfaction (comprised of three variables: *overall satisfaction with their job; meaningfulness of their work; and perceived opportunities for growth at their institution*) was in turn highly predictive of whether employees found themselves likely to seek work at other institutions. 73% of higher-ed employees report that greater leadership support for their PD would make them more likely to stay at the institution. Accordingly:

Leadership support -> Job satisfaction -> Employee retention

To grasp the full impact of leadership support and dialogue around PD, consider three groups of faculty and staff in higher education, occupying a spectrum from little to no leadership support to full support. Each group consists of one third of higher-ed faculty and staff. We will refer to the groups on the two ends of this spectrum as Group Red and Group Green.

The employees in Group Red say that their department head or supervisor rarely or never engages them in dialogue about PD (29%), that they rarely or never receive ongoing support from their leadership (32%) to follow through on what they’ve learned—such as time to reflect, encouragement to share what they’ve learned, or support in trying new things. And they say that their unit heads or supervisors rarely or never model investment in their own professional development (16%).

Group Green tells the opposite story: their supervisors engage them in regular dialogue about PD (33%), provide ongoing support in implementing what they’ve learned (35%), and frequently or always model investment in their own PD (47%).

We found:

- Group Green is *three times* as likely to report that they are “very” or “extremely” satisfied with their jobs (74% in Group Green, compared to 24% in Group Red).
- Group Green is *ten times* less likely to report extreme job dissatisfaction (3% in Group Green, compared to 31.5% in Group Red).
- Group Green is roughly *three times* less likely to report a high likelihood of seeking a job outside their current institution (16% in Group Green, compared to 44% in Group Red).

Across all three metrics—whether supervisors or department heads engage faculty and staff in regular dialogue, whether they provide support for implementing what’s learned, and whether they model investment in their own PD—the numbers tallied consistently, and all three were statistically correlated with each other.

This tells a compelling story that every supervisor and department head in higher education needs to hear. Even when there is limited funding for professional development, dialogue and support for faculty and staff professional development is the lever higher-ed leaders can pull to keep their people engaged, improving their effectiveness, and satisfied with their jobs.

And because the primary motivators for seeking PD are improving one’s work and advancing the work of the unit or department, support for PD is also a key opportunity to leverage the brainpower and learning potential of the academic workforce—that is, to gather the knowledge, strategies, contacts, and practices needed to navigate a stressful “new normal” and ensure that the institution not only survives but thrives in the months and years ahead. During a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, in which the academic workforce is distributed and opportunities for collaborative learning, networking, and sharing of ideas and successes are more limited, leadership support for PD is more critical than ever.

Finding #4. Faculty and staff perceive many barriers to asking for PD.

While dialogue between leadership and employees about professional development and growth is predictive of job satisfaction, the data also suggests that supervisors would be ill-advised to simply wait for faculty and staff to approach them to initiate this dialogue. Higher-ed employees perceive many barriers to asking for PD. For example:

- 62% of faculty and staff say they would be reluctant to seek PD because they believe leadership will simply say “no.”
- 86.7% say they would be reluctant to seek PD because they believe resources are too constrained or “tight.”
- 28.6% say they would be reluctant to seek PD because they fear leadership would see them as “inadequate” due to asking for support.
- 62.8% say that clear expectations for PD are not set during their first year on the job.
- 44.8% say they do not know the steps to take to get access to PD.

We also discovered that 52.1% of all higher-ed faculty and staff would assign their departmental leadership a letter grade of C, D, or a failing grade at building faculty and staff capacity and expertise. Only 47.4% say that their leaders regularly model investment in their own PD. Almost half of all faculty and staff say they do not know what steps to take to get PD, and almost two thirds believe their supervisors will just say *no*; over 1 in 4 think they’ll be judged as inadequate if they ask.

These are not signs of a working environment in which faculty and staff feel safe and empowered to engage their leadership in discussions around their professional development and growth. Therefore, it is critical that leadership model investment in PD, demonstrate that PD is valued and key to the growth of both individual employees and of their units, educate units about what PD is available and how to seek access to it, deconstruct or dispel common myths about the likelihood of approval for PD, and engage faculty and staff proactively in ongoing dialogue about their objectives, plans, and opportunities for professional development and professional growth.

Finding #5. Proactive outreach from leadership is especially critical to support PD for women and under-represented groups.

Understanding the PD gender gap

Among survey respondents, women were even more likely than men to report that PD is highly important to them—but were also less likely than men to report high rates of job satisfaction:

	Women	Men
% for whom PD is “very” or “extremely” important	85.5%	81.4%
% who report very high job satisfaction	51.6%	59.4%

They also reported higher perceived barriers to seeking professional development:

	Women	Men
% who would be reluctant to seek PD because they believe leadership will simply say “no”	65%	50.2%
% who would be reluctant to seek PD because they believe resources are too constrained or “tight”	87.7%	83.8%
% who would be reluctant to seek PD because they fear leadership would see them as “inadequate” due to asking for support	28.7%	26.8%

And less communication with their department heads:

	Women	Men
% who say that clear expectations for PD are set during their first year on the job	45.1%	50.1%
% who say they know the steps to take to get access to PD	63.5%	71.6%
% who say their supervisors always or frequently engage them in dialogue about their PD and professional growth	31.1%	39.4%

These findings suggest that higher-ed leaders searching for ways to support and empower women in the higher-ed workforce would do well to close the gender gap in support for professional development. Crucially, not only do women report less access to PD, they are more likely than their male colleagues to refrain from asking for PD. 65% of women believe their supervisor will just say *no* (whereas only 50% of men hold that same belief).

Rather than waiting for women in their department to ask for PD, department leaders need to provide access to professional development proactively and initiate the dialogue about professional development objectives and opportunities. The leader’s role in closing the gender gap is to take action to create the space where employees of all genders can learn and grow professionally—and to communicate by action that this is the kind of learning culture departmental leaders desire and support.

It is also critical that leaders ask their faculty and staff what support they need and make it clear that seeking support and dialogue around PD won’t entail appearing “inadequate.” Leaders need to take steps to address the perceived risk for all employees (but particularly women) of seeking PD. The data reveals a wide gap between the support leaders believe they are providing and the support faculty and staff are actually receiving. To cite just one example, only 23.3% of supervisors think their faculty and staff don’t know the steps to get access to PD, but among faculty and staff, 28.4% of men and 36.5% of women report that they don’t know the steps to take. The findings in this report suggest that department leaders frequently hold unfounded assumptions about the motivations of their faculty and staff in seeking PD, perception of the risk in seeking PD, perception of the support available, and knowledge about the steps to take.

Understanding the PD gap between white employees and employees of color

There is also a gap in the likelihood of seeking out PD, between white employees and their non-white colleagues. The barriers here are distinct from those involved in the gender gap. Employees of color report similar job satisfaction and levels of engagement with their supervisors when compared with their white peers, and are actually slightly *less* likely to believe that there are no funds available for their PD. However, POC still report feeling discouraged from asking for PD.

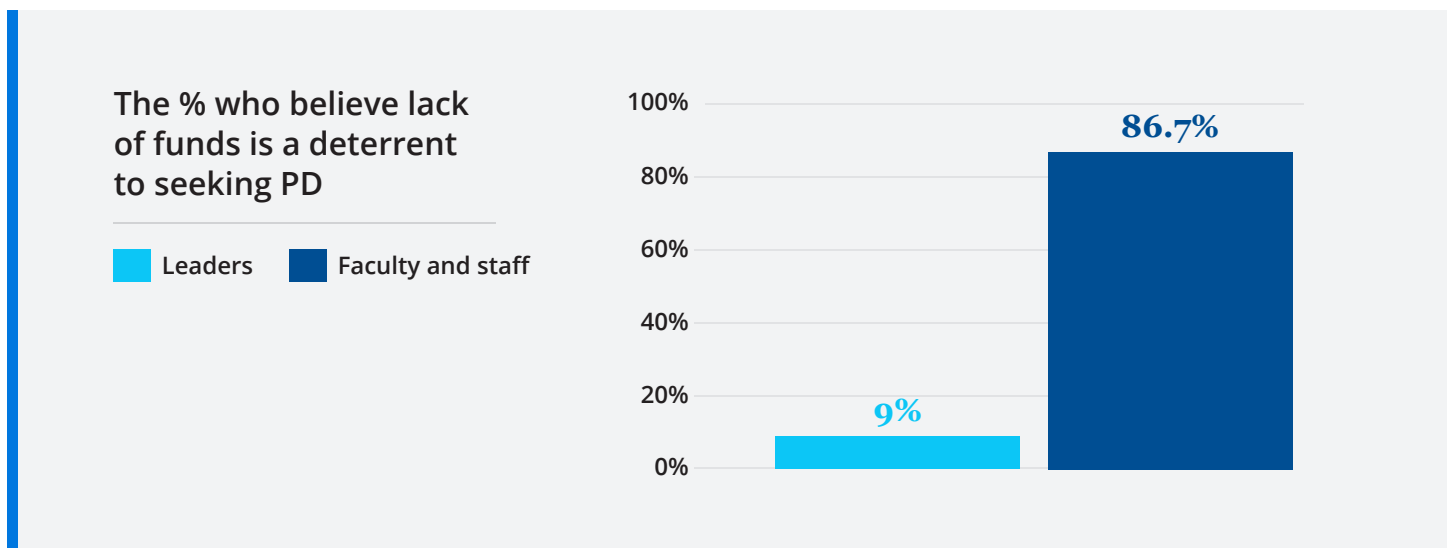
For women, one of the most significant barriers to seeking PD was the belief that their supervisors would simply say “no”; for POC, the far more significant barrier was the belief that their supervisors will see them as inadequate if they ask for support. Both groups are less likely than their peers to be aware of the steps to take in seeking PD:

	POC	White
% for whom PD is “very” or “extremely” important	85.8%	84.4%
% who report very high job satisfaction	53%	53.7%
% who would be reluctant to seek PD because they believe leadership will simply say “no”	58.1%	63.2%
% who would be reluctant to seek PD because they believe resources are too constrained or “tight”	80.6%	88.5%
% who would be reluctant to seek PD because they fear leadership would see them as “inadequate” due to asking for support	35.5%	26.1%
% who say that clear expectations for PD are set during their first year on the job	47.2%	45.4%
% who say they know the steps to take to get access to PD	62.5%	66.2%
% who say their supervisors always or frequently engage them in dialogue about their PD and professional growth	70.4%	71.8%

If supervisors are committed to building the capacity of women and employees from under-represented groups, they need to be proactive in dismantling these two myths: the myth that they'll simply say no when asked for PD, and the myth that asking for support and learning opportunities will be interpreted an indicator of inadequate performance.

Finding #6. Faculty and staff commonly believe that there are “no funds for PD,” even when funds are available.

The even more prevalent myth—among faculty and staff of all demographics—is that there simply are no funds available for their PD. A staggering 86.7% of faculty and staff report that resource constraints discourage them from asking for PD. Yet, only 9% of supervisors and department heads confirmed that access to PD funds was a barrier to dialogue about PD. These findings suggest that employees think resources for PD are scarcer than they actually are.



We also found that there were no differences in these data points between varied sizes and types of institutions. Participants responded to these questions on the survey similarly regardless of whether they were employed at a technical college, a prestigious liberal arts school, or a flagship state institution. We found no statistical correlation between the *beliefs* about the availability of resources and the probable access to resources. Employees at an R1 were just as likely as employees at a community college to see resource constraints as the primary barrier to seeking PD, and department/division leaders at a community college are just as unlikely as leaders at an R1 to see resource constraints as a primary barrier.

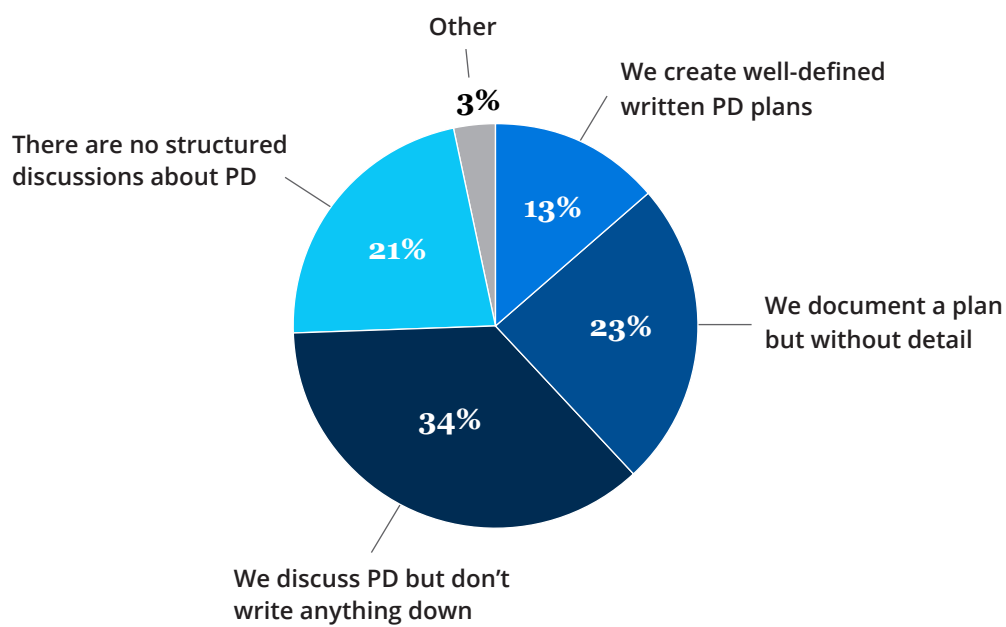
No matter the type of institution, leaders who commit to providing division-wide or enterprise-wide support for the professional development of their faculty and staff will need to recognize that simply providing the support isn't enough by itself; leaders have to also take steps to break down the myths that keep supervisors/department heads from engaging their faculty and staff in regular dialogue about their PD—and the myths that deter some faculty and staff from requesting PD.

Finding #7. Practices such as individualized PD plans and integration of PD into the performance review cycle make a significant difference in job satisfaction.

Another finding is that significant gains in employee job satisfaction can be realized when the dialogue between supervisors or department heads and their faculty and staff about PD is structured and regular rather than ad hoc, and when it is systemic across the institution. Below are three examples, surfaced from the survey data, of how to achieve these gains.

Individual learning plans

The survey asked whether departments are creating annual, written professional development plans for each employee:



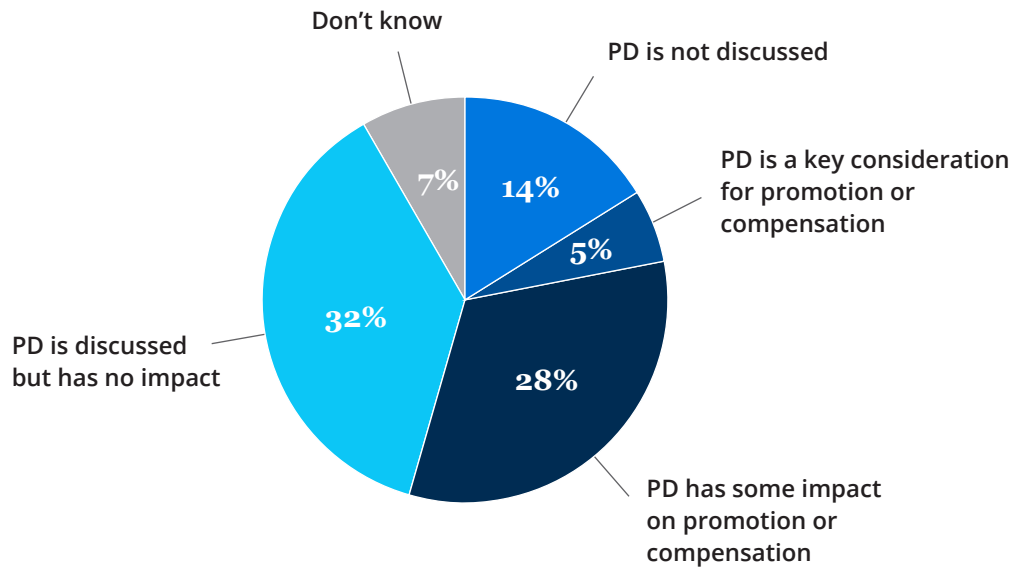
Most employees said either that there are no structured discussions about PD (21%) or that there are discussions but nothing is written down (34%). Only 13% of respondents said that their organizations have well-defined written plans with clear objectives and criteria.

Those who reported having well-defined written PD plans were 85% more likely to report high job satisfaction, 25% less likely to report they would seek work elsewhere in the coming year, and slightly more likely (1.1 times) to see PD as closely aligned with the strategic objectives and priorities of the institution.

Consider the axiom that we can't measure what we aren't tracking, and also the principle that we are more likely to strive toward and achieve goals we write down than we are toward goals we don't write down. Leaders that are committed to investing in their employees' capacity can consider having structured annual discussions with each employee about their PD needs and opportunities—and documenting the outcomes of those discussions.

Integration into the annual review process

Many faculty and staff report that their professional development either is never discussed during annual reviews (14%) or is discussed but has no impact on decisions about promotion or compensation (32%):



Similarly, 53% of employees believe there would be “no reaction” from their department head or supervisor if they did not participate in PD in a given year. That may be a telling diagnostic, given that leadership engagement in PD is also directly predictive of job satisfaction.

At those few institutions where PD is well-integrated into the annual review process, employees also report:

- Higher ratings of leaders’ level of support for employees’ PD
- Fewer perceived barriers to participating in PD
- Higher ratings of job satisfaction
- Lower chances of the employee saying they would seek work elsewhere

Activity	% who said they’re expected to do this
I apply what I have learned in doing my own work/teaching.	66.3%
I share resources gathered at the event with my colleagues.	58.2%
I use what I learned to mentor others in our office/department.	45.3%
I provide a presentation for our office/department.	26.7%
I write a report on the program I attended.	12.6%

Encouraging follow-up after PD

Third, the survey asked faculty and staff what follow-up activities they are expected to engage in after attending and completing a professional development opportunity. The following table lists the most frequent activities:

It's axiomatic that we learn best when teaching what we've learned, and that by sharing our knowledge, we grow more informed and more efficient. Unfortunately, nearly one in four employees (24.4%) report that no follow-up or knowledge sharing of any kind is requested or expected after they complete a professional development opportunity. Additionally, 31.5% report an absence of ongoing support from their leadership to implement what they've learned.

Finding #8. Even incremental progress toward systemic support for PD makes a measurable, significant difference.

Though the survey findings suggest that systemic and structured support for PD at institutions of higher education may be rare, the data also suggests that even minor, incremental steps toward providing that support can make a measurable difference in both job satisfaction and the perceived alignment of PD opportunities with departmental or institutional priorities and objectives.

The data suggests that even if a leader made just one procedural change—such as discussing PD in the context of the annual review—the likelihood of high job satisfaction and employee retention increases, even without making any other changes in PD offerings or funding. When we examined the relationship between this variable and others, the results also showed a linear progression; each step in the scale correlated to higher job satisfaction. Moving from “we don't discuss” PD during annual review to “we discuss it but it has no impact” produces an incremental increase in the likelihood of job satisfaction and in the perceived alignment between PD and departmental objectives, as does moving from “it has no impact” to “it has some impact.” The same is true with efforts to establish individualized learning plans for employees; even small steps toward that goal make a difference.

Conclusions

In summary, employees seek PD to improve the effectiveness of their work, and greater support for PD improves their job satisfaction and likelihood of retention. Therefore, a more planful approach to supporting professional development is a critical and integral part of a department or division's commitment both to building the capacity of its people and to leveraging their talent and skill effectively in the pursuit of strategic priorities. That more planful approach would be one in which professional development plans are developed and documented, professional development is reviewed annually, and there are clear expectations for how learnings from professional development are to be disseminated and shared with the rest of a team or department. When PD planning is part of an annual process—where PD objectives are aligned with departmental and unit objectives—and when learnings from PD are disseminated, PD is no longer an ad hoc and underutilized asset but instead becomes one of the core strategies by which teams, departments, divisions, and institutions improve and challenge themselves and advance their mission.

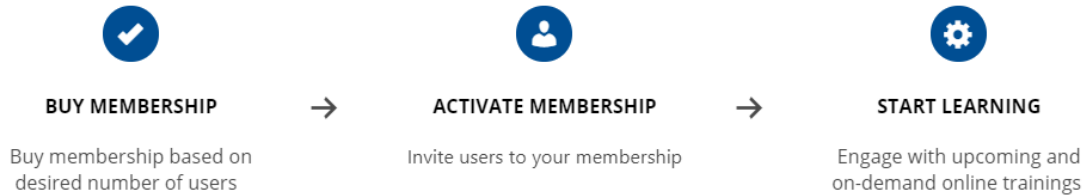
Additionally, it is critical that those in leadership or supervisory positions in higher education consider proactive outreach to their employees to initiate and structure the dialogue around PD plans, objectives, and opportunities. This is important because faculty and staff cite numerous perceived barriers or disincentives to seeking PD, while supervisors do not recognize the presence or validity of these barriers. The gap is greater for women and employees from under-represented groups, and the onus is on leadership to close that gap and create a space for a more productive conversation around PD.

Such an investment is timely because during an era of uncertainty and rapid change, there is a greater, not lesser, need to foster connection, networking, and sharing of practices among colleagues. The institutions that will emerge from a time of crisis in a position to thrive will be those whose leaders, faculty, and staff are empowered and equipped to think opportunistically, creatively, and with a growth mindset. During such a time, existing mindsets and approaches to the work need to be challenged. Creative solutions need to be sought, identified, piloted, and shared. Systemic, enterprise-wide support for professional development—in a structured, intentional way—cultivates a growth mindset in the academic workforce, communicates a powerful and necessary message to the institution’s employees about their leadership’s confidence and investment in their people, and strengthens the institution’s capacity and resilience in the face of change.

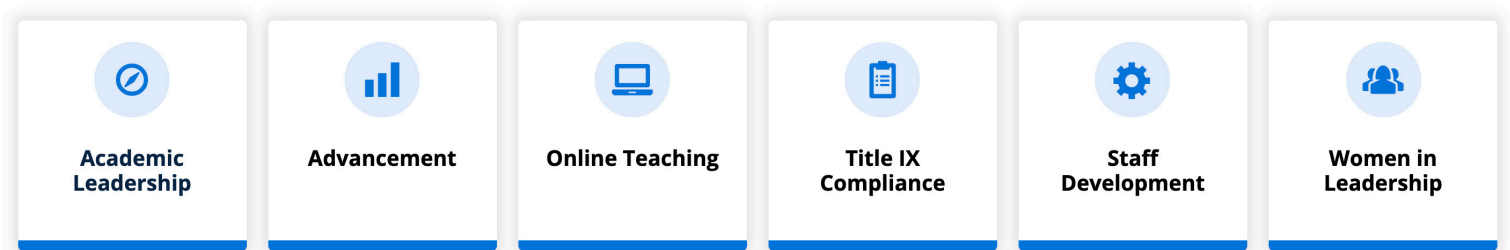
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