



The Faculty Engagement Trend: How Years of Work Experience Impact Engagement

Those of us in higher education often think about student engagement, but not employee engagement. However, business leaders have said that employee engagement should be a business's main priority. In fact, in 2015, organizations spent nearly three-quarters of a billion dollars on employee engagement initiatives. Business outcomes linked to employee engagement include fewer absences, higher employee productivity, increased customer satisfaction and loyalty, fewer employee mistakes, improved workplace safety, better service quality, and higher revenue and market share. Compared to unengaged employees, engaged employees are more likely to create satisfied and loyal customers. Loyal customers refer more customers, spend more money, are less price sensitive, and less easily influenced by competitors. Thus, many businesses focus on increasing employee engagement first and customer satisfaction second.

There have been many articles written about the importance of employee engagement in business, but very few articles can be found about faculty engagement in higher education, especially at community colleges. A study by Cornerstone OnDemand and Ellucian—leading software and service providers for the higher education community—found that many colleges and universities did not measure employee engagement, despite employee recruitment and retention issues. Of the higher education institutions surveyed by Cornerstone OnDemand and Ellucian, 39 percent did not offer any employee work engagement programs such as professional development, mentoring, or flexible work opportunities.

Employee Engagement

Employee engagement appears to be just as relevant to higher education as it is to business, leading us—one community college professor, one provost, and two four-year university associate professors—to survey community college faculty about employee engagement. To evaluate faculty work engagement, the group used the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES).

To measure work engagement, the UWES looks at an individual's vigor, dedication, and absorption in regard to his or her work. As defined by the UWES, work engagement is having a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor

(that is, high levels of energy and mental resilience while working), dedication (referring to a sense of significance, enthusiasm, and challenge), and absorption (being focused and happily engrossed in one's work).

Faculty Engagement Survey Results

After surveying 556 faculty members from a variety of community colleges, a trend line was drawn, as shown in **Figure 1**, to relate the perceived levels of work engagement—measured by UWES—to the number of years faculty have taught at their current community colleges.

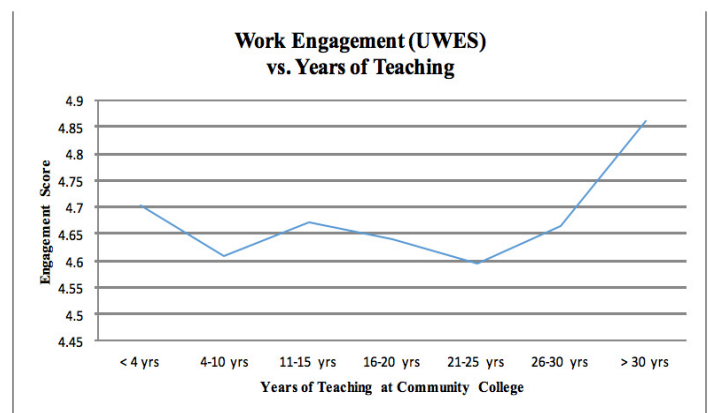


Figure 1. Trend analysis of work engagement and years taught at current community colleges.

When looking at the engagement trend, employee engagement is high for the newest employees, declines for the next group, then increases, decreases, and finally increases for those employees who have been at their institutions for longer than 30 years. Similar trends are found across all types of organizations, demonstrating how employee engagement changes over time within an organization.

According to the **Figure 1** trend line, newly hired faculty have high levels of engagement. New faculty members are optimistic about their new jobs and institutions, and focus on limitless possibilities for their careers. Based on survey responses, after the first year, new faculty members' optimism turns to realism as they see fewer growth opportunities for their professional development. Over the years, some faculty members grow and advance, while others fail to get promotions and acquire new skills, abilities, and knowledge. Faculty members who have been at their institutions for more than 30 years have the highest levels of engagement. Those faculty members are not just employees at their colleges; they *are* the colleges. Faculty who have been at their institutions for more than 30 years are more likely to hold higher positions of

informal influence within their colleges, which further strengthens their desire to support their colleges.

Benchmarking Faculty Engagement

To offer appropriate work engagement opportunities to community college faculty members, it is important to determine how faculty members perceive their current levels of work engagement. One way to create an engagement culture is to regularly conduct employee engagement surveys at your college to benchmark the data. Benchmarking provides opportunities for community college administrators to analyze their own faculty members' engagement levels in comparison to previous years. Measuring faculty engagement on a regular basis means longitudinal data can be leveraged to see how faculty members respond to internal initiatives. Furthermore, when an initiative is not working, community college administrators are able to see why.

Increasing Faculty Engagement

For the success of a college, it is critical to maintain the high level of engagement that comes with hiring a new faculty member. However, as shown in the trend line in **Figure 1**, most colleges do not keep that momentum going. To counteract the decreasing faculty engagement trend, apply the following strategies:

- Measure engagement by surveying faculty.
- Meet monthly or quarterly with individual faculty and hold performance conversations.
- Recognize individual faculty for their great work.
- Encourage peer-to-peer recognition among faculty.
- Offer more development opportunities for faculty.
- Inform faculty about the future of the college and how they individually fit within that future.

No Engagement?

If you realize that you are not engaged at work, you can communicate your dissatisfaction and hope that your dean will help you. Tell your dean that you are not reaching your full potential. Then, ask your dean to help you find a new challenge. Hopefully, the dean will suggest staff development opportunities that can provide meaning to your work.

Engagement Opportunities for Faculty Members

As a faculty member, you need to motivate yourself; however, you do not want to become burned out. While a certain amount of stress is needed to avoid boredom, high levels of stress over an extended period of time can significantly damage your health and well-being. Therefore, search for professional learning activities that you think will increase your engagement levels. Consider working with your peers to provide and receive regular feedback. Seek out colleagues who have worked at your institution longer than you and who can provide you with their valuable knowledge

and skills. By having a mentor at your college, you can attend campus events together and discuss career goals, institutional procedures, and instructional techniques.

To be more engaged with your institution and your work, you can also find out how to join a faculty senate committee. In that role, you are able to share your thoughts and ideas with fellow faculty members about improvements, problems, and successes occurring at your institution. Faculty committees are integral in making policies and deciding growth plans for their colleges.

Conclusion

If the United States is going to have the most educated workforce in the world, community colleges must provide the best learning conditions possible for their students. Education research has shown that faculty-student interactions are crucial to students succeeding. For this reason, it is imperative that community college administrators create policies to better engage their faculty members.

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