

# Faculty Experiences with Professional Development: Data to Inform Community College Teaching and Learning Hubs in North Carolina

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*The Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research, the North Carolina Student Success Center (NCSSC) and Achieving the Dream (ATD) are providing support for faculty professional development (PD) across North Carolina by establishing Teaching and Learning Hubs to complement and support the PD opportunities colleges are already providing. To inform these efforts, in Spring 2021 an independent evaluation firm, DVP-PRAXIS LTD, conducted 10 focus groups with 35 NC faculty to understand their experiences with teaching and learning PD and to gather insights regarding what is working, what could work better, and what additional supports could improve faculty experiences with PD. The focus groups were an in-depth follow up to a survey administered by ATD to all NC community college faculty related to their professional development experiences and that pointed to faculty's strong interest in learning new teaching and learning practices. This brief presents key themes and related implications from faculty focus groups which can further inform the work of the Teaching and Learning Hubs.*

## KEY FOCUS GROUP THEMES

- **Faculty are intrinsically motivated to participate in PD in order to continually improve their teaching and best support their students.** In addition, colleges' recognition of participation and provision of faculty release time and financial support can further motivate participation.
- **Faculty described effective PD experiences as engaging, relevant, and usable.** Faculty are especially interested in PD that facilitates collaboration with faculty from other colleges, that provides support for changes in classroom practice, that is facilitated by "near peers" who have community college teaching experience, and that provides clear information up-front related to what the PD will provide and what will be expected of faculty.
- **Faculty identified ways PD can be structured to facilitate application of their learning, and ways that colleges can provide further support for implementation.** For example, faculty benefit from PD that allows them to try out new techniques or requires "homework," and from follow-up opportunities at their college to present and share what they've learned with peers.
- **Faculty validated results from the survey regarding PD content areas that most interest them: engaging students in an online format, strategies and tools for being engaging teacher, discipline-specific developments, and culturally responsive practices.** The interest in certain topics varied by faculty discipline; for example, Allied Health, CTE, and Continuing Education/CCR faculty expressed less interest in PD related to online teaching because they deliver almost all instruction in-person (including during the pandemic).
- **Faculty emphasized the benefits of PD that is longer-term and more robust,** noting that faculty who are interested in meaningful learning will engage in sustained PD opportunities that help them gain a depth of knowledge and that facilitates their implementation of new strategies.

## FOCUS GROUP RECRUITMENT

To engage a diverse representation of faculty across the state, the Belk Center and NCSSC conducted email outreach to CAOs, Centers for Teaching and Learning, faculty who expressed an interest in contributing through the statewide survey, CTE Directors, CCR faculty, and groups of colleges who have previously partnered with the Belk Center.

## FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

- 35 faculty participants across 10 "role-alike" focus groups
- 23 colleges represented
- 63% of faculty participants teach at one of the first two Hubs or their affiliate campuses
- Faculty had 11 years of teaching experience on average (range: 1 to 40)
- 43% of faculty reported participating in 9-24 hours of PD per year; 37% reported participating in 25-40 hours of PD per year



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## IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING & LEARNING HUB EFFORTS

The themes and observations from faculty focus groups point to important implications that can inform efforts of these North Carolina Teaching and Learning Hubs. Faculty focus groups offered insights into internal and external factors motivating faculty to participate in PD, and into ways that Hubs can support colleges in their efforts to further motivate and strengthen faculty engagement. Faculty conversations also revealed important perspectives on the qualities and content of PD considered most effective, and on faculty preferences related to PD structure and communication, both of which can be incorporated into the PD offerings developed and delivered by the Teaching and Learning Hubs.

Focus groups revealed ways that faculty can be further supported by their colleges in their PD experiences. **Teaching and Learning Hubs can provide strategic guidance for colleges in their efforts to:**

- Further motivate faculty to participate in PD through intentional recognition via newsletters and annual evaluations; and where possible through release time, covering PD expenses, or providing additional compensation.
- Separate teaching and learning PD from operational PD (such as learning new college data systems) during annual PD days or convocations, so faculty do not have to choose between “must do” operational PD and teaching and learning PD.
- Provide post-PD support by creating expectations and space for faculty PD participants to share learnings with college peers, and by supporting staff and/or space resources – perhaps through a college’s Center for Teaching and Learning – to aid faculty in implementing course and classroom changes.

Faculty focus groups revealed characteristics of PD considered most effective and most likely to facilitate implementation of new strategies. **PD developed and delivered by Teaching and Learning Hubs should:**

- Be engaging and collaborative to ensure that participants remain attentive and have ample opportunities to learn from their peers.
- Include a variety of topics that are relevant to faculty’s disciplines and to their level of teaching experience.
- Include longer-term opportunities to help faculty implement major changes to courses, or in building new courses, as these more robust opportunities allow for more reflection time, implementation support, and opportunities to experiment with different approaches alongside a supportive peer network.

Focus groups revealed clear preferences by faculty regarding how PD should be structured and communicated. **PD organized and communicated by Teaching and Learning Hubs should:**

- Have clear and upfront identifiers indicating the intended PD audience (newer faculty vs. more seasoned faculty, faculty of certain disciplines) and the level of the PD (introductory vs. in-depth), so faculty can determine what opportunities are most relevant for them.
- Be shared in a digestible format at the start of the semester, or at minimum a month in advance, to allow faculty enough time to plan alternate class assignments or find substitutes so they can attend. Compiling all PD opportunities into a single, or fewer, emails as opposed to a series of one-off emails can alleviate faculty sentiments that the PD options are plentiful but “overwhelming.”
- Be organized around groups of faculty “near peers,” such as discipline or course specific groupings, student population specific groupings, or geographically specific groupings, to further ensure PD relevance and useability.
- Provide time and space for faculty to “try out” new teaching strategies, with support for implementation from presenters and peers. In addition, PD that requires “homework” or follow up increases the likelihood that faculty will implement changes to their courses or teaching approaches.