

Unveiling the Truth: How Leadership Impacts Trust, Morale, and Retention in Higher Education

Research Report | *Academic Impressions* | May 2024

By **Amit Mrig**, President, *Academic Impressions*

There are a small, but mighty, set of institutions that are like Teflon. Political interference, athletics scandals, congressional hearings, and donor activism aren't enough to change the trajectory of increasing applications, increasing net revenue, record research expenditures and record fundraising totals. And we're not just talking about Harvard or the University of Pennsylvania. There are probably 50-75 institutions in the U.S. that will continue to persevere in the face of most, if not all, obstacles. The other 3000 institutions have to invest in developing good leaders. And their track record isn't good.

Demographics

The data was collected in November and December 2023, and we collected 3,006 responses.

- *Full-time staff: 49.7% (1495)*
- *Part- or full-time faculty: 22.1% (666)*
- *Non-academic administrators and directors: 14% (202)*
- *Department chairs or mid-level academic administrators: 6.7% (202)*
- *Dean or Vice President: 5.1% (152)*
- *President or cabinet member: 1.9% (57)*

Academic Impressions conducts the most comprehensive, higher ed-specific survey of faculty and staff regarding leadership and professional development industry-wide. Conducted biennially, in December 2023, over 3,000 faculty and staff shared their views on leadership and professional development, the level of trust they have in their leaders, the psychological safety they feel in their units, and how effective they deem their units to be. The following are seven of our most important findings.

Finding 1: The Great Resignation is not over for higher education.

Despite not hearing as much about the Great Resignation as we did during and immediately after the pandemic, turnover remains a significant challenge. **According to our survey, 57% said they were likely to leave their**

position in the next year, and 42% reported clinical symptoms of burnout. The data is a slight improvement from 2021 but still higher than what we saw pre-pandemic.

HR offices are fighting a losing battle, often dealing with multiple issues at once (low compensation, ineffective supervisors, massive and disruptive change that is not being managed well, etc.) and often doing so reactively.

At the dozens of institutions that Academic Impressions visits every year, we see these challenges firsthand. Morale feels like it's at an all-time low. Senior leaders are turning over at alarming rates. Political interference, whether it be anti-DEI legislation, pressures to make political statements (or not to), or campus protests, is sowing seeds of fear and anxiety even in states and institutions that have not been directly impacted.

For some time, staff turnover has been a known issue, but increasingly we're hearing from our institutional partners that they are seeing faculty leave at unprecedented rates. And unfortunately, it's not the faculty *you* want to leave—the ones who are toxic, who perform no service, and are in under-enrolled programs. Instead, the faculty who are leaving are the “star faculty” who have productive research agendas, are wonderful mentors, advisors, and teachers, and who bring diverse perspectives.

The result is that whether due to the demographic cliff, artificial intelligence, or some other macro-level trend, many institutions will find themselves with a smaller headcount in a few years. But when reductions happens via attrition, it will lack any intentionality or strategy and will leave the institution not just smaller, but weaker. Leaders need to take seriously that retaining their best talent is no longer a given—even in small college towns where the institution is the biggest and most prestigious employer.

Finding 2: Leadership and professional development matter. A lot.

One of the most useful findings that has come from this study is the relationship between leadership and professional development and faculty / staff retention. Most of us intuitively know that this matters—people want to continue to grow within their roles, especially younger generations. Some leaders intuitively understand this and don't need to see hard data. Others have told us:

“I don't invest in professional development because one of two things will happen—either my employees will ask for a raise, or they'll leave. Neither is a good outcome for me.”

But the reality is actually different: When you invest in your faculty and staff's professional development, they are more likely to stay than to leave. Five studies, including more than 15,000 faculty and staff in total and spanning 10 years, have consistently produced a statistically valid finding: that **leadership support for professional development is the single biggest predictor of job satisfaction** (explaining 29.1% of the variance), and that job satisfaction is a meaningful predictor of job retention (explaining 25% of the variance). In fact, when someone is dissatisfied with their job, they are 67% more likely to leave their position within a year.

There are five variables that determine “leadership support for professional development:”

- 1. Leaders modeling an investment in their own PD:** Faculty and staff can easily distinguish the “talk” from the “walk.” Leaders can support professional development, but if they model the way, it sends a powerful and intentional message to others.
- 2. Engaging faculty and staff in conversations about their growth:** In ten years this has been the most powerful finding from the survey—that the mere act of a conversation, conveying a commitment and desire to invest in someone else, is the single most important retention tool a leader has.

3. **Following through on professional development:** Coming up with a plan and writing it down, committing to it, and following up are critical steps in proving that career development is valued.
4. **Providing time for professional development:** The number one barrier to career development is time—we're all guilty of this and are seemingly too busy doing our work to improve our ability to *do* our work.
5. **Providing financial support for professional development:** Some career development does require a financial investment and prioritizing these resources again signals true commitment as opposed to making empty promises.

We have combined these five variables to create a subscale that we call "leadership support for professional growth," and the data very strongly support their impact:

Leadership Variable	2021 Average	2023 Average	Relationship to Job Satisfaction	Relationship to Job Turnover
Leaders Model Their Own PD	$M = 3.37$	$M = 3.40$	$r = .35$ [110% greater]	$r = -.15$ [26% less]
Leaders Engage Employees re: PD	$M = 2.95$	$M = 3.11$	$r = .46$ [170% greater]	$r = -.21$ [35% less]
Leaders Follow Through about PD	$M = 2.92$	$M = 3.16$	$r = .47$ [178% greater]	$r = -.18$ [31% less]
Leaders Provide Time for PD	<i>Not asked</i>	$M = 3.19$	$r = .47$ [178% greater]	$r = -.24$ [39% less]
Leaders Provide Money for PD	<i>Not asked</i>	$M = 3.16$	$r = .43$ [151% greater]	$r = -.22$ [36% less]

Given the relationship between leadership support for professional development, job satisfaction, and job retention, it's critical that we train leaders on how to practice these behaviors. Developing people is not an intuitive skill that all leaders innately possess. You can and must learn how to do it, and Academic Impressions has a proven 4-step model that can help leaders to have intentional and constructive career-growth conversations.

Finding 3: The public aren't the only ones losing trust with higher ed leaders.

Fully 1 in 5 people reported low or no trust in their supervisor. While this isn't the majority, it signals a major issue for institutions. This group was much less satisfied with their jobs and was **more than twice as likely to say they will be seeking another position within the next year.**

The old adage that "people leave supervisors, not organizations" certainly rings true here. Effective supervision and leadership matter, and institutions fail to make these investments at their own peril.

Trust is also a critical factor in innovation. Have you ever tried to persuade a group with low trust to try something new? Low trust creates a protectionist and self-serving stance—faculty and staff are not willing to take risks because they don't think anyone has their back. As Stephen Covey wrote, “organizations move at the speed of trust.” When trust is low, everyone questions every decision, intention, action, and inaction. People are suspicious and spend more time protecting themselves than advancing the work or the team forward.

When high trust was reported, respondents were nearly twice as likely to say that their organizations were highly effective (defined by how well the organization achieves its goals, financial sustainability, and how well they function as a team). The highest predictor for trust in our survey? Leadership support for professional development.

Those who rated high leadership support for professional development were **22% more likely to say they trusted their supervisor.**

Finding 4: The best ROI for employee engagement? Leadership development.

Leadership development can come in many forms. With this in mind, in our latest survey, and for the first time, we surveyed faculty and staff on both the availability of such programs at their institutions and on their interest in participating. The findings were stark:

- 85% of faculty and staff reported interest in participating in a leadership development program.
- 38% reported having an internal program available to them.

The fact that faculty and staff want to pursue leadership development should be an encouraging finding. Those that have participated in a leadership development program are **23% more likely to be satisfied with their jobs** and are **9% less likely to report significant symptoms of burnout.**

If leadership development is implemented intentionally, it's not simply a retention tool but is also a mechanism to advance the institution forward. Leadership programs designed or supported by Academic Impressions promote self-awareness, productive approaches to dealing with conflict, building trust and psychological safety in teams, enable leaders to challenge long-held assumptions, and create the space for new ideas to thrive.

When you consider the challenges we face as an enterprise of higher education—declining U.S. demographics, the rise of artificial intelligence, political interference, and more—we need new solutions and approaches. We need leaders who are self-aware and comfortable saying that they don't have all the answers, leaders who are skilled at navigating ambiguity and complexity, and leaders who can build a strong sense of trust and commitment. These are skills and approaches that can be learned, and we can no longer afford the [costs of underinvestment](#).

Finding 5: It's time to start investing in coaching.

For the first time in our survey, we asked about leadership coaching. Since Academic Impressions launched its coaching business in 2018, we have seen consistent and steady growth in demand for both faculty and leadership coaching. We had previously taken this as a sign that there is greater awareness and belief in the value of coaching, but our survey found that this is not actually the case.

Of the 81% of respondents who had not yet used a coach:

36%

didn't know what coaching involves.

34%

were unsure of its value.

28%

were concerned about the costs.

Building habits of reflection is one of the most effective strategies that leaders can practice to improve their leadership. Coaching can provide this space for reflection by providing a thought partner who can help leaders overcome limiting beliefs, see their own roles in contributing to difficult situations, and identify patterns—both constructive and destructive—to help ensure that leaders are working in alignment towards both personal and professional goals.

Coaching in higher education is not the same as in other industries. It's critical to ensure that coaches have both expertise in the discipline of coaching and that they also have lived experience in higher education. Leading in a post-secondary context is very different from the corporate, government, or non-profit worlds. Faculty coaches that support research development and tenure or career advancement must understand the world their clients live in — including the pressures, politics, and personalities that are unique to the academy. Similarly, leadership coaches need firsthand experience with shared governance and its impact on effecting change, the decentralized nature of higher education, and the competing interests of various stakeholders.

The benefits of coaching are clear. Those that have received coaching were:

16%

more likely to be satisfied with their jobs.

31%

more likely to say they can take creative risks in their teams.

60%

more likely to report safety in pushing back against their leadership.

Although 81% of respondents have never used a coach, encouragingly, 62% of managers said that they were either likely or very likely to support coaching for members of their team. This disconnect further affirms the need for more career and professional development conversations between unit heads and faculty/staff.

Finding 6: Succession planning...works.

Succession planning is not something that is widely practiced in higher education and, in some ways, it runs counter to the academic tradition of increasing intellectual diversity by hiring from outside the program. While that practice may make sense for faculty lines, it rarely makes sense for other positions. Yet this talent-seeking approach has created a cultural belief that the best talent must reside somewhere else. Even in staff and administrative roles, too often the reality is that “to move up, you have to move out.”

Succession planning in higher education is not well understood. In fact, there are two pervasive myths that influence people’s views and muddy the water. The first myth is that succession planning means guaranteed successor planning. Effective succession planning is about investing in the right group of people so that they have the best chance at securing a position when it becomes open; it *doesn’t* mean hand-picking a successor. The second pervasive myth is that succession planning equates to settling because the institution is more likely to promote from within, limiting outside talent and new ideas. In reality, effective succession planning is about combining the best of both worlds—capitalizing on the institutional knowledge and relationship capital of your faculty and staff while investing in the skills necessary to help them to succeed in future roles.

In our survey, succession planning was rarely practiced. Fully 86.1% of respondents said that it was rarely or never practiced. Yet, interestingly it was also the most effective practice reported.

In reality, those who had participated in succession planning were:

75%

more likely to report high job satisfaction.

28%

less likely to be experiencing significant burnout.

24%

less likely to say that they planned to leave their current jobs in the next year.

To do succession planning right, the effort needs to consider the future needs of the unit, not just the current structures, programs, and offerings. In this way, effective succession planning should be tied to ongoing strategic planning. If forward planning is episodic and not continuous, succession plans are limited in their usefulness and are more likely to reinforce “status quo” thinking and operations rather than enabling growth and innovation.

The lack of succession planning is emblematic of broader talent practices that are woefully out of date, driven more by historic and bureaucratic approaches than what’s best for the institution. In one system we work closely with, once Deans are in their roles for three years, they relinquish their faculty role and their tenure, essentially ensuring a revolving door at the Dean position. At another campus we work with, interim Deans are not permitted to apply for the regular position. This either ensures that leaders who have no interest in leadership assume these critical roles, or that the School’s best leaders—who desire experience—are guaranteed to leave. These practices are not unique and are part of a medley of practices that include promoting individual contributors into leadership roles in order to retain them, forcing faculty into leadership roles that they don’t want, and weighing individual performance over leadership potential when hiring middle managers.

Not only can succession planning provide greater continuity for the future, but engaging in the effort itself produces immediate benefits. Respondents who had been engaged in succession planning were 85% more likely to trust their leader, 77% more likely to be satisfied, and 32% less likely to leave their positions within a year.

Finding 7: Faculty break the mold: they are more satisfied, yet more likely to leave their jobs.

Approximately one-third of our respondents were faculty or faculty leaders, and given the unique nature of their role in colleges and universities, we wanted to segment our responses to see how their responses differed from staff and administrative leadership.

Compared to non-faculty, faculty respondents scored lower on multiple items. They rated professional development as **less important**, had **less trust for unit leaders**, said that their **unit heads were less supportive of PD**, reported **a lower sense of belonging**, were **less willing to take creative risks**, and said overall that **their organizations were less effective**.

Perhaps paradoxically, they also reported higher job satisfaction than non-faculty. They were 10% more likely to report that they were satisfied with their jobs—not a big increase, but important in the sense that despite their complaints, faculty generally recognize and appreciate the unique roles they get to occupy.

We did not break down faculty respondents by rank or track however. In a [validated survey diagnostic tool](#) that Academic Impressions created in 2023, we found that mid-career faculty are most likely to be dissatisfied with their jobs, experience burnout, and leave their positions. The data from that survey affirms what we hear every day from our institutional partners—that they struggle the most with engaging mid-career faculty.

This shouldn't be surprising. Mid-career faculty often carry the biggest burden while receiving the least amount of support. Whether overwhelmed by their service and leadership responsibilities, feeling stagnant in their research, or struggling to balance both personal and professional demands, mid-career faculty require a unique type of support.

The complexity of their reality is that mid-career faculty often have the least amount of time for the intensive professional development they would benefit from most. Knowing this, Academic Impressions has taken an approach to provide highly practical resources that can be delivered in a bite-sized format, and that can be accessed by faculty at any time they experience a struggle (which is usually not within standard working hours).

Taking a flexible yet intentional approach to supporting all faculty—but especially mid-career, when the burden is highest and the support is lowest—is critical to cultivating the institution's future leaders. Beyond improving preparedness, such investments can also build motivation and enthusiasm for leadership positions, helping to build a pipeline of leaders when the program director, chair and associate dean positions come open.

Conclusion

The numbers don't lie. When leaders support professional development, several positive things happen as a result—trust and a sense of belonging increase, overall job satisfaction increases, and turnover and burnout decrease.

There are any number of ways to do this, including creating or supporting participation in leadership programs, coaching and engaging in succession planning. But perhaps most critically, these benefits will start accruing with a single conversation.

Engaging employees in conversations about their career growth is the one of the best ways to move the needle on these outcomes, and it doesn't cost a dime. It does require time, attention, and ensuring that supervisors are trained and supported to have these conversations.

When we support faculty and staff development, not only do measures of employee engagement and retention improve, so too will our ability to confront the daunting challenges we face as an industry. We need leaders with different leadership skillsets if higher education is to thrive in the future—leaders who are skilled in strategic thinking, proactive about dealing with issues, optimistic and opportunistic, and comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty, among other similar skills. These are not innate skills, but they can (and must) be learned.

The challenges facing higher education today are significant, but so too are the opportunities. As the world is transformed by artificial intelligence, climate change, and other macro-level forces, the need for education will only increase. And meeting that need must begin with our own faculty and staff.

Academic Impressions, May 2024

Boost Leadership at Your Institution with Academic Impressions

Strong leadership has never been more critical as higher education faces significant challenges and transitions. With over 20 years of experience providing leadership and personal development training to higher education, Academic Impressions can help prepare your current leaders for the challenges ahead and build up your leadership bench for the future.

We can help in these areas:

- *Academic Innovation*
- *Advancement*
- *Chairs*
- *Deans*
- *Employee Engagement*
- *Faculty Vitality*
- *Leadership*
- *Service Excellence*
- *Student Leadership*
- *Team Dynamics*
- *Women in Leadership*

Don't miss out on the opportunity to enhance leadership at your institution with the help of Academic Impressions. Connect with our president, [Amit Mrig](#), today to start the conversation.