

# Teaching Better: A Community College's Faculty Development Needs

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## **Abstract**

Faculty development is a critical area of practice for every higher education institution. Many programs, however, are increasingly designed around assuring institutional compliance rather than equipping faculty to be successful teachers. The current study was designed to explore what a community college's faculty perceived as important faculty development programming. Using a survey of nearly 400 faculty at a suburban community college, faculty identified programs that focus on linking social technology to academic success, generational differences of students, and addressing student disabilities in the classroom as the most important. Nearly half of responding faculty noted that developmental programming is of high importance to them, and just over a third indicated that programming should be in person rather than online. Findings suggest that faculty are seeking the best possible way to connect with students who have grown up with technology.

**Keywords:** college teaching, community colleges, faculty, community college faculty

## 1. Introduction

### *1.1 Introduce the Problem*

Teaching has typically been considered a hybrid of art and science, relying on the skill and acumen of the teacher to discern how interactions, reactions, and processing work with learners in a classroom. The action of teaching has been considered one of the most important aspects of a college education, as these experiences inside of the classroom not only build the knowledge necessary for the future, but create relationships that help form the ‘experience’ of higher education (Hyland, 2014).

Teaching is a part of virtually all higher education institutions, but is particularly central to the role of the American community college. Designed to provide high quality instruction to students pursuing a range of personal, practical, and academic, teaching is the backbone of the community college (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). As such, the teachers, the faculty who comprise the primary workforce of these institutions, rely on a set of skills that are both natural and professionally developed (English & LaCroix, 2020). Teachers are the frontline employees who impact and influence students, and ultimately, their behaviors and practices determine the effectiveness of the college.

The ways in which community college faculty become, and remain, strong teachers is important to understand in the current social environment for many reasons (Costino, 2018). Technology, for example, has grown in ways that it now impact student behaviors such as attention span, focus in the classroom, and access to communicating with others in real time. Additionally, the characteristics of the current generation of college students presents new challenges for teachers, as they learn to respond to different societal expectations, including expectations of work, degree outcomes, and reinforcement. And most notably, the world-wide COVID pandemic has greatly impacted not only how teachers can deliver their content, but also how students choose to consume this instruction. With a global response of moving college coursework into online formats, the strategies for effective and successful teaching have changed as never before.

Considering the importance of teaching and the environmental factors influencing how students learn, it is critical to understand how colleges help their faculty members improve their teaching. Therefore, the purpose for conducting the study was to explore a comprehensive community college’s faculty perceptions of their development needs specifically related to improving their teaching. The research question to be answered, subsequently, was: how do comprehensive community college faculty members at a single institution describe bot their development needs and topics for development.

### *1.2 Relevant Scholarship*

*Current Students.* One of the most popular ways of attempting to understand college students is through the placement of them, generally, into categories of generations. Although specific years have often been used to define when a generation begins or ends, they are typically not absolute boundaries, as characteristics of generations are typically framed from shared experiences and societal exposure. Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak (2010) noted, “ it should

hardly be a surprise that in this environment then is a growing sense of individual and generational enmity. ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’... attitudes are easy to comprehend and empathize with” (p. 2).

The generational identification that has received perhaps the most attention was commonly referred to as “the Greatest Generation,” indicating those born approximately 1925 who lived through the middle of the 1900s. Following generations have included Baby Boomers (1944-1964), Generation X (1965-1980), Millennials (1981-1995), and most recently, Generation Z (1996-2015) (Woods, 2019). These classifications are important because they allow faculty members and institutions to better understand who their clients (students) are and how to teach and communicate with them. The current generation, referred commonly to as Generation Z, as the students who began arriving on college campuses within the past decade and bring with them a skill and experience set that has not been noted before.

Students categorized as part of Generation Z are the most ethnically diverse in the history of the United States, but with that diversity also bring a strong technology orientation (Zemke, Rains, & Filipczak, 2010). Some research has even noted that they have exposure to and use technology up to 16 hours a day. This technology orientation has led to the use of visuals and images as a major element of communication (emojis, self-taken-pictures, etc.). In addition to this technology, they have been described as self-reliant, persistent, self-aware, willing to work for success, and realistic in their expectations of themselves and their lives.

Coupled with these changing behavioral patterns, community colleges recruit a broad range of students, ranging from traditional students looking to prepare for four-year college enrollment to those who have returned to learn after earning advanced graduate degrees (Lynch, 2009; Miller, Grover, & Deggs, 2020). Many traditional students possess the characteristics of Generation Z and see enrolling in a the community college as a functional way to save from paying high tuition prices at a four-year institution. Others view the developmental function of a community college as the deciding factor in their enrollment, and others begin their postsecondary journey by sampling classes on a part-time basis. Additionally, students return to formal education after long absences, short periods of stopping out, after beginning a family or losing a job. This broad conveying of student differences in the community college presents significant teaching challenges for faculty members. How these teachers respond to a traditional 18-year old might be very different from how they respond to a 50-year old. The challenge to providing effective instruction for the college, then, is how to be the best teacher possible in responding to an increasingly broad range of students.

*Improving Teaching.* As the primary role of a community college faculty member, the quality of teaching delivered to students ultimately determines the success or failure of the institution (Hromalik, Mhhill, & Carr, 2020). Historically, community college faculty were initially employed from the secondary school ranks, meaning that most faculty had a combination of content knowledge and a fair amount of teaching experience. As community colleges have grown and evolved, the teaching labor force has become more specifically trained, meaning that individuals in faculty roles are often arriving in these positions as a career ambition

(Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Faculty teaching in these colleges generally are required to hold at least a masters degree in their content area and in some instances may be required to hold an additional teaching credential. Broadly, though, faculty members are not required to have training on how to effectively teach.

Many higher education institutions engage actively in faculty development programs around teaching, although there was a period of time when these centers and programs were reduced due to budget constraints. Current efforts have been described as sporadic, and typically dependent upon academic leadership vocalizing value in such efforts. The focus of these developmental programs is also predicated on whether they should focus on teaching as opposed to other institutional priorities, such as service learning, diversity, globalization, and even software and procedural trainings (Al-Asfour & Young, 2017; Baker, Pifer, & Lunsford, 2018).

For institutions that have created programs to assist with teaching improvement, many undertake either a strategy of annually focused teaching programs (eg, a theme for a year), or make use of individualized training programs based on institutional need (Rands, Bender, Gillette, & Orgler, 2017). The current response to the pandemic, for example, prompted many institutions to offer their own versions of faculty development based on remote learning or the institutional response to non-face-to-face classes.

Technology has also aided institutions in developing and distributing teaching improvement programs. Some of these are commercially available programs on how to use specific software, such as Canvas or Blackboard, and others are developed by the institution helping faculty learn the nuances of some teaching strategy (Wuhib, 2020). Some, for example, might be institutionally developed courses distributed online to faculty about writing learning objectives or alternatives to student grading (Wood, Xiong, Harris, & Delgado, 2017; Vance, 2018).

*Faculty Development.* The concept of faculty development has evolved from focusing on simply improving teaching to encompassing a broad array of topical areas that fall within the realm of community college faculty members job responsibilities. Topics such as working with students who have learning disabilities, multiculturalism, inclusion, technology, time management, conflict resolution, etc. have all become common topics for these programs (Bickerstaff & Chavarin, 2018; Krug, 2018). The difficulty of offering such a broad range of development training is that it can become hard for faculty members to know how to prioritize a developmental agenda.

Time management has been noted as a primary concern for college faculty members due in a large part to the structure of a faculty member's work. Teaching four or five classes per academic term, hosting office hours, advising, and participating in departmental work are all elements of the faculty position, and many institutional leaders view developmental programs as a way to enhance faculty quality, effectiveness, and efficiency (Perez, McShannon, & Hynes, 2012).

There are several key problems with faculty development, beginning with that which has already been mentioned, the difficulty in prioritizing what activities should be emphasized.

Many administrators will view faculty development programs as an element of risk management, meaning that institutional control is best served by assuring that faculty members behave in some certain way or that they perform tasks in some specific manner. These programs are often important for the welfare of the institution and might include areas such as how to work with minors, how to process leave forms, and how to serve on search committees. These programs might be of benefit to the institution, but might not be critical to improving teaching or student learning. The problem of prioritization snowballs, as faculty members might struggle with participating fully with these programs simply due to the sheer magnitude of what they are being asked to participate in (Wood, 2015).

A second challenge of faculty development is the nature of how the programs are delivered, and whether or not the programs are structured in such a manner that they have a long-term, lasting impact on the faculty member's performance (Pelletreau, Knight, Lemons, McCourt, Merrill, Nehm, Prevost, Urban-Lurian, & Smith, 2018). Many professional development programs are one-time seminars or lectures, even consultant visits, and in recent times, particularly with the COVID pandemic, have been delivered as on-line programs. Some online learning has been demonstrated to be highly effective, while others have been described as simple recordings of lectures or narrated Power Point presentations. So although online delivered faculty development has the potential to be effective and weaved throughout a faculty member's academic year, the desire for brief programs has the potential to more often than not be ineffective.

## **2. Method**

The purpose of the study was to describe the types of faculty development a current community college faculty perceived to be important. The study made use of a large, comprehensive suburban community college of approximately 15,000 credit and non-credit students (approximately 1,300 associates degrees awarded each year), with one main campus and approximately 10 education and training centers. The college employed approximately 388 full-time faculty members across the district, and as a cautionary note, the majority of these full-time faculty members were in academic transfer-oriented areas. The college tended to employ a large number of part-time faculty in occupational education disciplines. Additionally, program chairs, department and division directors, and deans were not considered "faculty members" for the purpose of the study. Additionally, the institution reported 388 full-time faculty lines, but during time of the administration of the study, they were not able to confirm whether all of the positions were actively filled.

Faculty members at the case study institution first received an email message from the vice president for academic affairs asking for their participation in the study. One week after receiving the email, the survey was sent using an electronic survey instrument. Survey reminders were sent three times, each one being sent through email at five day increments.

The survey used in the study was a research-team developed instrument that contained 25 faculty development topical areas. These areas were drawn from both academic and popular literature, meaning that some of them were mentioned in popular media articles while others have been the subject of research for a longer period of time.

The instrument was first developed in the early-fall of 2020 and pilot tested with a group of sitting community college academic leaders and faculty members. A total of 28 non-participants reviewed and commented on the survey. Through their feedback, adjustments were made to both the content of the survey as well as the wording that was used. The response stem for the survey included the wording: “This item is critically important for us to receive faculty development training on in the current environment.” Respondents were then asked to rate their agreement level with the item on a one-to-five Likert-type scale, where 1=Strongly Disagree, meaning that the responding faculty member did not believe that training was important, progressing to 5=Strongly Agree, meaning that training in that area was seen as critically important.

Following the feedback from the non-participants, the survey was then sent to group of 25 faculty members at a non-participating institution. Using their responses, a Cronbach alpha of .7823 was computed, suggesting that the instrument had a high level of internal reliability.

### 3. Results

A total of 209 surveys were initiated, and 202 were completed for a 52% response rate. As shown in Table 1, the most agreed upon areas of faculty development were linking social technology to academic success ( $\bar{x}=4.78$ ) and understanding generational differences ( $\bar{x}=4.53$ ). Thirteen faculty development topics had group mean ratings between 4.0 and 4.46, including accommodating student disabilities ( $\bar{x}=4.46$ ) and online teaching strategies ( $\bar{x}=4.37$ ) ranging to developing student interactions in class ( $\bar{x}=4.01$ ) and linking courses with other in the program ( $\bar{x}=4.00$ ). Nine items had group mean ratings between 3.5 and 4.0, suggesting neither agreement nor disagreement that they were desired faculty development topics, including managing grading ( $\bar{x}=3.94$ ) and more effective lecturing ( $\bar{x}=3.80$ ), ranging to evaluating teaching  $\bar{x}= (3.56)$  and writing learning objectives ( $\bar{x}=3.55$ ). The faculty development topic with the lowest overall mean was linking curriculum to course outcomes ( $\bar{x}=3.41$ ).

Table 1. Topics of Desired Faculty Development

| Faculty Development Area                      | Level of Importance<br>Mean ( $\bar{x}$ ) | Standard<br>Deviation |
|---|---|-----------------------|
| Linking social technology to academic success | 4.78                                      | .3092                 |
| Understanding generational differences        | 4.53                                      | .4736                 |
| Accommodating student disabilities            | 4.46                                      | .8953                 |
| Online teaching strategies                    | 4.37                                      | .2294                 |
| Use of video conferencing                     | 4.35                                      | .5792                 |
| Building community online for students        | 4.30                                      | .2117                 |
| Social media use in teaching                  | 4.26                                      | .4312                 |
| Managing student behaviors                    | 4.18                                      | .7772                 |
| Alternatives to testing                       | 4.18                                      | .5703                 |
| Overall class assessment                      | 4.11                                      | .8999                 |
| Using active learning strategies              | 4.10                                      | .4322                 |
| Embedding diversity in the curriculum         | 4.08                                      | .4563                 |



|  |      |       |
|--|------|-------|
| Building classroom inclusion             | 4.06 | .4103 |
| Developing student interactions in class | 4.01 | .5555 |
| Linking courses to others in the program | 4.00 | .6010 |
| Managing grading                         | 3.94 | .2391 |
| More effective lecturing                 | 3.80 | .6546 |
| General technology use in teaching       | 3.79 | .7111 |
| Evaluating student learning              | 3.75 | .4390 |
| Creating grading rubrics                 | 3.73 | .3701 |
| Facilitating small group work            | 3.72 | .5799 |
| Use of in-class presentations            | 3.68 | .4562 |
| Evaluating teaching                      | 3.56 | .5653 |
| Writing learning objectives              | 3.55 | .8578 |
| Linking curriculum to outcomes           | 3.41 | 1.103 |

The second part of the survey asked responding faculty to identify, using categorical responses, whether or not faculty development is a priority for them “right now.” The wording about timing was deemed important considering institutional adjustments to respond to the COVID pandemic. As shown in Table 2, the largest response from faculty (n=83; 41%) was that faculty development is a high priority for me right now. Nearly the same percentage (n=76; 37%) indicated that their interest level in faculty development was about the same as usual, and approximately one-fifth (n=43; 21%) of the faculty indicated that faculty development was less important than usual.

This section of the survey also asked respondents to indicate their preferences for how faculty development programs are delivered. Responses indicated a range of preferences, with the largest group of respondents indicating the desire for in-person faculty development programs (n=79; 39%) followed by self-directed programs (n=60; 29%), online programs (n=44; 22%), and taking personal responsibility for their own development (n=19; 9%; see Table 2).

Table 2. Perceptions of Need and Delivery Method of Faculty Development

|   | N  | %  |
|---|----|----|
| <i>Faculty development is...</i>            |    |    |
| A high priority for me right now            | 83 | 41 |
| About the same as it always is              | 76 | 37 |
| Is less important now than usual            | 43 | 21 |
| <i>I prefer...</i>                          |    |    |
| Online faculty development programs         | 44 | 22 |
| In person faculty development programs      | 79 | 39 |
| Self-directed learning development programs | 60 | 29 |
| I take care of my own development           | 19 | 9  |

The 15 highest areas desired for faculty development were then stratified by the priority level indicated by responding faculty. This created three groups of responses, including desired faculty development programs for those who indicated faculty development was a high

priority, those indicating the same level of priority as usual, and those indicating that faculty development is less important now than usual. As shown in Table 3, faculty with a high level of desire indicated that they were most interested in faculty development that addressed linking social technology to academic success ( $\bar{x}=4.87$ ) accommodating students with disabilities ( $\bar{x}=4.69$ ), and using social media in teaching ( $\bar{x}=4.68$ ). Faculty indicating a desire for the same level of faculty development also agreed most strongly with the topic of linking social technology to academic success ( $\bar{x}=4.86$ ), and also indicated online teaching strategies ( $\bar{x}=4.60$ ) and use of video conferencing ( $\bar{x}=4.59$ ). Those faculty indicating that faculty development is less important now than usual had the highest level of agreement with the linking social technology to academic success topic ( $\bar{x}=4.41$ ), followed by understanding generational differences ( $\bar{x}=4.37$ ), and accommodating student disabilities ( $\bar{x}=4.06$ ).

Table 3. Comparison of Priority for Development with Topics of Interest

|   | HI<br><i>n</i> =83<br>$\bar{x}$ | SAME<br><i>n</i> =76<br>$\bar{x}$ | LO<br><i>n</i> =43<br>$\bar{x}$ | Total |
|---|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------|
| Linking social technology to academic success | 4.87                            | 4.86                              | 4.41                            | 4.78  |
| Understanding generational differences        | 4.63                            | 4.50                              | 4.37                            | 4.53  |
| Accommodating student disabilities            | 4.69                            | 4.40                              | 4.06                            | 4.46  |
| Online teaching strategies                    | 4.65                            | 4.60                              | 3.41                            | 4.37* |
| Use of video conferencing                     | 4.45                            | 4.59                              | 3.72                            | 4.35* |
| Building community online for students        | 4.51                            | 4.25                              | 3.95                            | 4.30  |
| Social media use in teaching                  | 4.68                            | 4.39                              | 3.18                            | 4.26* |
| Managing student behaviors                    | 4.45                            | 4.21                              | 3.58                            | 4.18* |
| Alternatives to testing                       | 4.67                            | 4.17                              | 3.23                            | 4.18* |
| Overall class assessment                      | 4.40                            | 4.00                              | 3.72                            | 4.11* |
| Using active learning strategies              | 4.22                            | 4.21                              | 3.65                            | 4.10  |
| Embedding diversity in the curriculum         | 4.09                            | 4.26                              | 3.72                            | 4.08  |
| Building classroom inclusion                  | 4.19                            | 4.14                              | 3.65                            | 4.06  |
| Developing student interactions in class      | 4.33                            | 4.10                              | 3.20                            | 4.01* |
| Linking courses to others in the program      | 4.27                            | 4.18                              | 3.13                            | 4.00* |

\*Significant at the  $p < .05$  level.

The three groups of mean scores for the highest rated faculty development topics, including those for high priority (HI), same priority (SAME), and less important (LO), were then compared using a one-way Analysis of Variance. Eight significant differences were identified at the .05 level between group means ( $f=5.41$ ;  $p=.0069$ ), with the HI and SAME groups rating items significantly higher than those from the LO group means.

#### 4. Discussion

Responses by faculty members to the survey provide an interesting context to the state of the contemporary community college. Although over a fifth of the faculty in the present study indicated that faculty development is less important now than usual may indicate one of two things. First, this might suggest that there is an overabundance of faculty development being



directed at faculty, attempting to herd them into certain behaviors that comply with institutional directives (eg, forcing all faculty to teach online or remotely during the pandemic). Or, second, this may mean that with new generations moving into the faculty role, there is less need for many faculty development efforts that might be considered rudimentary, meaning, the basics of teaching online or using technology to be integrated into offering instruction. Regardless of faculty motivation, there was a strong indication of faculty who were interested in faculty development as a high priority. Future research might look at this types of distribution of need along with faculty age, seniority, and length in the profession, as the priority of faculty development may well be aligned with these variables.

In terms of faculty development topics, those with the highest means fell into three broad categories. The first of which were the technical aspects of teaching. These including the basics of teaching online or with video conferencing, both of which might be consistent with the sudden movement to online and remote learning due to the pandemic. Other technical areas, though, are traditional challenges for faculty members at all types of institutions and included areas such as enhancing interactions among class members, managing student behaviors, and linking individual class curriculum to larger programs of study. The second category of faculty development topics included those around diversity and inclusion. The prominence of these might be related to the strong national conversation and highlighting of social justice movements, and have certainly been present in many faculty development programs in recent years. And the third category would be that of understanding student populations, as evidenced by topics such as linking technology to student work, understanding generational differences, and integrating social media into the class. All combined, these topical areas represent a robust and clear agenda for faculty who desire to institutional support for enhancing their craft.

The faculty development topics with the lowest overall mean scores all related to traditional areas of faculty work, such as grading, lecturing, the use of rubrics, etc. These ratings did not indicate a lack of agreement that they are desired, but rather, that responding faculty had very neutral perceptions of them. This might suggest several things, including the possibility of over-use of these topics in development programs, the stable nature of the topics that do not ebb and flow in importance, and even the lack of enthusiasm for them despite their importance.

As faculty indicated, those participating in the current study clearly preferred in-person faculty development programs. As with other survey responses, this might be a reflection of the increased desire for social, in-person interactions, or, it might be a reflection that participation in developmental programs has a strong social support network building role that faculty desire. Somewhat surprising was the high number of responses for self-direction ( $n=60$ ; 29%) and personal determination ( $n=19$ ; 9%; combined for  $n=79$ ; 38% of responses) that would be non-social developmental work, which could be a reflection of lack of interest in formal faculty development, or a perception that development might be highly individualized.

Findings such as those presented in this study indicate that faculty do have ideas about where

they need to hone and enhance their skills as teachers, and those with oversight for faculty affairs should take full advantage of assessments such as this in determining which programs to offer, when, and in what format. As suggested, there may well be a fine line between providing enough and too much in terms of developmental programs, and faculty should be involved in the determination of where and what types of programs might best fit an individual faculty. Further assessments based on the comprehensive nature of a college, the offering of technical programs and non-formal leisure education programs should also be considered and could form a strong foundation for a multi-institution, national study to help academic leaders further understand the state, preparation, and future performance of the community college faculty.

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