Engaging Faculty and Staff: The Importance
of Professional Development

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Teaching students so that they learn and develop skills that will be relevant to their future workforce pathway is the core business focus of colleges. As such, community colleges must set expectations for what students should learn, measure whether the students are doing so, and use that information to improve. Providing professors with pertinent data about what is working in their own and other classrooms is priority to improving instruction. Equally as important is the identity of which student support services or student success courses are most viable with strengthening student persistence (Wyner, 2014). Providing professional development opportunities for community college instructors and staff differs from that of 4-year universities where most often a part of the culture includes symposia and colloquia. As a result, professional development programs at community colleges are often designed to best address the unique and diverse campus cultures (Smith, 2007).

Review of the Literature

Definitions.

Professional development is defined as those activities that increase, enhance, and revitalize the professional knowledge and skills of all campus personnel. Such activities clearly include the traditional methods by which educators and support personnel expand their discipline specific or job-related skills, such as taking courses and attending seminars, workshops, and conferences. In addition, professional development encompasses all factors related to the revitalization and enhancement of our professional abilities, individually, collectively, and institutionally. Effective professional development includes activities that further knowledge in relevant subject areas, and actually change or improve teacher practices, requiring consistent action over periods of time in collaboration with colleagues providing feedback. Professional development is considered one of the primary mechanisms that educational institutions can use to assist instructors to continuously learn, maintain currency and improve their teaching skills over time (Danville Community College, 2016; Grubb, Boner, Frankel, Parker, Patterson, Gabriner, Hope, Schiorring, Smith, Taylor, Walton, & Wilson, 2011; Professional Development, 2013).

Challenges include: when to schedule professional development activities because of faculty workload; and funding for speakers, conferences, meals and stipends. In addition, there are part-time faculty challenges such as no college email, part-time faculty do not receive college newsletters, and they are often not integrated into the campus culture so they are not routinely informed of professional development opportunities (Smith, 2007).

Increasing the effectiveness of completion initiatives through professional development.

A diversity of teaching and learning styles should be embraced, open to recognizing that there are many effective approaches to both which can be explored through professional development. Faculty and staff at many community colleges do not necessarily mistrust one another, but neither do they trust each other primarily because they have not had the opportunity to connect with one another on a personal level, working together on problems of mutual concern. Co-mentoring projects can provide support for newer and seasoned faculty members to work together on instruction and research projects of mutual interest. Well-designed mentoring collaborations can provide beneficial learning opportunities for all parties involved producing long-term positive broader impact for students, engagement and completion. Over the past decade, Achieving the Dream has evaluated a network of 200 community colleges as they work to reshape and optimize institutional cultures supportive of student success. The key findings toward increasing the effectiveness of completion initiatives through professional development include: clarify expectations and project design up-front through developing roadmaps and outlining objectives; make the work meaningful for faculty and staff, keeping them informed and connected to the work and how it will make a difference; identify champions and get support; ensure there is two-way communication ensuring that their voices are heard as equals among peers; use and share data setting the tone for the use of data to be informative, not punitive; be conscious of workloads and scheduling; and, offer incentives such as stipends (Bailey, Jaggars & Jenkins, 2015; Baldwin & Chang, 2007; Harrill, Lawton & Fabianke, 2015).

Examples of professional development practices.

In the Grubb et al. (2011) study, 13 colleges were examined for their professional development practices. A variety of professional development initiatives were observed. At one extreme, a completely self-paced individualized approach where faculty are required to have 33 hours per year of professional development; however, the eligible activities include reading in their discipline or attending any type of conference/webinar. This is not the ideal collaborative collegial approach. The most common approach to professional development is 'flex day'. This practice is often a smorgasbord of miscellaneous topics with minimal coherence. The extant of literature would suggest that neither one of these stand-alone approaches are model examples for effective professional development practices; and both have minimally effective long-term benefits.

Research has shown that the more collaborative and collegial the efforts, the more effective the professional development. Some colleges have centers for teaching and learning focused on faculty and staff development, such as Faculty Summer Institute (FSI) at Santa Monica College (SMC). The SMC FSI is funded through a U.S. Department of Education Hispanic Serving Institution Title V grant. Planning included a Faculty survey to determine what their interests were for professional development with questions specific to what issues Faculty might be struggling with. The first two-week FSI was held in 2013 with 20 faculty attending, and has grown to 42 faculty (from the 60 who applied) for the summer of 2015. Stipends were provided for faculty leaders/coordinators of the FSI as well as the faculty attending.

At Citrus College there are ongoing campus-wide professional development efforts that include: the Faculty Learning Institute (FLI) that provided a speaker series open to the entire college community on strengthening student resolve and motivation which included Jackie Cruz, a popular singer, songwriter and actress; the Classified Development Committee providing activities and workshops for classified staff; the recent Faculty-led series of thought-provoking discussions on student engagement highlighting best practices facilitated by three Citrus College faculty; and the spring 2016 pilot for contextualized teaching and learning (CTL) opportunity. The pilot 2016 CTL initiative was a resounding success in strengthening faculty/student engagement impacting over 375 students. Qualitative and quantitative, tangible and intangible less visible outcome data was analyzed showing increases in student grades, critical thinking, lively dialogue, meetings with counselors, increased confidence, and overall class participation. Faculty who participated in the pilot CTL initiative will also have the opportunity to discuss their student engagement outcomes at upcoming faculty-led professional development presentations; promoting the exchange of ideas on strengthening student engagement.

Methodology

The researcher for this literature review found a total of 10 publications which focused on Professional development. The researcher examined peer reviewed publications and studies released by research entities such as the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (the RPgroup) and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU); relevant state and federal websites, and articles discussing professional development in community colleges. Findings and conclusions for this research brief are drawn from the conclusions of the literature reviewed.

Findings and Conclusions

Effective community colleges work to engage educators and staff in the process of professional development. Achieving strong student course and overall completion outcomes requires deliberate efforts by educators. Faculty and staff must be fully engaged in the process with institutional governance aligned. While completion is the end goal, educators must be open to implementing innovative ideas with the potential of improving day-to-day teaching techniques. Collaborative professional development can help to sustain a dynamic climate that maintains excellent faculty and staff while ultimately promoting a healthy learning environment for students. Faculty and staff are the key to effective organizational and cultural long-term change. Faculty-led reforms work best with the most impactful and sustainable outcomes when faculty are more than just engaged, they are the central driving force to improving student completion. Professional development facilitators have identified three areas that drive change and shape future planning of development efforts. Questions remain – how to develop and sustain the vitality of the entire college workforce, newcomers, midcareer, senior employees and part-timers. How best to address the increasingly diverse student body. How to effectively invest in professional development as a strategy for ensuring that institutions cultivate the ideal inclusive student learning environments. Professional development requires large doses of investment to identify innovation and resources in order to address new pedagogies, technology and assessment, while not losing sight of the core institutional standards and priorities (Baldwin & Chang, 2007; Fain, 2016; Harrill et al. 2015; Sorcinelli, 2007; Wyner, 2014).

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