

Why Are Faculty Development Workshops a Waste of Time?

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How many people does it take to screw up a faculty development event?

Faculty development workshops are a waste of time!" As a faculty member, has that thought ever raced through your mind or taken up permanent residence there? If you're a faculty developer, is that the perception of some of your faculty? Read on, Macduff!

DISCLAIMER: I am not now nor have I ever been a director, coordinator, or facilitator of faculty development or a center for teaching excellence. I was assistant dean for teaching for five years, but my job description was much more limited than that of a center director. I have been a faculty member for 30 years and a keynote/workshop speaker at faculty development programs for 15 years. It is the latter perspective from which I wrote this column.

At nearly every voluntary and mandatory event where I have spoken, directors have communicated to me the constant battle they wage to persuade faculty to attend. Even mandatory events have attendance problems. For example, faculty show-up for the required part of the day, such as the state-of-the-college address by the president or a presentation by a dean, and then sneak out at the coffee break before the speaker, workshops, or any other activity begins. As one of those speakers on the receiving end of many successful, but also, a few disastrous events, I have learned a lot, but so have the directors. I'd like to pass on a few ideas from those experiences that might be helpful on your faculty development journey.

What's the Problem?

The problem is clear: How do you write this article with humor and still make a serious point. WROOONG!! That's not your problem. It's: *How do you improve the quality of teaching at your institution and encourage teaching scholarship when many faculty members don't want to attend events*

designed to attain those goals? How do you acquaint them with basic and also the latest teaching and assessment techniques? (*Sidebar:* Hummm. Isn't this challenge a little bit like teaching students who don't want to come to class to learn a boring, horrible subject, say, statistics? Does that ring a bell, Pavlov?)

Characteristics of the Faculty Development Event

There are several characteristics in the design and execution of the event that can sabotage or facilitate attendance. They relate to: (a) format and frequency, (b) venues, (c) technical support, and (d) competing activities.

Format and Frequency

There is considerable variability in the format and frequency of events at institutions in the U.S. and internationally. There are numerous combinations and permutations of the following formats and frequencies to accommodate schedules, facilities, and available resources.

Formats include:

- Speaker on a specific topic for a one- to three-hour session as a keynote or workshop
- Speaker(s) in-house, local talent, or imported, well-known experts on the speaking circuit
- One-half day- to three-day events or multi-day institutes
- One day or longer events to showcase teaching and teaching scholarship which
 - o recognizes outstanding teaching

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- o encourages innovative teaching and assessment techniques
- o allows faculty the opportunity to share their innovative teaching ideas
- o permits faculty to present their teaching research
- Live, online Webcasts, and/or teleseminars

Frequency may be:

- Annual or semi-annual
- Between semesters in August, January, or May, or during the summer
- A regular series of workshops or seminars throughout the academic year
- Repeated workshops several times a year to permit more faculty to attend due to schedule conflicts
- None of the above

Venues

The crunch for space on campuses sometimes limits the rooms available for these events. The room may range from a theatre with the entire technical capabilities of a Broadway production TO a cafeteria, auditorium, or library with a make-shift sound system and limited or no lighting capabilities TO a traditional classroom or broom closet. The room that's available sometimes reflects where the particular event ranks on the institution's food chain in terms of importance. A half-day or full-day conference with concurrent faculty showcase presentations requires a commitment of several rooms, which may not be available.

Technical Support

PowerPoint Presentations by any speaker or faculty member typically require the following: (1) projector and screen with VGA cable for a laptop, (2) audio cable for sound, (3) lectern, lapel, or Madonna microphone, and/or (4) lighting dimmer or blackout capabilities. Frequently, technical staff members are not even assigned to cover the event when they are needed. (*Up Close & Personal*: Over the past three years, technical support staff for PowerPoint and sound and lighting equipment at 80% of the institutions where I spoke showed up at the venue prior to my presentation to test the equipment. I require an hour rehearsal prior to my presentation. But then, guess what? The equipment broke down. NO. After the rehearsal, the techies disappeared, leaving the responsibility for sound and lighting during the presentation to the director or an appointee. They said they had other commitments on the campus or they had to go fishing!)

Competing Activities

The importance of the event is also reflected in the scheduling of the event. If all classes and meetings are occurring contemporaneously with the event, administra-

tors and faculty members have a legitimate excuse for not attending. Even during a designated "faculty development day (FDD)," meetings or other activities may still be scheduled. Is there such a phenomenon as a pure, unadulterated FDD? Faculty members have so little discretionary time that competing activities make teaching events nearly impossible to attend.

Faculty Excuses and Attitudes

The problem of skimpy attendance at faculty development events seems to afflict buckets of institutions. You're not alone in this battle. Directors of centers have communicated: "I don't feel the love of my faculty." Ya think?

Although you have probably heard a bunch of excuses by faculty for opting out of these events, I thought I'd open some of those old wounds with the comments I've heard over and over again. Maybe newbie developers will benefit.

Here are a few comments from faculty:

- "Last year's speaker was horrible; I'm not going back."
- "The event is a waste of my time."
- "Who cares about these teaching topics? I know how to teach."
- "The speaker sounds boring."
- "My job is bringing in money and getting grants."
- "I can't relate to the topic."
- "That topic doesn't help me do my job any better."
- "I don't have the time. There are more important things I have to do. In fact, just about everything I do is more important than going to listen to these speakers."

On occasion, instructors may utter these comments without italics or quotation marks. It depends on their discipline. The bottom-line message is that many faculty look for any reason not to attend rather than to consider any positive value to attend. (*Up Close & Personal*: My simple and, perhaps, naïve notion about outside speakers on my campus during my teaching years had always been: "I have a lot to learn about teaching and attending the event is a small time price to pay for something I might gain." What a dope I was! What was I thinking?)

Top 10 Strategies to Increase Attendance

Since most faculty resist attending teaching events with or without speakers on teaching or assessment methods, what practical, "successful" ideas can you use to increase attendance? They are derived from the experiences of faculty developers communicated to me over the past decade at more than 75 different institutions, plus a sprinkling of marketing techniques I've learned over the past couple of years.

Here are a few suggestions you might want to consider. You may have tried some of these already. I hope there's at least one useful idea in the list.

1. Survey Your Faculty

Conduct an anonymous, short, online survey to determine topics that interest both full-time and adjunct faculty as well as their preferred formats, days and times, weather conditions, type of food, etc. Request input on their problems, complaints, challenges, and burdens. What issues should be addressed to save them time, reduce their workload, decrease conflicts with students, boost their student ratings, and increase their publication productivity, as well as enhance their students' motivation and performance? Are the topics chosen by full-time faculty different from those selected by adjuncts? Which ones are the same?

Use a structured-response format that they can answer quickly where you provide them with options they can click. Also give an unstructured section where they can add their own topics and preferences. (*Note:* If you get a lousy response rate, don't despair. Shrug it off, dust yourself off, and start all over again. After shrugging and dusting, elicit ideas from your peer developers at sister or brother institutions.)

This intelligence (aka "intel") can also be collected on the evaluation forms after an event, though the response rate may be lower. It's probably best to *do both surveys* as well as informally chat with faculty on possible topics. Do your homework and investigate what type of event they are willing to attend. At least, you will have tried to gather data that you can use to develop some programs.

2. Pick Interesting Topics

Based on your topic intel, pick topics in which faculty have the highest interest or need for information. Consider teaching and assessment topics of interest to both full-time and adjunct faculty. The latter often neglected corps of teachers should be given the opportunity to attend the live event or see it online. Timely issues with which everyone is dealing should also be considered, such as new state, regional, or federal regulations on anything.

Need is riskier because some faculty don't want to admit they need any help. Do "need" anyway. It's all about faculty arrogance. Even high-rated interest topics may not draw. Keep trying.

3. Experiment with Broad-Appeal and Timely Topics

Open the workshops to administration and staff on topics of broader appeal, such as coping with stress, time management techniques, how to conduct meetings, dealing with difficult students or co-workers, best use of furlough time, and workplace incivility. If faculty members

know their department chairs or deans will be there, they may go. If their administrative assistants enroll in the time management session, maybe they would realize that it would be in their best interest to hear the same principles to build accountability and maybe even be able to increase productivity.

4. Schedule Event to Minimize Competition with Other Events

If faculty members are in class or attending meetings, you've already restricted the potential attendance pool. Use the intel from your survey and pick a day with the fewest classes or an off day, such as Columbus Day or, better, Hanukkah (which lasts eight days), when most employees are available. Otherwise, choose pre-semester (August), between-semester (January), or post-semester (May) days, depending on your institution's calendar.

If you select a "regular day," during which everything is scheduled, a disappointing turn-out can be expected. (*Up Close & Personal:* I have presented on all of these days. The day chosen is one of the best predictors of success or failure in attendance.) (*Note:* When outside guest speakers are scheduled, provide online access with a Webcast, video record their presentation, and/or post their PowerPoint slides so nonattendees and adjuncts can view it at their convenience later. Do not announce the latter two options until after the event; faculty may use the video as another excuse not to attend the live event.)

5. Sell the Event

Package the event so that it is salable. Make believe you're Steve Jobs promoting the latest iGizmo.

- Provide adequate info on each workshop, including title, detailed abstract, speaker biosketch and picture, links to speaker's publications, Websites, blogs, etc.
- Select a title that will grab their attention, not an "academic" title
- Post an abstract that will pique interest and suck them in
- Prepare copy like a business marketer, not academician
- Send out multiple announcements and reminders that are worded differently; be creative; use a video promotion

6. Call It a Conference, Not a Day

Promote the event as a conference, not a day. If faculty present, their CV, promotion-conscious selves would prefer to list the event as a *conference* rather than as a *day*. Also, *teaching* conference is more salable than *faculty development* conference. If you already call your event a *regional* conference, elevate it to *national* conference to attract a

broader geographic audience. If a few persons show up from outside your country or they're visiting the campus (Yank them into the conference), consider labeling it *international*. However, the adjective should be legitimate. All of these titles are dripping with academic pretension.

7. Provide Presentation Opportunities

If a keynote is given in the morning to kick off the event, don't just end it then or with lunch. Extend it to the afternoon. Consider scheduling concurrent sessions with your own faculty on generic innovative teaching and assessment techniques they're using. Now they have to be involved to present and maybe their buddies will show up, at least, for moral support. This add-on encourages teaching scholarship and classroom research. Finally, these presenters will have something to enter under "conference presentations" on their CV.

8. Provide Incentives

Tease faculty into attending with free books from the speaker or other incentives, like TA support for their courses, professional course credits such as CEUs or CMEs, or a trip to Hawaii. What tantalizing, valuable gimmick would draw faculty into the event?

9. Require Registration

Require registration with deadlines at voluntary events, especially, if workshops are scheduled, to provide the illusion of importance to them. Formal registration connotes a formal, significant event. No registration conveys: "There's going to be a special event with a guest speaker, but you can come if you like." Why would faculty bother to attend that event? Only the serious diehards would bother to show up.

The registration list will also help you to plan the actual event and gauge deployment of personnel and resources. How do you schedule rooms for concurrent sessions without knowing how many faculty will turn out for each workshop? Without any registration, you and your staff may be scrambling up to the last minute.

Make sure to prepare name badges for all registrants and display them prominently on the check-in table so you and the enrollees can easily identify the no-shows. They should be removed from the roll.

10. Promote to Regional Institutions

Promote aggressively to regional institutions to increase attendance and build positive public relations with them. Invite them to the live event, but make the Webcast available as well. They can also furnish sources for financial support, which can help expand your event. Eventually, you may even get a reputation for quality workshops and speakers, if you haven't already. That can't hurt. (*Up Close & Personal*: On one speaking occasion, virtually no faculty attended the full-day event from the host institution. Instead, over a hundred came from area colleges and universities. They saved the event.)

Conclusions

Your first step to create SRO (Standing Room Only) faculty and staff events is to self-diagnose your program characteristics. Among the issues contributing to faculty nonattendance at your events, which ones can you address? What are the problem areas? Once you have pinpointed your potential attendance gremlins, you're ready to proceed with executing some of the 10 preceding strategies.

What seems to work best is not just one of those strategies, but a combination. Centers where I have presented employed a tautly-orchestrated, but multi-strategy, shotgun approach for a successful event. Several strategies should be tested that fit your program elements, faculty interests and needs, and institutional culture. Once you have discovered the secret formula or faculty development sweet-spot, share what you learned with other developers and me so I can revise this column.

In this period of budget and personnel cut-backs, the challenge of running useful, meaningful, and well-designed teaching events will be more formidable than in the days of yore—being loosely defined as "last week." Consider every resource you have available to plan high-caliber events that your faculty will attend. Hopefully, they will deliver the substantive teaching gut-punch that effective faculty development deserves.

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