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How should universities keep highly qualified staff?

April 26, 2016 | By Erin Wehmeyer
Workforce Development

Faculty development is a hot topic for most universities right now. We create training opportunities and send faculty to conferences and workshops. But what about university staff? Are we encouraging their professional development? If so, how?

As an academic staff member with experience at multiple universities, I can say that it often seems that our professional development opportunities are limited to what the faculty want to do. Furthermore, faculty development usually gets paid for first, and if there's no money left over after faculty needs are addressed, staff must make do with lower-quality training options or none at all.

But my own experiences are just a few data points, and we are a data-driven organization. What does the research say? As it turns out, not much.

I was unable to find much solid data on the benefits of sending staff to staff development events vs. faculty development events. There are some studies (see the resources and reading listed below) about how business managers and non-managers view professional development differently and how it is encouraged or discouraged at different places. So, for the rest of the post, I'm going to focus on my own observations concerning staff development.

What I do

In my academic support staff position, I help create faculty development training courses, workshops, and presentations. And while these experiences provide important development for our faculty, nobody is creating similar types of resources to help me and our other staff enhance our skills in our current work. If the people most responsible for doing the work at a university aren't supported, that can create both a serious development gap as well as morale problems.

It's worth noting that there is often pressure in higher ed. institutions to earn advanced degrees, but not all staff dream of being faculty one day - some of us like being staff. Staff success is critical: "the largest expenditure [for universities] is compensation; as a result, faculty and staff productivity is a key factor when aligning resources with institutional priorities" (Ward, 2008, p. 55).

How do we keep our highly qualified staff without giving them opportunities to grow?

Here are five things that should be part of any staff professional development plan:

1. **Technical Training** - Conferences or training sessions on a technology or process we use or could use regularly in our work would be extremely helpful. For instance, this could be an Adobe product training for staff involved in multimedia creation and design or project management training for the team project coordinator. And almost everyone who builds online courses could use training on HTML and CSS!
2. **Exploratory Training** - You want to make sure that you are training your staff to increase their skills and passions and function well as part of your team. For example, maybe you have a staff member who avoids social media and seems puzzled by online marketing efforts. You don't want to put this person in charge of your department Twitter account and blog! But consider sending him or her to some Internet Marketing 101 training; once he or she starts to understand the subject and its importance and possibilities, he or she may develop a new enthusiasm for helping with social media efforts.
3. **Networking** - A networking conference or session to meet others with similar jobs/duties at other institutions can be very helpful, especially for staff who might feel isolated. Learning from peers can be powerful, motivating, and practical.
4. **Staff Retreats** - Give your staff a chance to talk to others performing similar work within your university. This allows us to pool resources, reinforce processes, discuss the interesting projects we're working on, and share advice and expertise.
5. **Career Path Planning** - All staff need a career path within the university. If one doesn't exist, managers should create a path for employees that details where successful staff could expect to be in 1, 3, 5, and 10 years. If employers are implementing annual reviews and expecting staff to pursue professional development, those employers need to demonstrate that the development is actually meaningful. Managers should always have plans for how employees can either grow in their positions or advance within the organization. Universities often lose staff because those employees feel stuck with no chance for advancement.

Here are three things that should *not necessarily* be part of your staff professional development plan:

1. **A Master's or PhD degree** - Again, staff don't all aspire to become faculty. Getting a graduate degree involves a huge amount of time, effort, and money, which the university can offset but may not fund completely for every staff member.
2. **Faculty development workshops** - These are great for faculty but may not be ideal for support staff or allied professionals.

For universities to maximize their potential, they must give their staff the chance to shine, and the ideas above can help make that possible.

How will you grow?



Resources and reading:

Ward, J. (2008). Understanding the business of higher education: Creating context for your staff development plan *College & University*, 84(1), 53-55. Retrieved from <http://spu.edu/depts/idm/docs/publications/JW08ContextforStaffDev.pdf>

Russell, Z. A., Ferris, G. R., Thompson, K. W., & Sikora, D. M. (2016). Overqualified human resources, career development experiences, and work outcomes: Leveraging an underutilized resource with political skill. *Human Resource Management Review*, 2(26), 125-135. Retrieved from <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S105348221500056X>

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