

Fertile Ground – Supporting and Retaining Vital Faculty: The Role of CTLs in a Changing Landscape

Mary C. Johannesen-Schmidt, JayIn Parker, and Janet S. Tilstra

Abstract

Unprecedented and multi-faceted changes in and challenges to higher education in recent years exacerbate faculty stress and burnout. This article details unique stressors facing higher education faculty and notes intentional contributions that Centers for Teaching and Learning make in promoting faculty vitality and well-being, in addition to supporting student success.

Keywords: Faculty success and well-being, higher education, Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network Conference, institutional change, Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTLs), faculty vitality

Higher education faces intense scrutiny. Institutions are asked to justify the expense and value of a college education; recruit new cohorts of students—even as a barrage of systemic barriers emerge; please multiple stakeholders; and match educational structures for students with a wide range of ages, goals, and experiences. To the general public, the job “professor” brings to mind tweed jackets, a leaf-strewn campus, and a life of the mind where the sage professor saunters into a room of eager learners. The lived experience, however, of 21st-century faculty differs markedly from this idyllic scene. Today’s faculty shouldered abrupt course delivery changes during the pandemic and then returned to transformed campus and work environments. Instructors face

altered course modality expectations, unprecedented budget cuts, resulting workload changes, intense review of course content, and uncertain implications of teaching and learning in the age of AI. Current college students arrive in classrooms with uneven foundational knowledge and gaps in their social-emotional development. These challenges are even more complex for the increasing number of contingent instructors who often teach across multiple institutions with varied processes and limited educational development options. Movement toward online communication, while providing flexibility, can amplify instructors’ feelings of isolation and unceasing work. Faculty new to an institution are particularly impacted as they are still building community and establishing

their reputations within their campus (Gupta and Downen, 2024).

In short, instructors are navigating change at multiple levels. These shifts have implications for classroom interactions and instructional practices. Multiple POD Network Conference sessions reported on specific ways Centers of Teaching and Learning (CTLs) provide intentional support for all faculty to ameliorate these challenges and strengthen faculty vitality.

How might leaders demonstrate care for faculty and instructor vitality?

The success and well-being of faculty are crucial in this time of change and challenge in higher education. Throughout the POD Network conference, faculty well-being and vitality were a common theme. Dankoski et al. (2012) define faculty vitality as a synergy between high levels of satisfaction, productivity, and engagement that enables individuals to maximize professional success and achieve goals in concert with institutional goals. According to Shah et al. (2018), faculty vitality is influenced by both contextual factors (such as autonomy, sense of competence, and feeling valued) and personal factors (such as satisfaction, motivation, and self-efficacy). Importantly, faculty vitality can refer to the state of an instructor as an individual person or the state of “the instructor” as a segment within an institution.

To retain valuable and vital campus instructors, sessions emphasized the need to acknowledge not just the instructor but the unique, multifaceted human who is living, working, and growing within a

rapidly changing, high-pressure field. Instructors who feel valued, competent, and productive within an institution are better equipped to navigate change, support student success, and stay engaged with their professional and institutional priorities. Institutional investment in instructor vitality enables an institution to meet the continuous changes and challenges in higher education. Instructors who feel supported, whole, and energized are better equipped to meet students with compassion, advance their success, and support the goals of the institution, and CTLs are well-positioned to meet these personal and professional instructor needs.

How can CTLs help retain and inspire great instructors?

CTLs serve as catalysts for faculty well-being and vitality. While the precise structure and governance of campus centers vary widely, Wright (2023) identified multiple roles that CTLs play. For example, they may serve as a hub connecting instructors and creating community (Cox, 2024) and creative endeavors or an incubator to fuel innovative and effective instruction (Rumpff, Rummings, and Benowski, 2024). CTLs can function as a sieve to distill complex information such as technology updates, evolving student needs, and emerging research-supported teaching and learning practices (e.g., the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning or SoTL) into manageable ideas for implementation in the classroom. CTLs can serve as neutral, sanctuary-type spaces where trust is built when other parts of the academic workplace feel overwhelming or chaotic. Within

these in-person or online spaces, instructors can connect, build community, engage in honest dialogue, make experimental adjustments to their teaching, and continue their learning in a low-stakes growth-oriented environment. Settings for learning and collaboration in CTLs can expand faculty networks and help them forge connections across the institution. These expanded networks serve an especially powerful support for minoritized instructors, who may find a sense of belonging within affiliate groups within CTLs.

Fostering a culture where all instructors feel empowered to learn -- and take risks -- is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Empowering educational developers to adapt to the needs of their faculty allows for unique and appropriate development of programming and consultations that respond to emergent needs. When faculty have a space for rich pedagogical development, professional support, relationship building, and a creative hub for innovation, they are better positioned to advance student learning and institutional initiatives. CTLs also collaborate with instructors on SoTL projects related to relationship-rich education methods and belonging. These SoTL findings extend the professions' understanding of how specific teaching approaches impact different groups of students. When supported and well-implemented, CTLs fill these vital needs within an institution and advance the interests of the entire campus community.

The recent meeting of the POD Network provides multiple models for programs that meet the professional and interpersonal needs for achieving

faculty vitality.

Some educational development models from the conference include:

- **Peer-to-peer training** models, which may include programs such as instructor peer mentoring, teaching squares, or learning communities. One key message from the POD Network Conference is to reconfigure these programs as sources of mutual support and learning rather than traditional “mentor/mentee” relationships. These community-based structures are particularly conducive in fostering belongingness for all instructors, including contingent instructors and those who are members of historically marginalized groups (Leeman and Rideau, 2024; Norell, Robertson, and Smitherman, 2024; Utschig, 2024).
- **Students as pedagogical partners** in instructor learning, which may include students partnering as trained teaching observers and coaches, co-developers of policies, co-creators in research, and co-authors in Scholarship of Teaching and Learning publications. At the POD Network Conference, several Students as Partners sessions focused on the expanding presence of these programs and reported a strong positive impact on faculty engagement and improvement in pedagogy. There are additional known benefits for students who participate as partners. (Please see the article on Student

pod

PERSPECTIVES

A POD Network Paper Series on Educational Development Perspectives for Higher Education Leadership

Success & Retention in this issue for details.)

- **Growth-centered approaches**, which allow instructors to feel empowered to experiment, learn, and grow without fear of failure (Alexander and Orr, 2024; Dewsbury, Sandoval, and Killpack, 2024). One specific example from POD is using connections to support faculty in the world of AI with an acceptance that the path forward is still unfolding (Stansbury and Lausch, 2024). Self-compassion is another mindset to encourage. Participation in CTL programs and sessions reminds instructors to view themselves as continuous learners in teaching who will inevitably make mistakes.
- **Modeling innovative learning methods**, which may include sessions designed for hands-on learning to try out new technology, consider alternate teaching methods, and inspire instructors to experiment in a safe space. POD Network Conference sessions showed multiple ways that CTL programs promote innovative teaching and learning (Brown, 2024; Duong, 2024; Ives, 2024; Mitchell, 2024; Rumpff, Rummings, Benowski, 2024; Spain, et. al, 2024) as educational developers simultaneously model the strategies they promote in instructor sessions (Belknap, 2024; Bifulco, Caldwell, and Drue, 2024; Holshouser and Pelzel, 2024).

These diverse models all advance pedagogical practice while fostering community among

instructors, staff, and students. By empowering the community-building efforts of CTLs, leaders are investing in the well-being and retention of faculty, which in turn positively impacts the student learning experience. Building and sustaining a supportive community includes partnering with CTLs to lay the groundwork for a positive and impactful shift toward a culture where both faculty and students feel valued, connected, and empowered to grow. By fostering imagination and flexibility in teaching strategies, educational developers can better meet instructors where they are. And this is where powerful and positive change can occur.

The evolving landscape of AI in higher education provides an illustrative case for the role of CTLs and educational developers in supporting instructors. Numerous sessions at the year's POD addressed AI's impact on the work of faculty. Rather than individual instructors navigating these waters alone, educational developers can provide models for AI policies and ethical use, share updates on AI advancements, and create opportunities for faculty to explore AI in comfortable, supported settings. CTLs can provide space for faculty to discuss policies and practices regarding AI in student work, as well as workshop potential assignment modifications. These efforts help instructors stay current with technological advances. They also help faculty feel supported in adapting to changes.

In the midst of rapidly changing educational environments, instructors in higher education may feel disoriented, disconnected, and even disillusioned. Institutional leaders in partnership

pod

PERSPECTIVES

A POD Network Paper Series on Educational Development Perspectives for Higher Education Leadership

with CTLs can support faculty vitality to develop a culture where both individuals and institutions can thrive.

References

- Alexander, J. and A. Orr (2024).. *How growth-oriented are we, really? Building growth mindset affirming cultures*. [Conference presentation] POD Network 2024 Convention, Chicago, IL, United States.
- Belknap, K. (2024). *How DO faculty learn to teach? An emerging model*. [Conference presentation] POD Network 2024 Convention, Chicago, IL, United States.
- Bifulco, C. M. Caldwell, C. Drue (2024). *Providing scaffolding and choice to improve a faculty development program*. [Conference presentation] POD Network 2024 Convention, Chicago, IL, United States.
- Brown, M. E. (2024). *Developing a culture of care in teaching through critical self-reflection*. [Conference presentation] POD Network 2024 Convention, Chicago, IL, United States.
- Cox, T. (2024). *Navigating change: Inclusive and relational leadership for higher education innovation*. [Conference presentation] POD Network 2024 Convention, Chicago, IL, United States.
- Dankoski, M. E., Palmer, M. M., Nelson Laird, T. F., Ribera, A. K., & Bogdewic, S. P. (2012). An expanded model of faculty vitality in academic medicine. *Advances in Health Sciences Education: Theory and Practice*, 17(5), 633-649.
- Dewsbury, B., C. Sandoval, and T. Killpack (2024). *The Impact of inclusive faculty development on faculty teaching mindsets*. [Conference presentation] POD Network 2024 Convention, Chicago, IL, United States. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10459-011-9339-7>
- Duong, T. (2024). *Nurturing instructors and students: Insights from pedagogical wellness narratives*. [Conference presentation] POD Network 2024 Convention, Chicago, IL, United States.
- Gupta, K. (2024). *Building relationships in asynchronous online learning environments*. [Conference presentation] POD Network 2024 Convention, Chicago, IL, United States.
- Holshouser, V. and H. Pelzel (2024). *Re-invigorating relationship-rich educational development through equity, embodiment, and mindfulness*. Grossman, D. L. and R. Rideau (2024). *Creating faculty support networks with mentoring squares*. [Conference presentation] POD Network 2024 Convention, Chicago, IL, United States.
- Ives, J. (2024). *When STEM teaching and learning is led by care*. [Conference presentation]

POD Network 2024 Convention, Chicago, IL, United States.

Kim and Bower (2024). *How group structure impacts graduate students' pedagogical development*. [Conference presentation] POD Network 2024 Convention, Chicago, IL, United States.

Leeman, D. M. and R. Rideau (2024). *Longing to belong: Creating faculty support networks with mentoring squares*. [Conference presentation] POD Network 2024 Convention, Chicago, IL, United States.

Mitchell, S. (2024). *Upgrading to support first-generation student learning and well-being*. [Conference presentation] POD Network 2024 Convention, Chicago, IL, United States.

Norell, E. A., M. Robertson, and M. Smitherman (2024). *Reconceptualizing peer review as a relationship-strengthening endeavor*. [Conference presentation] POD Network 2024 Convention, Chicago, IL, United States.

Rumpff, J., J. Rummings, and K. Benowski (2024). *Supporting innovation projects*. [Conference presentation] POD Network 2024 Convention, Chicago, IL, United States.

Shah, D. T., Williams, V. N., Thorndyke, L. E., Marsh, E. E., Sonnino, R. E., Block, S. M., & Viggiano, T. R. (2018). Restoring faculty vitality in academic medicine when burnout threatens. *Academic Medicine*, 93(7), 979-984.
<https://doi.org/10.1097/ACM.0000000000002013>

Spain, A. L. Bayers, C. M. Lesoski, B. Shafar, (2024). *Building and maintaining relationships in neurodiverse learning spaces*. [Conference presentation] POD Network 2024 Convention, Chicago, IL, United States.

Stansbury, J. A. and S. Lausch (2024). *Creating teaching center connections through AI faculty and student courses*. [Conference presentation] POD Network 2024 Convention, Chicago, IL, United States.

Utschig, T. (2024). *Building capacity for peer observation of teaching*. [Conference presentation] POD Network 2024 Convention, Chicago, IL, United States.

Wright, M.C. (2023). *Centers for Teaching and Learning: The new landscape in higher education*. Johns Hopkins University Press. <https://doi.org/10.56021/9781421447001>

pod

PERSPECTIVES

A POD Network Paper Series on Educational Development Perspectives for Higher Education Leadership

About the Authors

Mary Johannesen-Schmidt is Coordinator of the Center for Teaching Innovation and Distinguished Professor of Psychology at Oakton College.

Jayln Parker is Faculty Development Facilitator at the Teaching and Learner Center at Colorado Technical University.

Janet S. Tilstra is Director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning and Learning and Associate Professor of Communication Sciences and Disorders at St. Cloud State University.