

(Re)Engaging with Faculty Requires Consideration of Faculty Motivation: Insights from a Faculty Motivation Survey

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The signs that faculty are suffering, disengaging, and even leaving the profession surround us. We contend that we have to consider carefully what motivates faculty members to be faculty so faculty developers can be better positioned to help faculty re-engage. Integrating data from a preliminary survey we conducted, we offer five steps that faculty developers and centers for teaching and learning can take to help faculty reengage and recommit to our work.

Introduction

The signs that faculty are suffering, disengaging, and even leaving the profession surround us. We could easily say that the challenges faculty face result from the COVID-19 pandemic, but such a claim fails to acknowledge issues that were percolating—from shrinking resources and tenure-lines to increasing demands on time and greater responsibilities to students—long before the pandemic. A daily read of *The Chronicle for Higher Education* and similar publications is replete with testaments of the issues and how they might be addressed (e.g. McMurtrie, 2022a; McMurtrie, 2022b; McClure & Fryar, 2022; Brown, 2022; Tugend, 2020; McClure 2022). A concerted effort to understand faculty motivation is missing more broadly in these discussions, however. We contend that by carefully considering what motivates faculty members to be faculty, we, as faculty developers, can better position ourselves to help faculty re-engage. We have to renew our focus on the core reasons that faculty choose to be faculty to help them in their day-to-day professional lives, recognizing that those motivations today likely differ from motivations from years past.

There are many references to the importance of motivation to the work of faculty (e.g. Jacobson & Cole, 2020; Lindsay, 2018; Lang, 2016; Brownell & Tanner, 2012; Weimer, 2010), yet surprisingly, little empirical work in this area exists. Here we draw on a handful of questions from a pilot survey

that we conducted during the summer of 2021 to explore faculty motivation. Our results lead us to five steps that faculty developers and Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTLs) can take to help faculty re-engage. Our continuing work to understand faculty motivation enables us to posit that helping faculty re-engage must start from an understanding of why faculty members are faculty members in the first place, as this understanding allows us as faculty developers to support our colleagues individually and in a variety of campus settings.

Before we delve into the insights from our online survey, we share our approach and methods to provide context for our extrapolations. We constructed the survey based on the limited existing work in this area (e.g. Pautz & Vogel, 2020; Mohammed et al., 2020; Daumiller et al., 2020; Watt & Richardson, 2020; Jacobson & Cole, 2020; Wergin, 2001) and then distributed via a snowball strategy to our professional networks, various listservs, and social media.¹ Given this methodology, we cannot offer a response rate, but we can describe who responded to our survey. One hundred and fifty-six faculty members representing a range of roles on campuses and a wide variety of institutions responded to the survey. Half of all respondents were tenured faculty, 59% teach primarily undergraduate students, 58% are at private institutions, and 49% are at doctoral universities. Additionally, we had good representation across

¹ For additional details about the survey construction, methods, IRB approval, and findings, please see Diede and Pautz 2021.

academic disciplines with 33% of respondents in the arts and humanities, 27% in the social sciences, and 24% in the natural sciences, with the remainder representing other areas. Just over half—52%—of faculty respondents have been teaching for more than 15 years. The survey does have an overrepresentation of respondents who identified as female (67%) and white (89%). This overview of our respondents demonstrates that our respondents are not representative of higher education², but we contend that their insights can help us to navigate assisting faculty and more fundamentally, to point to the importance of understanding faculty motivation at a deeper level.³

Having described our respondents, we turn to what we learned from them and how that can inform our work as faculty developers. Our survey revealed that faculty are highly motivated in their work and are positive about their students. More specifically, respondents to the survey note that the intellectual stimulation and engagement that their work offers them motivates their professional lives (48%, the largest plurality). Further, three-quarters of respondents report that their academic work and professional interests closely align. Salary/financial benefits and other fringe benefits do not significantly motivate them, though some report teaching for free, an experience that they find insulting (Hartocollis 2022). In contrast to some prevailing perceptions, faculty included in this survey feel positively about their students: 65% agree that their students work hard, and 79% agree that their students are focused on what they are learning. Only a small percentage (11%) think that their students are unmotivated and lazy.

However, the survey results confirm that faculty are under strain. Respondents reported experiencing stress (72%) and fatigue (65%) in their work. Fifty-nine percent declared that they are experiencing burnout. When asked about the sources of difficulties in their professional lives, the largest portion of respondents (42%) reported workload inequities. The next most frequently cited challenge was the COVID-19 pandemic (37%). Additionally, 36% of respondents also indicated

that budget and financial concerns as well as campus communication and transparency were sources of significant quandary. Rounding out the top five most cited difficulties was department environments or cultures (35%). Faculty developers and those of us in higher education are likely unsurprised by this list. Nonetheless, identifying these challenges may dishearten faculty developers, as our ability to improve these conditions is somewhat limited. Still, these survey findings and our own experiences on our campuses lead us to conclude that faculty developers and Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTLs) can take steps to address these difficulties.

Steps Faculty Developers and CTLs Can Take

We suggest five actions faculty developers and CTLs can take to help faculty and their campuses that stem from our work in faculty development, our research into faculty motivation and insights from the aforementioned survey. First, we can provide space for faculty to talk and reflect. An important part of managing the grief that accompanies the changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic is creating space to mourn the losses. In the mourning process, faculty may perhaps complain, and faculty developers can steer the conversation productively to avoid becoming mired in complaints with no forward motion. Organizational change literature (e.g. Kezar, 2018; Bridges & Bridges, 2016; Kotter, 2012; Kegan & Lahey, 2001) stresses the importance of this space to equip individuals—in this case faculty—to come to terms with the changes thrust on them and to acknowledge that a return to pre-pandemic teaching is unlikely. Further, in these spaces, faculty have the opportunity to celebrate positive changes—perhaps new skills and knowledge, or even flexibility—that the pandemic has brought. Faculty have found themselves becoming proficient with technologies they never dreamed of and even enjoying their newfound tools and skills.

Second, and building on convening conversations for faculty, we need to assess where faculty are now and what they need moving forward. We cannot assume that faculty professional development and learning needs remain unchanged. Faculty

² See data from the National Center for Education Statistics, <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=61>

³ We should also note that at the time of this writing, we are continuing to conduct research in this area with additional survey instruments.

have learned and adapted, feeling pressures and constraints that they have never experienced, as have faculty developers. Nonetheless, our survey revealed that alignment between intellectual stimulation from and engagement with their work itself coupled with alignment of academic work and professional interest is a key motivator. To foster that motivation, CTLs can use regular needs assessment protocols with additional questions about emerging needs and new program delivery methods. Even brief surveys that do not add to faculty burden can be used in conjunction with other means of gathering such feedback such as focus groups and conversations with departments and department chairs can give direction. The benefits of these efforts are twofold: one, CTLs gather needed information, and two, we demonstrate that we care about and truly want to help faculty.

Third, time spent pausing and taking a step back, then planning is time well spent as it allows faculty developers to reexamine the faculty “why.” Faculty developers gave tremendous time and energy to their campuses during COVID-19 pandemic. To be able to carve out this space to plan requires a pause within which developers can take space to address unique campus needs. What we once imagined to motivate faculty may no longer supply their “why.” The means of engagement for one faculty may not reflect exactly those of faculty on other campuses. While it is often advantageous, perhaps tempting, to see what others are doing, now more than ever, faculty developers have to meet the needs of individual campuses. Previous semesters of multi-part workshops may still work in some contexts whereas other contexts may need a series of short videos. Faculty may feel reluctant to see others in person or may long to have in-person workshops. Regardless, pausing and planning now saves future frustration and allows for faculty and faculty developers to produce excellent work calibrated to align faculty expectations and work experiences—a key move to address the stress, fatigue, and burnout that faculty report experiencing.

While development and learning opportunity needs may be more specific to campuses, we also contend that, fourth, CTLs are well-positioned to instigate and to continue conversations about the evolving roles of faculty, again encouraging faculty, administrators, and organizations to think about

and to coalesce their work around the difficulties that faculty in our survey identified and that faculty developers recognize as long-standing. Campus communication and transparency and difficult department environments and cultures appear among faculty’s top five challenges, so attention to these pain points promises value on investments of time and resources. Equipping faculty and administrators with the skills to engage in tense conversations and to negotiate what may feel like competing needs can help to address the strain caused by unclear expectations. Additionally, the pandemic has generated much conversation about work/life balance for faculty as well as discussions of who is doing faculty work. Building communication and negotiation skills for both faculty and administrators can increase needed transparency and allow for trauma-informed management practices consistent with work/life balance needs (e.g. Manning, 2022).

Finally, due to the roles that CTLs and their staff have in supporting faculty, CTLs can help faculty and administrators to think through appropriate, sustainable practices they have developed during the pandemic. These techniques and habits may continue to serve them; pre-pandemic ways and less useful choices that emerged during the pandemic can be let go.

Given the consultative nature of CTL work and the partnership dimensions of CTLs with faculty, these entities are well-situated to help faculty think through transparency, boundaries, and other practices that serve the evolving faculty well and the people our students are becoming.

This positioning returns us to faculty motivation. Most faculty development work assumes that faculty pursue development opportunities in their teaching because helping students to learn motivates them. Our research suggests that this assumption is only partly accurate. As COVID-19 becomes endemic, faculty and administrators need to reflect on the ways that the context for academic work, including teaching, have changed. Faculty, administrators, and students have also changed. As our data suggests, the intellectual work and stimulation involved in teaching motivates faculty. Few faculty developers think of their programming from a perspective that combines faculty intellectual interest in learning with improved student outcomes. We hold up student-focused learning as paramount, yet

we often neglect the importance of faculty energy and enthusiasm in their own learning and teaching.

Furthermore, those of us involved in higher education need to operate with an understanding that academic work involves significant emotional labor. The grace that administrators, faculty, and students extended to each other during the first phases of the COVID-19 pandemic to produce a state of calm—or at least a reduction in stress—was and continues to be work.⁴ Expending effort too long without pauses to reset and to refill, perhaps without solid boundaries to protect those pauses, leads to the stress, fatigue, and burnout that faculty in our study identified as the top three challenges to their work. Unfortunate behaviors stemming from stress, fatigue, and burnout also likely increase the difficult department climates that faculty in our study identified as a significant professional challenge. Unnoticed are faculty members's desire to excite students in class and to engage them in academic pursuits is equal parts emotional and intellectual labor. Having faced multiple semesters of students whose intellectual and emotional bandwidth is fully consumed with survival challenges while navigating their own survival challenges, faculty may need to reduce some of that intellectual and emotional labor in order to manage their own lives, even if they believe that their students are trying to learn. For faculty—who are motivated by intellectual stimulation and stave off burnout because their professional work and academic interests align—the need to withdraw pushes directly against the very motivations for choosing a faculty career. Thus understanding and naming faculty motivation from an evidence-based perspective is essential for CTLs and faculty developers. Working from this evidence, we can adjust our offerings to engage faculty motivations and to support them in their careers as they support students.

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⁴ The original work on emotional labor defines it as work to produce an emotional state or response in another person (Hochschild, 2012).

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