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Effects and Impacts of Postsecondary Online Teaching Faculty Members' Participation in Professional Development Activities

Participation in professional development activities contributes to both effectiveness and productivity among postsecondary faculty members, as well as enables them to assist institutions to sustain the means to continuously innovate, for example, as they integrate emerging technologies in curricula and instruction. A broad continuum of program alternatives combines to facilitate a high level of interaction, communication, and information sharing, providing variety and enabling personalization that supports a range of professional goals and needs. The research study discussed in this article solicited participation from an elite population of postsecondary faculty members teaching online courses to respond to the following general research question, „To what degree does participation in professional development activities impact your teaching and/or professional practice in the postsecondary educational environment in which you are employed?”. The context for this exploration focused on professional experiences teaching online in postsecondary institutions with which participants were sufficiently familiar to be able to effectively respond.

Introduction

In the report titled *Changing Course: Ten Years of Tracking Online Education in the United States 2012* Allen and Seaman¹ surveyed more than 2,800 U.S. colleges and universities related to the depth and breadth of online academic program delivery. Among the array of issues addressed by constituent responses to their survey research the authors² noted implications related to the scope and design of training programs provided to postsecondary faculty members

¹ E.I. Allen, J. Seaman, *Changing course: Ten years of tracking online education in the United States*, 2013, <http://www.onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/changingcourse.pdf>.

² Ibidem.

by the institutions in which they teach. Such professional development programs appeared to increasingly extend beyond the use of technologies to focus on the facilitation of discipline-specific academic competencies and learning outcomes. Now in its tenth year of publication, this longitudinal research both provided a context for the development of an increasingly diverse focus for professional development programming, as well as indicated the impact of industry trends on the continued provision of faculty training, for instance, the integration of a range of technologies as well as open source resources in instruction³.

Within the context of its „Five Pillars of Quality Online Education” („Five Pillars”)⁴ the Sloan Consortium identified training as critical to faculty competence in developing and instructing meaningful web-based learning environments. As described in the publication *A Primer on Quality Indicators of Distance Education*, Chaney et al.⁵ reinforced the importance of continued development within a framework of quality indicators, emphasizing the importance of „continual instructor training opportunities” as a benchmark of instructional quality. Building on a range of studies and largely influenced by the Sloan Consortium’s „Five Pillars”, Shelton and Moore⁶ in their publication titled *A Quality Scorecard for the Administration of Online Education Programs* determined quality indicators for the administration of web-based programming to include the provision of training, professional development, and related technical assistance to faculty members as essential to distinguishing excellence. While such sources substantiated the critical importance of continuous faculty development to sustaining academic quality, few detailed specific models built on information originating with educators in their role as consumers.

Faculty development programming is typically addressed within the context of academic quality through adherence to national standards for best practices. It characteristically includes training events and activities as well as compensation and reward structures indicating the parameters around which the programming is provided and conducted. The missions of this kind of programs differ based on a number of variables that ultimately shape an organization’s instructional workforce, namely governance structures, institutional mission, available resources, personnel policies, and professional and disciplinary standards. Policy makers, educational

³ Ibidem.

⁴ J. Bourne, J. Moore (eds.), *Elements of quality in online education*, Vol. 3, Sloan-C, Needham 2002.

⁵ B.H. Chaney, J.M. Eddy, S.M. Dorman, L.L. Glessner, B.L. Green, R. Lara-Alecio, *A primer on quality indicators of distance education*, 2009, <http://www.uncg.edu/oao/PDF/Chaney%20A%20Primer%20HPP.pdf>, p. 5.

⁶ K. Shelton, J. Moore (eds.), *Quality scorecard for the administration of online programs*, Sloan-C, Needham 2011.

leaders, and faculty members alike attest to the importance of the dynamic provision of faculty development programming as critical to ensure academic quality related to instruction, curricula development, and scholarly innovation. As an example, the evaluation of the degree to which the programming is integrated within institutional goals for academic quality is generally a component of United States' postsecondary accreditation processes that define assessment criteria to which higher educational institutions must adhere. As evidence of such import, numerous educational researchers have identified the dynamic provision of faculty development initiatives as an essential benchmark in the achievement of academic quality, critical to teacher satisfaction as well as curricular quality, student success, and institutional innovation, particularly in institutional environments in which the teaching faculty is geographically dispersed⁷.

In Their Own Voices

Cranton⁸ described postsecondary teachers' development as facilitating „... a process of becoming more autonomous and independent, of engaging in critical reflection, and of revising perspectives on practice”. Quite simply, teachers are first and foremost adult learners; to that end, Cranton⁹, Cranton and King¹⁰, and King and Lawler¹¹ emphasized critical reflection to be particularly important to integrating and applying learning for adults in as much as it extends knowledge related to one's goals, practice, and the larger professional discipline with which one is engaged. An important source of such learning includes participation in professional development events and activities, widely accepted as important to sustaining instructional

⁷ J. Bourne, J. Moore (eds.), op.cit.; B.H. Chaney, J.M. Eddy, S.M. Dorman, L.L. Glessner, B.L. Green, R. Lara-Alecio, op.cit.; V. Diaz, P.B. Garrett, E.R. Kinley, J.F. Moore, C.M. Schwartz, P. Kohrman, *Faculty development for the 21st century*, „EDUCAUSE Review” 2009, No. 44 (3), p. 1-7; E. Donnelly-Sallee, A. Dailey-Herbert, B. Mandernach, *Professional development for geographically dispersed faculty: Emerging trends, organizational challenges, and considerations for the future*, [in:] J.E. Groccia, L. Cruz (eds.), *To improve the academy: Resources for faculty, instructional, and organizational development*, John Wiley and Sons Inc., San Francisco 2012; R.M. Palloff, K. Pratt, *The excellent online instructor: Strategies for professional development*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco 2011; K. Shelton, J. Moore (eds.), op.cit.

⁸ P. Cranton, *Professional development as transformative learning: New perspectives for teachers of adults*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco 1996, p. 1.

⁹ Ibidem,

¹⁰ P. Cranton, K.P. King, *Transformative learning as a professional development goal*, „New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education” 2003, No. 98, p. 31-37.

¹¹ K.P. King, P.A. Lawler, *Trends and issues in the professional development of teachers of adults*, „New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education” 2003, No. 98, p. 5-13

quality so as to result in increased levels of engaging and innovative practice, with the ultimate goal of strengthening student achievement¹².

Participation in professional development activities contributes to both effectiveness and productivity among postsecondary faculty members, as well as enables them to assist institutions to sustain the means to continuously innovate, for example, as they integrate emerging technologies in curricula and instruction¹³. Venues for instructional collaboration, like participation in communities of practice, soliciting colleagues' feedback, or engaging with peer networks, have substantial impact in shaping instructional practice when transferred to professional settings¹⁴. Opportunities of this kind delivered in collegial environments are particularly conducive to assisting postsecondary teachers to strengthen instructional skills which in turn ensures that they are able to maintain methodological quality and subsequently invest in longevity within professional and institutional systems¹⁵. While such programs are essential to providing information, support, and advisement to campus-based faculty members¹⁶, an argument may be made that they are particularly critical as growing numbers of instructors teach online from remote settings within decentralized organizations¹⁷.

Faculty development programming has the potential to foster academic quality through a range of initiatives that when individually selected may be specifically customized to address a range of professional skills and abilities related to, for example, developing curricula, exploring pedagogical solutions, and investigating the needs of targeted student populations. The outcomes of participation in these events and activities result in motivating and challenging faculty members to continuously shape professional skills by integrating best practices, current research, and emerging technologies into instruction. Moreover, participation in activities that support continuous professional growth ultimately strengthens student success, satisfaction, access, and

¹² P. Cranton, op.cit.; J.R. Dee, C.J. Daley, *Innovative models for organizing faculty development programs: Pedagogical reflexivity, student learning empathy, and faculty agency*, „Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge” 2009, No. 7 (1), p. 1-22; V. Diaz, P.B. Garrett, E.R. Kinley, J.F. Moore, C.M. Schwartz, P. Kohrman, op.cit., p. 1-7; M.D. Sorcinelli, J. Yun, op.cit.; S. Zepeda, *Professional development: What works*, Eye on Education Inc., Larchmont 2008.

¹³ K. J. Gillespie, L. R.Hilsen, E.C. Wadsworth, *A guide to faculty development*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco 2010; K.P. King, P.A. Lawler, op.cit.; G. Wilson, D. Stacey, *Online interaction impacts on learning: Teaching the teachers to teach online*, „Australasian Journal of Educational Technology” 2004, No. 20 (1), p. 33-48.

¹⁴ C.E. Cook, M. Kaplan, *Advancing the culture of teaching on campus: How a teaching center can make a difference*, Stylus Publishing, LLC, Sterling 2011.

¹⁵ M.D. Sorcinelli, J. Yun, op.cit.; H. Wach, L. Broughton, S. Powers, *Blending in the Bronx: The dimensions of hybrid course development at Bronx Community College*, „Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks” 2012, No. 15 (1), p. 87-94;

¹⁶ K.P. King, P.A. Lawler, op.cit., p. 5-13.

¹⁷ V. Diaz, P.B. Garrett, E.R. Kinley, J.F. Moore, C.M. Schwartz, P. Kohrman, op.cit., p. 1-7.

persistence. Excellent teachers may innately understand ways to engage and excite student audiences in ways that further knowledge and skill-building, however, such participation is essential to ensuring their talent can be channeled in ways that both meet their goals as well as student needs and institutional requirements¹⁸.

A broad continuum of program alternatives combines to engage postsecondary teachers on individual, community, and institutional levels. The range of means utilized to facilitate a high level of interaction, communication, and information sharing provides variety, and enables personalization so as to respond to a variety of individual goals and needs as well as to guard against reliance on a single approach on which to base one's practice. For example, some components are designed for customization (e.g., just-in-time webinars may be viewed asynchronously as faculty members judge them necessary), others (such as customized peer mentoring) are selected according to individual needs and preferences organizational mandates. The goals of those participating in professional development events and activities may include: promoting professional collegiality and affiliation; creating a community of practice for ongoing dialogue; reinforcing self-assessment and continuous quality improvement in teaching; coordinating the organized distribution of information, processes and procedures; promoting ongoing capacity building to facilitate faculty members' adoption of technologies; distributing information related to both practice-based and organizational innovations, policies, and mandates in order to maximize institutional effectiveness; reinforcing curricular standards; and enabling the transfer of skills and knowledge to meet evolving professional goals¹⁹.

The following research study solicited participation from an elite population of postsecondary teachers to respond to the following question: „To what degree does participation in professional development activities impact your teaching and/or professional practice in the postsecondary educational environment in which you are employed?”. The context for this exploration focused on professional experiences teaching in web-based learning environments in postsecondary institutions with which participants were sufficiently familiar to be able to effectively respond.

¹⁸ B. Mujtaba, *Faculty training and development practices in distance education to achieve high performance through extraordinary teaching*, „Journal of College Teaching and Learning” 2011, No. 1 (6), p. 73-87.

¹⁹ H. McCracken, E. Dittmar, *Using a comprehensive faculty development program to promote continuous quality in online teaching*, proceedings from the Association for Advancement in Computing Education Global Time Conference on Technology, Innovation, Media & Education, 2012, <http://www.editlib.org/2012>.

The Research Study

Twenty-five individuals were invited to participate in the web-based interview process. All potential respondents were known to the researcher to have been employed in postsecondary institutions within the past years, and to have provided fully online instruction to either or both undergraduate and graduate students during that period of time. Twenty respondents out of twenty-five invited individuals returned the interview by the deadline for accepted results, indicating a return rate of 80 percent.

The respondent population was informed that for purposes of this interview professional development was defined as attendance at or participation in planned events or activities that positively reinforced, augmented, or strengthened one's professional skills and abilities with the goal of effecting meaningful change. Such activities and events were identified as including participation as an attendee at, an enrollee in, or in a leadership role with the following: 1) training activities such as conferences, workshops, in services, or other educational opportunities; 2) scholarship activities such as writing and publishing in related journals, periodicals, manuals, or books; 3) research activities such as grant development and administration; 4) service activities such as volunteerism and community development; 5) professional organization and association memberships and activities; or, 6) academic courses and/or programs.

Research Approach and Methodology

The written interview was a broad, descriptive standardized study employing a semi-structured approach that enabled the collection of responses to a combination of structured questions eliciting quantitative data and open-form questions facilitating the collection of qualitative responses²⁰. This kind of approach was selected both for its capacity for efficiency, and its potential to afford consistency related to information collection, analysis, and reporting. The instrument included thirteen questions; responses to the questions were optional. The first five questions required the selection of specific responses; quantitative in nature, they were included in the study to provide a context for the subsequent qualitative responses that followed. Questions six through 10, then, solicited narrative responses. Optional questions 11 through 13

²⁰ M.D. Gall, J.P. Gall, W.R. Borg, *Educational research: An introduction* (8th ed.), Pearson, Boston 2007; B. Gillham, *Research interviewing: The range of techniques*, McGraw-Hill Education, Berkshire 2005; B. Johnson, L. Christensen, *Educational research: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed approaches*, 4th ed., Sage Publishers, Thousand Oaks 2012.

were included to offer respondents opportunities to participate in follow up activities following completion of the interview.

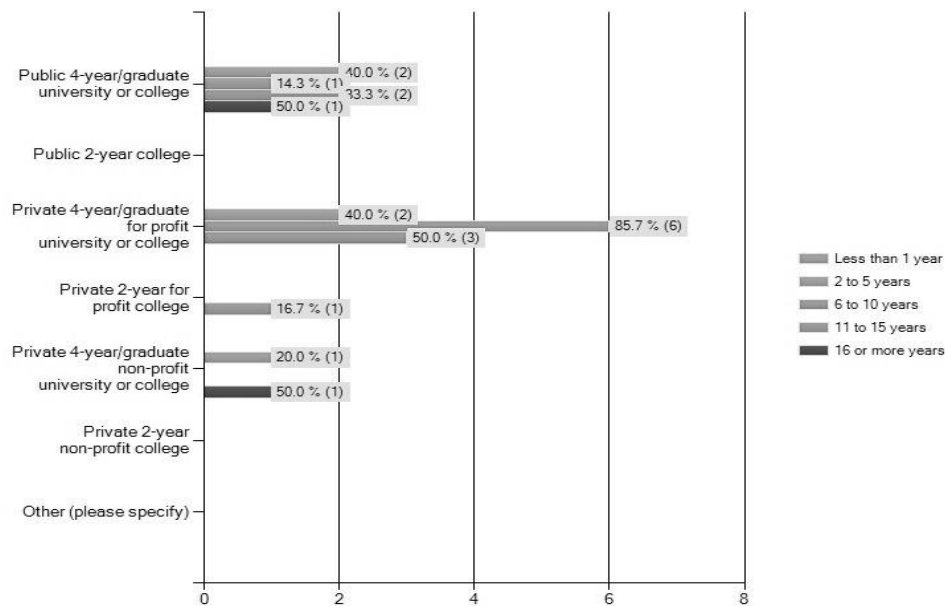
Interview questions were specifically worded to generate information in a consistent format that enabled contrast and comparison, as well as ensured the protection of the privacy of participants' responses. The written interview was conducted using a web-based survey with a unique website address distributed exclusively to potential participants. Only those individuals to whom the web address was distributed were able to participate in the interview, and the website address was not distributed beyond the potential sample population. Once identified, the schedule for completing the open-ended questionnaire was distributed to respondents. For additional information, Appendix 1, „The Written Interview Instrument” is included to document the interview questions.

Results: Emergent Patterns and Themes

Quantitative Framework as a Context for Qualitative Results

Part 1 of the interview, titled „You and Your Participation in Professional Development Activities and Events” included five questions that enabled an examination of respondent attributes in order to establish a framework for the analysis of emergent patterns and themes; two such attributes were found to be especially significant. As indicated by Figure 1, all 20 (100 percent) respondents described the postsecondary environment that was the context for their survey responses, also providing estimates related to the total amount of time they had been employed in such settings. As indicated, the majority of the respondents, 11 subjects (55 percent), indicated the context for their survey responses to be a private four-year graduate for-profit university or college; this group reported having been employed between two and five years in this setting. Only two respondents (10 percent) reported a total amount of time employed as 16 or more years; of this subsample, one participant reported employment in a public four-year graduate environments, and one in a private four-year graduate non-profit environment.

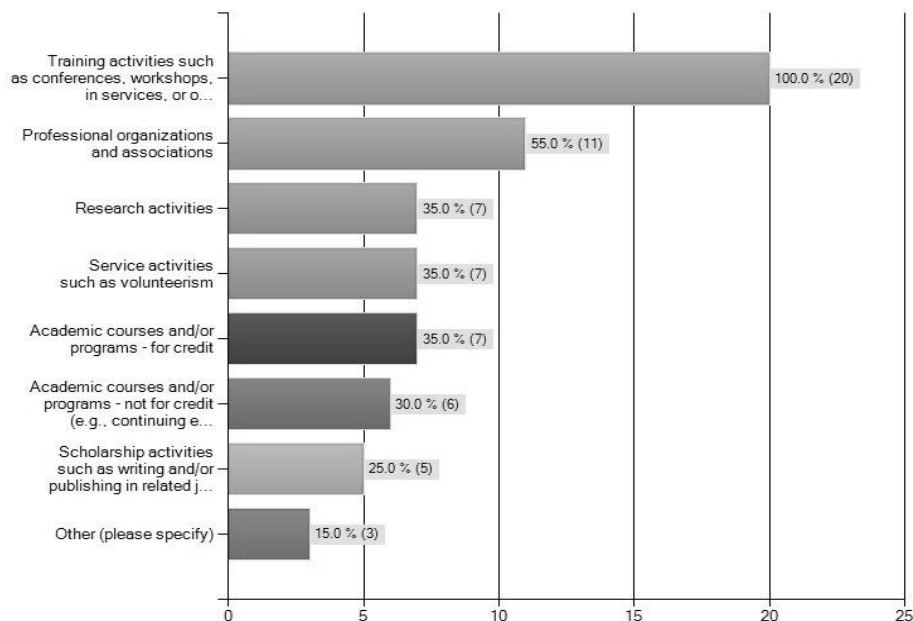
Figure 1. Time engaged in specific postsecondary environments



Source: author

Moreover, interviewees provided general estimates regarding the amount of time allocated to professional development activities during the last year. All 20 respondents (100 percent) indicated the allotment of a minimum of six hours devoted to such activities. As illustrated in Figure 2, interviewees continued by indicating types of professional development activities and events they believed to contribute most substantially in reinforcing, augmenting, or strengthening their professional practice to effect meaningful change in skills, knowledge, or abilities. Overwhelmingly, all subjects (100 percent) identified training activities such as conferences, workshops, in services, or other educational opportunities provided externally from their workplaces as most substantially contributing to reinforcing, augmenting, or strengthening their professional practice to effect meaningful change in skills, knowledge, or abilities.

Figure 2. Types of professional development activities and events



Source: author

Other types of activities included participation in professional organizations and associations, enrollment in credit and/or non-credit academic courses and/or programs, engagement in service activities such as volunteerism, and participation in research and scholarship activities such as writing and/or publishing in related journals, periodicals, manuals, or books.

Finally, the participant group of twenty described the primary mechanisms they utilized to pursue professional development, with the majority of 17 respondents, (85 percent) indicating their employers as the primary mechanisms on which they relied to facilitate professional development experiences; the specific roles employers assumed in facilitating such experiences were unclear (for example, employers may have financial subsidized participation, or may have sponsored the actual events and activities). Other mechanisms included professional organizations, associations, and networks as important venues by which to obtain continued development.

Analysis of Themes Derived from Qualitative Data

The identification of detailed descriptions of the types of events and activities considered in the literature as constituting professional development. Identified as both relevant and critical

by a range of sources, opportunities for ongoing development were deemed essential to insuring the individual growth of faculty members as well as strengthening institutional collaboration efforts, both of which combine to promote student achievement²¹. While the postsecondary professional community has not clearly defined that which constitutes faculty development, it is apparent that the types, sources, and focuses of activities included in such initiatives share the goal of strengthening instructor success and disciplinary expertise, thus contributing to an evolving skill repertoire²².

Regardless of specific definitions, Lawler and King²³ emphasized the need for research into the understanding and analysis of educators' goals, motivations, and needs in ensuring programming is relevant and outcomes measurable. It is essential that educational activities are sufficient in scope so as to address the wide range and complexity of the evolving roles assumed by faculty members (e.g., teacher, scholar, researcher, and public servant) in order to improve instructional quality and extend postsecondary learning opportunities²⁴. Moreover, Sorcinelli, Austin, Eddy, and Beach²⁵ specifically characterized an increasing emphasis on collaboration as a primary approach to facilitating professional development, emphasizing qualities inherent in the „age of the network” as essential for critically impacting curricular and pedagogical transformation of the quality that is generated through collegial networks and relationships. While this aspect of professional development was not explicitly identified by research study results as a critical attribute of educational activities, participant feedback indirectly indicated the prioritization of collaboration and collegiality as an essential aspect to ensuring activities were relevant, meaningful, and applicable to their practices. Such definitions provided by recognized professional sources as well as the responses of interviewees reinforced the scope of events and activities designated as relevant and appropriate for inclusion in the research study.

²¹ S. Hirsch, *Why is collaborative learning critical for professional development*, „NSCD Policy Points” 2009, No. 1 (4), p. 1-2; K.P. King, P.A. Lawler, op.cit., p. 5-13; M.D. Sorcinelli, A.E. Austin, P.L. Eddy, A.L. Beach, *Creating the future of faculty development: learning from the past, understanding the present*, Anker Publishing Company Inc., Bolton 2004.

²² D.L. Robertson, K.J. Gillespie, W.H. Bergquist, *A guide to faculty development*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco 2010.

²³ P.A. Lawler, K.P. King, *Changes, challenges, and the future*, „New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education” 2003, No. 98, p. 83-91.

²⁴ Professional & Organizational Development Network, *Ethical guidelines for educational developers*, 2007, http://www.podnetwork.org/faculty_development/ethicalguidelines.htm.

²⁵ M.D. Sorcinelli, A.E. Austin, P.L. Eddy, A.L. Beach, op.cit., p. 10.

The second component of the interview, titled „Interview Research Part 2: Your Opinions About the Impact of Professional Development Activities and Events”, included questions six through 10; these questions indicated primary themes originating in qualitative data, representing major patterns evidenced in the study.

Types of Activities and Events

Zepeda²⁶ emphasized that for professional development to be meaningful multiple opportunities must be „bundled” in ways that are complementary within both professional and systemic contexts. Dee and Daley²⁷ reinforced the importance of such practices as goal-directed in facilitating the selection and use of initiatives that purposefully strengthen academic delivery models and methodologies. In a limited interview-based study Lackey²⁸ found that a combination of activities such as attendance at workshops, consultation with resources, collaboration with colleagues, and individualized mentoring represented an effective balance that positively supported postsecondary faculty members’ professional growth. Interview results obtained in the current research study specifically mirrored Lackey’s findings, as respondents indicated a wide range of preferences in their selections of professional development activities.

The initial theme discussed in participant responses explored the types of professional development activities in which respondents participated during the last twelve months. Beyond the descriptions of such types, an identification of the primary sources of such events, as well as the topics around which activities were focused was included. Twenty subjects provided 58 distinct responses that addressed three subcategories indicating types, sources, and topical focuses of activities.

Of the 32 (55.1 percent) of the responses identifying types of professional development events and activities most often pursued, notably, 17 (53.1 percent) indicated attendance at public presentations external to the workplace (such as conferences, workshops, seminars, webinars, and campus lectures) as important sources for professional education. Interestingly, interviewees further noted continued involvement in both credit generating and non-credit

²⁶ S. Zepeda, op.cit., p. 61.

²⁷ J.R. Dee, C.J. Daley op.cit., p. 1-22.

²⁸ K. Lackey, *Faculty development: An analysis of current and effective training strategies for preparing faculty to teach online*, „Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration” 2011, No. 14 (5), <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/winter144/lackey144.html>.

generating academic studies, participation in research and scholarship activities, and engagement in service opportunities as substantively contributing to their teaching practices.

Seven subjects identified the sources of faculty development programs that were most valuable for them. Among the specific sources of events and activities in which respondents participated, professional organizations and associations with which affiliations were maintained were considered most valuable, as reflected by six out of seven (85.7 percent) of this subsample's responses. Only one respondent indicated that she or he relied on an employer as an important source of professional development programs or resources.

Finally, participants reported participating in activities that specifically related to the functional aspects of teaching, for example, managing virtual and on ground classrooms, integrating technologies into classroom practices, developing online strategies, and promoting student-centered learning and engagement. Approximately one third or 19 (32.7 percent) of the responses in this subsample reported widely diverse interests, including focuses on pedagogies specific to topics related to general distance education and online learning and teaching. As such, several research study respondents specifically identified the focus of their participation targeted to online learning pedagogies, distance education methods, and information technology use and integration, confirming King and Lawler's²⁹ and Langley, O'Connor, and Welkener's³⁰ observations that ongoing development activities not only augment skills, but also assist faculty members to address challenges evident in instructing increasingly diverse student populations and navigating complex institutional demands, such as the integration of educational technologies into teaching.

Dee and Daly³¹ argued that rather than focus on the functional needs of institutions, the most valuable professional development activities are those that engaged the faculty members' „foundational human needs”, that is, developmental needs that emerged through engagement in interactive and relational processes. While interviewees primarily indicated a focus on activities that extended functional skills and abilities, their overwhelming agreement related to the value of continued professional development to addressing such foundational needs. Gillespie, et al.³² emphasized the importance of relationship building, such as establishing professional networks

²⁹ K.P. King, P.A. Lawler, op.cit., p. 5-13.

³⁰ D.J. Langley, T.W. O'Connor, M.M. Welkener, *A transformative model for designing professional development activities*, [in:] C.M. Wehlburg, S. Chadwick-Blossey (eds.), *To Improve the Academy: Resources for Faculty Development*, Anker Publishing Company Inc., Bolton 2004.

³¹ J.R. Dee, C.J. Daley, op.cit., p. 2-3

³² K.J. Gillespie, L. R.Hilsen, E.C Wadsworth, op.cit.

and identifying collegial relationships both internal and external to one's institution of origin, as particularly important in contributing to development. This theme resonated with study participants, as they identified networking as well as affiliations with professional associations as substantial benefits of participation. Typical of comments related to such effects, one participant remarked, „The more I teach, and the more interaction I have with my fellow faculty members, the better I get at my chosen profession”. Regardless of the types of activities in which they were engaged, research study respondents overwhelmingly agreed that ongoing engagement with colleagues enabled them to participate as members in a range of networks that continuously informed their professional practice.

Effecting Meaningful Change

Framing a discussion of both benefits of and challenges to professional development activities and events within the larger context of change, Zepeda³³ contended, „Professional development is learning, and learning is change”. Addressing the effects of change is critical in post secondary education as it is the means to promote the quality of innovation that furthers both improved teaching and genuine learning³⁴. Proactively managing change within a context of highly personalized experiences of the quality that results in improvement and innovation is accomplished by encouraging participation in learning events and activities that support professional growth³⁵. Such activities have an expansive influence as diverse participants learn from one another during events such as conferences, seminars, and workshops external to their workplaces, and apply them as they return to their home organizations. Qualters³⁶ specifically stressed the importance of engaging in activities that enable substantive dialogue of the quality that furthered „contemplative change” borne of both individual and collective exploration and discovery. The second theme evolving from the research study focused on descriptions of the ways respondents' participation in professional development activities positively reinforced, augmented, or strengthened their professional skills and abilities to effect meaningful change in their teaching practices.

³³ S. Zepeda, op.cit., p. 62.

³⁴ D.M. Qualters, *Creating a pathway for teacher change*, „Journal of Faculty Development” 2009, No. 23 (1), p. 5-13.

³⁵ P.A. Lawler, K.P. King, op.cit., p. 83-91.

³⁶ D.M. Qualters, op.cit., p. 8.

Twenty subjects provided 55 responses in three subcategories, which addressed positive effects related to skill development, and positive as well as negative impacts of events and activities. Overall, interview respondents identified obtaining new information as the primary benefit of participation in professional development activities, specifically related to utilizing new tools and methodologies, recognizing more effective ways to reach and support students, and meeting the new expectations of students regarding technology use. Approximately 20 percent (36.3 percent) of the responses to this interview question described positive effects related to skill development; of this number 19 (95 percent) indicated obtaining new information as the primary effect of participation, providing examples related to obtaining new tools and methodologies, identifying more effective ways to reach and support students, and addressing evolving new expectations of students regarding technology use. As an example, one respondent remarked, „Involvement encourages motivation and energizes pursuit of experience and knowledge”.

Buring, Bhushan, Brazeau, Conway, Hansen, and Westberg³⁷ specifically noted continuous professional development to be important in addressing the learning needs of increasing complex student populations. This development is especially essential to supporting the professional goals of faculty members whose expertise extend along a broad continuum of competencies³⁸. Approximately 23 (41.8 percent) of responses overwhelmingly reflected positive impacts on teaching practices as a result of participation in professional development events and activities. Notably, all 23 (100 percent) of responses in this subsample emphatically reported there were only positive results that originated from such participation, resulting in substantial, and dramatic impacts as they applied their learning to affect curricular changes, reinforced current knowledge related to instructional approaches, integrated emerging technologies to assist with classroom teaching, and developed knowledge to build upon previous and experiential learning to evolve their professional practices. In fact, one participant emphasized that professional development activities assisted her or him to, „maintain a current knowledge base of teaching practices/methodologies to better meet the needs of a constantly changing student population”. Regardless of the types of activities in which they were engaged, the respondent population overwhelmingly agreed that ongoing engagement with colleagues enabled them to

³⁷ S.M. Buring, A. Bhushan, G. Brazeau, S. Conway, L. Hansen, S. Westberg, *Keys to successful implementation of interprofessional education: Learning location, faculty development, and curricular themes*, „American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education” 2009, No. 73 (4), p. 60.

³⁸ Ibidem.

participate as members in a range of networks that continuously informed and supported their professional growth.

Among the challenges to facilitating manageable and proactive change, Taylor and McQuiggan³⁹ noted the unavailability of sufficient resources such as time and finances as substantially restricting participation in professional development activities. A significant percentage of the research study interviewees echoed this observation, identifying participation in professional development events and activities as demanding time away from employment duties, family commitments, academic responsibilities, and social activities, which ultimately affected their quality of life. In fact, 12 (21.8 percent) of the responses to this question noted possible negative impacts of participation in professional development events and activities, the majority of responses identifying participation in professional development events and activities as competing with daily priorities.

Impacts on Student Learning

The third theme identified in the research study focused on the extent to which respondents' participation in professional development activities impacted their students' learning, soliciting the discussion of four subcategories, including enhanced methods, impacts, effects, and challenges. The importance of pursuing ongoing development can be directly connected to the increased need for educators to be accountable to a wide range of stakeholders related to student success and achievement outcomes⁴⁰. Zepeda⁴¹ identified student learning as the primary goal of professional development for educators, stressing that relevant and timely data related to student achievement must direct engagement in such events and activities. Dee and Daley⁴² concurred, noting that the influence of professional development activities can be attributed to their capacity to enhance participants' knowledge of student learning and the assessment of such learning. Twenty participants provided 43 responses in four subcategories as they discussed enhanced methods, impacts, effects, and challenges related to student learning.

³⁹ A. Taylor, C.A. McQuiggan, *Faculty Development programming: If we build it, will they come?*, „EDUCAUSE Quarterly” 2008, No. 3, p. 28-37.

⁴⁰ P.A. Lawler, K.P. King, *Planning for effective faculty development: Using adult learning strategies (Professional practices in adult education and human resources development series)*, Krieger Publishing Company, Malabar 2000; M.L. Oulette, *Overview of faculty development*, [in:] D.L. Robertson, K.J. Gillespie, W.H. Bergquist (eds.), *A guide to faculty development*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco 2010, p. 3-20; M.D. Sorcinelli, A.E. Austin, P.L. Eddy, A.L. Beach, op.cit.

⁴¹ S. Zepeda, op.cit.

⁴² J.R. Dee, C.J. Daley, op.cit., p. 1-22.

Twenty-five (58.1 percent) responses in this category addressed enhanced teaching methods and approaches; an overwhelming 20 (80 percent) of the 25 responses in this subsample perceived such participation to extend skill repertoires, for example, by providing opportunities for networking, and enabled discovery of best practices through exposure to new pedagogical approaches, strategies, and techniques (related to learning styles, lesson planning, technology use, assessment strategies, student engagement and success, and current instructional trends). Typical of the responses obtained in this category, one participant commented, „I think my participation in professional development activities makes me a better instructor. As such, my students benefit from my activities in a very real way”. Additionally, interviewees reported that such participation enabled them to more fully facilitate classroom discussions as well as address students’ questions, again, assisting instructors to more effectively integrate learning resulting from professional development activities.

Approximately one third of the responses in this category, or 15 (34.8 percent) subjects, assessed their participation in professional development activities as having some level of positive impact on students’ learning. Of this percentage, a majority represented by 10 of the responses (66.6 percent) reported participation in professional development activities to have a positive impact on students’ learning, to the extent that such experiences appeared to increase the levels and types of knowledge instructors were able to share in classrooms, enabled informed and current responses to questions and discussions (particularly relevant for application in adult students’ workplaces), and, allowed teachers to incorporate current trends in their methods, for example, related to assessment. As evidence of the impact of this theme on both teachers and students, one respondent reported about her or his participation in professional development activities, „I think it has a very strong impact on my students' learning. The more I know about my field of study and educational best practices, the more my students benefit”. Another respondent indicated, „The students have benefitted from the introduction of new concepts that encourage participation and increase student motivation”. Finally, a third respondent reflected, „The greater impact is on me than on the students, but this does ultimately impact the students' learning”.

On a much smaller scale, two (4.6 percent) of the responses in this category described positive effects of participation as increasing confidence in teachers’ instructional abilities through facilitating feedback related to the use of specific strategies. An additional response (2.3 percent) indicated the primary challenge related to participation in such activities was an

overload of professional teaching responsibilities (this response was non-specific related to the impact of this variable on student learning).

Ambrosino and Peel's⁴³ research study assessing the impact of professional development practices on student learning and motivation substantiated the responses of interviewees. They⁴⁴ reported qualitative results that indicated willingness for participants in professional development activities to apply practices learned as a result of increased awareness gained within such a framework. For example, one study participant concurred, emphasizing, „There are many positive things about [professional development] - one that I value most is the opportunity to exchange ideas and practices with my fellow educators”. Although the research of Ambrosino and Peel⁴⁵ demonstrated the important impact of instructors' participation in professional development activities on teaching practice, they none-the-less acknowledged the need for further research to firmly establish a connection between instructional methods and student learning.

Impacts on Student Satisfaction with Teaching

Theme four of the research study focused on respondents' descriptions of the extent to which their participation in professional development activities impacted students' satisfaction with their teaching. Based on study results as well as literature, evidence indicated that participation in professional development activities enabled faculty members to change approaches and behaviors in such ways that can be detected by students which, therefore, impacted learning outcomes⁴⁶. Twenty subjects provided 30 responses in four general subcategories, commenting on satisfaction levels, impacts, and effects. Approximately eight (27 percent) of the responses specifically addressed the degree to which participation in professional development activities impacted students' satisfaction with instructors' teaching abilities. Of this sample, two (25 percent) responses reflected that instructors' capacity to expand teaching abilities and approaches appeared to increase the level of students' satisfaction in courses. Similarly, three (37.5 percent) responses indicated that the receipt of positive feedback from

⁴³ R. Ambrosino, J. Peel, *Faculty development programs: Assessing the impact on instructional practices, and student learning and motivation*, „Journal of Faculty Development” 2011, No. 25 (2), p. 33-38.

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁶ Ibidem; Y. Steinert, K. Mann, A. Centeno, D. Dolmans, J. Spencer, M. Gelula, D. Prideaux, *A systematic review of faculty development initiatives designed to improve teaching effectiveness in medical education*, „BEME Guide N. 8. Medical Teacher” 2006, No. 28 (6), p. 497-526.

students evidenced their satisfaction with instructors' teaching as she or he implemented new strategies.

Research study interviewees reflected that their abilities to expand teaching approaches appeared to increase the level of students' satisfaction in their classes. Sixteen (53.3 percent) of the responses in this category described the effects of their participation in professional development events and activities on students' satisfaction with teaching. Of this subsample, nine (56.2 percent) responses indicated that continued professional education enabled the implementation of new and best practices in as well as the refinement of skills and abilities to which students responded positively; this, in turn, made the learning environments increasingly engaging. For example, one participant commented, „My students generally like the approach I take to their learning, as well as how I present the information. All of this is a result of the ‘best practices’ that I have learned from my professional development activities”.

Respondents generally perceived that the receipt of positive feedback from students evidenced such impacts as she or he implemented new strategies. For example, one participant noted, „I do think that as I expand my abilities and approaches to how I teach – the more I implement new technologies, for example – the more satisfied my students are”. Upon reflection, a respondent reported, „I am more engaged with my student's *[sic]* and they seem to respond to me positively regarding what I say and share with them”. While much literature exists linking student satisfaction to specific instructional attributes and approaches, Hoessler, Britnell, and Stockley⁴⁷ noted the apparent absence of research connecting the scholarship of teaching and learning to instructors' capacity to integrate learning and effectively implement practices gained through professional development. Based on the results of this study, however, it is logical to conclude that improved attributes and approaches are actualized as a result of ongoing training and education, the source of which for faculty members largely exists through professional development venues⁴⁸.

Professional development events and activities must, above all, substantially contribute to instructors' disciplinary knowledge as well as enhance methods used to further critical reflection

⁴⁷ C. Hoessler, J. Britnell, D. Stockley, *Assessing educational development through the lens of scholarship*, [in:] J. McDonald, D. Stockley (eds.), *Pathways to the profession of educational development: New directions for teaching and learning*, no. 122, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco 2010, p. 81-90.

⁴⁸ R. Ambrosino, J. Peel, *op.cit.*, p. 33-38.

and inquiry among their students⁴⁹. Several interviewees discussed that continued professional education enabled the implementation of new and best practices in as well as the refinement of skills and abilities to which students responded positively; this, in turn, made learning environments increasingly engaging. One participant commented about her or his participation writing, „I feel it helps my students to know that the training and teaching they are getting is current”.

Conclusions and Reflections

The fifth and final theme reflected by research study participants included general impressions and concluding ideas about experiences in attending or participating in professional development events or activities and their impact on professional practice. Responses to this general solicitation for additional information identified a range of issues not previously articulated within the context of the previous four themes. Fourteen of 20 respondents (70 percent) identified 17 topics distributed in five categories, including the effects, impacts, and weight of participation, the quality of events and activities, and associated challenges.

Gillespie, et al.⁵⁰, emphasized the importance of relationship building such as establishing professional networks and identifying in house and external collegial relationships to one’s growth and development. Their research was reinforced by approximately five (29.4 percent) responses that addressed the effects of participation in professional development events and activities on their practices; four (80 percent) of those responding in this subsample identified networking and relationship building as substantial benefits of their participation.

Three research study respondents (17.6 percent) described the impact of participation on their own learning, emphasizing that participation in professional development activities and events critically impacted teaching effectiveness, and that the interaction afforded by participation in such events enabled continued skill development. Indicative of responses, one participant reported, simply, „I think continuing my own education is critical to being an effective educator”.

Four (23.5 percent) responses in this category provided information related to challenges to participating in professional development events and activities; specifically, three of these

⁴⁹ L. Resnick, *Teaching teachers: Professional development to improve student achievement*, „Research Points” 2005, No. 3 (1).

⁵⁰ K. J. Gillespie, L. R. Hilsen, E. C. Wadsworth, op.cit.

responses reflected the desire to be able to devote substantial time to such activities and events. On a smaller scale, three (17.6 percent) of the responses in this category identified the degree to which professional development was important, stating that such participation was essential to personal growth, and two respondents (11.7 percent) emphasized the relationship between the quality of the event or activity with the degree to which participation was meaningful and substantial, one remarking, „... too many professional development activities are overly marketed to increase financial gain/attract attendees and really does not always relate to those it is marketed to”.

Opportunities for Follow Up to the Interview

The interview was concluded with three final questions that extended opportunities for participants to follow up with the researcher related to their participation in the study. Six (30 percent) of 20 respondents requested the receipt of a summary of interview results. All respondents declined the opportunity to schedule a one-on-one discussion of their interview experiences with the researcher; similarly, all 20 declined the opportunity to discuss the impact of professional development experiences with the researcher.

Discussion, Limitations, and Conclusions

Results from the process of comparative analysis indicate postsecondary teachers’ participation in professional development events and activities as essential to enabling the successful navigation of increasingly complex faculty roles. This participation was reported to have affected not only their professional skill and knowledge levels as practitioners and their capacity for collaboration with colleagues, but also appeared to have a positive impact upon their students’ potential for meaningful learning. Although the major challenge to such participation was expressed as the sacrifice of time and focus required by and financial resources required to attend such events and activities, the majority of respondents indicated that the benefits far outweighed the negative consequences to resources and schedules. Additional research is, however, needed in order to more specifically identify and assess the impacts of such participation upon student learning, as the results reported in this thematic category were based upon practice-based perceptions as opposed to methodical measurement.

As a result of the comparative analysis, additional aspects related to the effects and impacts of professional development on instructional methods and outcomes were identified that

may provide critical detail to contribute further depth to the results and subsequent analyses. For example, investigating the extent to which preferences differed between part-time (adjunct) instructors as compared with full-time faculty members may inform the research related to differences based on institutional status and context as well as professional affiliations. Additionally, a comparison of the effects and impacts of extended, intentionally developed programming targeted to specific audiences (for example, noticeably absent were references to mentoring opportunities) with activities individually selected for participation by teachers may inform research results regarding the diversity of outcomes as they related to mandated activities versus those that are freely chosen.

Dee and Daly⁵¹ stressed that professional development programming should be integrated within a larger system of faculty rewards in order to achieve the depth required for impact that leads to change; the placement of such activities and events within a postsecondary institutional infrastructure was not an aspect upon which responses were solicited. Steinert, et al.⁵², noted that upon their expansive review of literature, there was virtually no research reflecting the impact of faculty development on organizations and institutions. They⁵³ found, however, that the outcomes resulting from professional development that occurred over an extended period of time had different impacts than those interventions offered within a short timeframe (for example, one time) related to sustainability and application of skills and knowledge; the degree of relative impact of the range of activities and events was not explored within the context of this research study.

The exploration of additional facets of the impacts and effects of and challenges to professional development activities throughout a range of contexts most assuredly would provide substantial depth to move the current investigation beyond a basic understanding of the types and functions of such events and activities. By engaging in a more thorough and robust examination of the role and meaning of activities that support, affirm, and engage postsecondary faculty members to continuously develop professional practices, knowledge about their impact on student achievement and success may be more definitively identified.

⁵¹ J.R. Dee, C.J. Daley, op.cit., p. 1-22.

⁵² Y. Steinert, K. Mann, A. Centeno, D. Dolmans, J. Spencer, M. Gelula, D. Prideaux, op.cit.

⁵³ Ibidem.

The Semi-Structured Interview Instrument

Professional Development Experiences, Preferences, and Impacts

The following ten questions are included in the written interview; your response to any of the questions is optional (that is, you may complete some or all of the following questions).

The first five questions ask that you select specific responses; the remaining five questions request a narrative response.

Part 1: You and Your Participation in Professional Development Activities and Events

1. Generally describe the post secondary environment that is the context for your survey responses (select one answer).
 - a. Public 4-year/graduate university or college
 - b. Public 2-year college
 - c. Private 4-year/graduate for profit university or college
 - d. Private 2-year for profit college
 - e. Private 4-year/graduate non-profit university or college
 - f. Private 2-year non-profit college
 - g. Other (please specify):
2. Estimate the total amount of time you have been employed in postsecondary educational environments (select one answer).
 - a. Less than 1 year
 - b. 2 to 5 years
 - b. 6 to 10 years
 - c. 11 to 15 years
 - d. 16 or more years
3. In general how much time do you allocate to professional development activities during the last year (select one answer)?
 - a. Less than 1 hour
 - b. 1 to 5 hours
 - c. 6 to 10 hours
 - d. 11 to 15 hours
 - e. 16 to 20 hours
 - f. More than 21 hours
4. What types of professional development activities and events contribute most substantially in reinforcing, augmenting, or strengthening your professional practice to effect meaningful change in skills, knowledge, or abilities (select all that apply).

- a. Training activities such as conferences, workshops, in services, or other educational opportunities
 - b. Scholarship activities such as writing and/or publishing in related journals, periodicals, manuals, or books
 - c. Research activities
 - d. Service activities such as volunteerism
 - e. Professional organizations and associations
 - f. Academic courses and/or programs
 - g. Other (please specify):
5. What are the primary mechanisms you utilize to pursue professional development (select all that apply).
- a. My employer
 - b. Professional organizations and associations
 - c. A professional network of colleagues
 - d. Other (please specify):

Part 2: Your Opinions about the Impact of Professional Development Activities and Events

The following questions require a narrative response. Due to the limitations of the software, your responses are limited to 500 characters (including spacing and punctuation).

- 6. Describe the types of professional development activities in which you have participated during the last year.
- 7. Describe the ways your participation in professional development activities positively reinforces, augments, or strengthens your professional skills and abilities to effect meaningful change. Describe any negative impacts or outcomes of your participation in professional development activities.
- 8. Describe the extent to which your participation in professional development activities impacts your students' learning.
- 9. Describe the extent to which your participation in professional development activities impacts your students' satisfaction with your teaching.

Part 3: Concluding Thoughts

- 10. Do you have any other concluding ideas or thoughts about your experiences in attending or participating in professional development events or activities and their impact on your professional practice?

Part 4: Follow Up

1. Would you like to receive a written summary analysis of the results of this research project? If so, please send a request for the „Professional Development Interview Research Analysis” to Holly McCracken.

☐ Yes ☐ No

2. Would you like to schedule a one-on-one discussion of your experience with the interview research? If so, please send a request for the „Professional Development Interview Research Debriefing” to Holly McCracken.

☐ Yes ☐ No

3. Would you like to further discuss the impact of their professional development experiences with the researcher? If so, please send a request for the „Professional Development Interview Follow Up” to Holly McCracken.

☐ Yes ☐ No

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Holly McCracken is currently a faculty member at Capella University located in Minneapolis, Minnesota in the U.S. where she teaches in the School of Undergraduate Studies and is affiliated with the First Course and Business Programs. Additionally, she is a faculty member with the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning's premiere program LearningCounts that emphasizes prior learning assessment with postsecondary institutions throughout the United States. McCracken has taught at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, in the areas of

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