THE STATE OF FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

2026

ncfdd

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1. Executive Summary

This report presents findings from NCFDD's Faculty Experience Survey (n = 1,098) to assess the current state of faculty development in higher education. The survey examined how faculty development priorities are changing, how institutions are responding, and how these dynamics intersect with faculty research concerns, well-being, workload, and professional sustainability.

Five key findings define the state of faculty development in 2026.

Faculty are placing significantly greater personal value on professional development. When asked how the importance of their own professional development had changed over the past year (Q5_1), respondents reported an average score of 70.5 on a 0–100 scale, where 50 represents no change, indicating a clear increase in the importance faculty place on their own professional development across ranks and institution types.

Institutional funding for faculty development is declining. Perceptions of institutional investment averaged 34.6 (Q5_2), reflecting widespread reports of reduced support. More than seven in ten respondents (71.2%) reported that institutional professional development funding had decreased (36.0% substantially; 35.2% somewhat), while only 15.9% reported any increase (11.1% somewhat; 4.8% substantially).

Faculty well-being is low, and institutional support structures are not offsetting that strain. When asked how their personal well-being had changed over the past year (Q9), 63.9% of respondents report a decline (26.3% substantially; 37.6% somewhat) and 33.1% report improvement (21.7% somewhat; 11.4% substantially). Access to supportive professional community remains uneven (Q12), averaging 55.5 on a 0–100 scale, with faculty reporting weaker community than administrators. Informal networks now carry much of the support burden.

F**aculty want development that is tactical, relational, and adaptable.** When asked which forms of support would be most valuable, faculty prioritized writing and accountability groups (61.2%), mentoring networks (58.7%), and leadership development cohorts (48.2%). These preferences favor ongoing, community-based models over one-time or top-down approaches. Faculty described these as more effective than isolated or prescriptive formats.

External instability is intensifying pressure on faculty development systems. Research funding volatility and rapid AI-related change are compounding existing workload and role pressures, increasing uncertainty in both teaching and research contexts, leaving many faculty feeling unmoored, unsupported, and overextended.

These findings suggest that faculty development has shifted from a supplemental function to a core institutional concern. When institutions treat professional development as discretionary, they risk misalignment with faculty needs and an increase in threats to retention, productivity, and long-term stability.

2. Introduction

Why Faculty Development Matters Now

Faculty development is no longer a peripheral concern in higher education. It has become central to whether institutions can sustain their academic mission, retain faculty, and adapt to ongoing disruption.

Faculty are working under conditions that have shifted rapidly and unevenly. Workloads have increased as hiring slows and administrative responsibilities expand. Expectations around teaching, research productivity, mentoring, and service continue to rise, often without corresponding reductions elsewhere. At the same time, technological disruption, particularly the rapid introduction of AI into teaching and research, has created new demands without clear norms or shared guidance. Political scrutiny and public skepticism about higher education further intensify uncertainty for faculty across different types of institutions.

These pressures shape how faculty experience their work and what forms of support feel viable. In this environment, faculty development functions less as a professional enhancement and more as a stabilizing system. It is one of the few institutional mechanisms positioned to help faculty adapt to change, maintain productivity, and remain engaged over time. In a moment of institutional fragility, it has become a rare space for orientation, structure, and support.

NCFDD's Faculty Experience Survey was designed to examine how faculty development fits into this moment. Drawing on responses from 1,098 faculty members and academic administrators, the survey focuses on how professional development priorities are shifting, how institutional investment is perceived, how faculty well-being has changed, and what kinds of support faculty identify as most necessary right now.

In practice, support remains largely informal. When asked where they turn for support (Q13), 64.0% of respondents reported relying on peer or social networks, 52.4% turned to colleagues within their department, 51.1% relied on disciplinary or professional associations, 30.9% turned to networks within their institution outside the department, 25.0% relied on external organizations, and only 14.7% reported relying on online or digital communities.

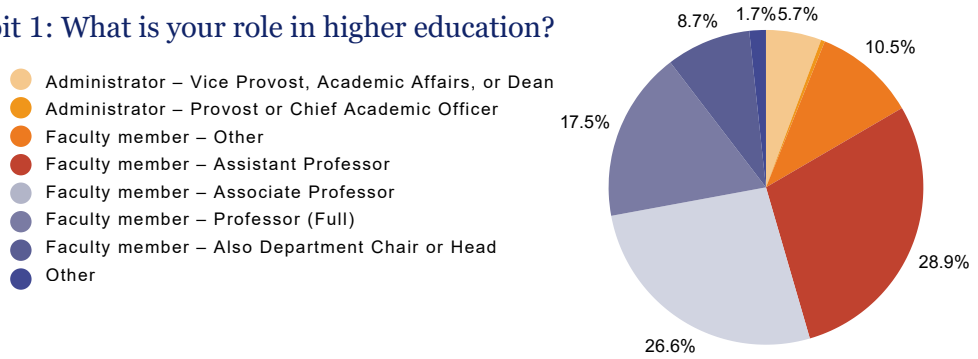
This report is grounded in NCFDD's long-standing perspective on faculty development as core academic infrastructure. Rather than treating development as a set of discrete programs, the survey examines it in relation to workload, well-being, community, and institutional conditions.

The sections that follow trace what the data reveal about the state of faculty development in 2026, where current approaches are falling short, and what these patterns suggest for institutions navigating the next phase of higher education.

3. Survey Respondents and Methodology

This report is based on data from NCFDD's Faculty Experience Survey, which collected 1,098 completed responses from faculty members and academic administrators. Respondents were primarily based in the United States and represented a range of institution types, with the largest share coming from research-intensive institutions.

Exhibit 1: What is your role in higher education?



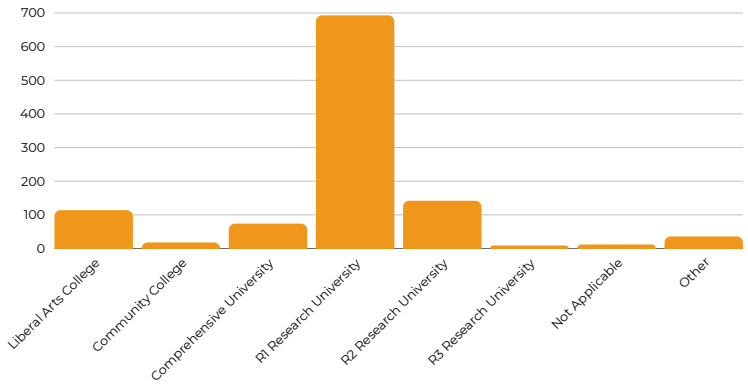
The survey instrument included 65 variables designed to capture both broad patterns and lived experience. Question formats included sliding-scale items, Likert-style questions, multi-select items, and open-ended prompts. This mixed-methods design allowed respondents to quantify change while also describing how those changes are experienced in practice.

Quantitative findings are presented alongside qualitative insights drawn from open-ended responses. We reviewed open-ended responses to identify repeated themes and explain patterns observed in the numeric results. Quotes included in the report are illustrative of these themes and are used to contextualize, not replace, quantitative findings.

Key questions showed high completion rates (e.g., Q13 n = 1,087; Q15 n = 1,053), supporting confidence in the stability of observed patterns.

This integrated approach supports both rigor and interpretability. Numeric indicators establish the scope and direction of change, while faculty reflections provide insight into how those changes are understood and navigated on the ground.

Exhibit 2: At what type of institution do you work?

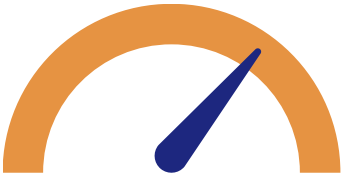


4. Faculty Development in Flux

4.1 The Rising Importance of Professional Development

The clearest shift captured in the survey is the growing importance faculty place on professional development. When asked how the importance of their own professional development had changed over the past year (Q5_1), respondents reported a mean score of 70.5 on a 0–100 scale, indicating a substantial increase in personal valuation.

Exhibit 3. Increase in importance of Personal Professional Development



70.5

Mean score (0–100 scale)

This shift appears across ranks and institution types, but is especially evident among assistant and associate professors, particularly at research-intensive institutions. These faculty are navigating pervasive research budget cuts, heightened productivity expectations alongside expanding teaching, service, and administrative responsibilities. For many, professional development is no longer framed as optional or aspirational. It is increasingly tied to day-to-day survival in the role.

> One respondent referred to professional development as their “lifeline,” while another described it as “the only thing helping me stay afloat in a system that keeps changing the rules.”

Open-ended responses underscore this shift. Faculty describe professional development as essential to adapting to institutional and cultural turbulence, including changes in research funding, the integration of AI into teaching, and the erosion of informal support structures. One respondent referred to professional development as their “lifeline,” while another described it as “the only thing helping me stay afloat in a system that keeps changing the rules.”

Faculty also connect professional development directly to well-being and sustainability. Rather than seeking prestige or advancement alone, they describe development as a way to manage workload, set boundaries, and preserve a sense of purpose in increasingly fragmented roles. Professional development is becoming embedded in the rhythms of teaching, writing, mentoring, and self-preservation. Faculty describe professional development not only as a way to advance, but as a way to feel anchored and regain stability amid constant change.

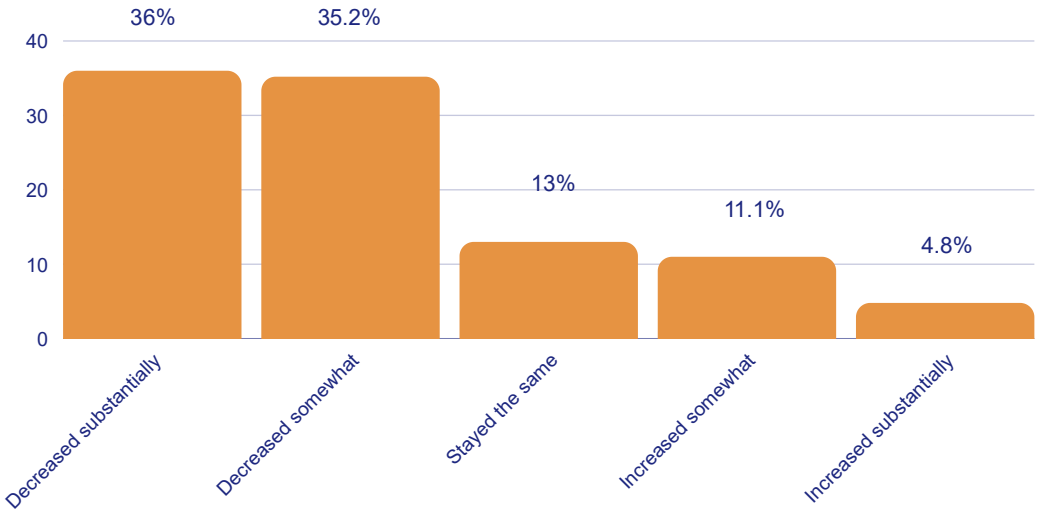
This reorientation matters. It signals that faculty development is no longer peripheral to academic work. It is increasingly experienced as a core mechanism for maintaining professional viability.

4.2 Institutional Support Is Shrinking

While faculty report placing greater personal value on professional development, they also report declining institutional support.

When asked how institutional funding for professional development had changed over the past year (Q5_2), responses averaged 34.6 on a 0–100 scale, reflecting widespread reports of reduced investment. Declines were reported far more often than stability or growth, and faculty consistently rated institutional support lower than administrators. The decline is not marginal: 71.2% reported decreased funding (36.0% substantially; 35.2% somewhat), while only 15.9% reported any increase (11.1% somewhat; 4.8% substantially).

Exhibit 4. Change in Institutional Funding for Professional Development



This disconnect between rising need and shrinking resourcing carries emotional weight. In open-ended responses, faculty frequently described reduced support as demoralizing. Several interpreted it as a signal that faculty development, and by extension faculty success, is no longer a priority. One respondent noted that “support disappears just as expectations increase,” while another described institutional hesitation as “a quiet withdrawal from faculty development altogether.”

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The erosion of support also has practical consequences. Faculty report fewer opportunities to access mentoring, writing support, and leadership development without personal cost. Some describe paying out of pocket or relying on unpaid peer labor to compensate for institutional gaps. Others report disengaging from development entirely due to time and resource constraints.

The result is a widening structural imbalance. Faculty are increasingly motivated to invest in their own development, but the institutional scaffolding that once supported that investment is weakening. This divergence sets the stage for many of the tensions that surface throughout the rest of the report, including declining well-being, reliance on informal networks, and growing frustration with institutional priorities.

5. Faculty Well-Being and Workload

5.1 Declining Well-Being Across the Board

Faculty well-being has deteriorated noticeably over the past year. When asked how their personal well-being had changed (Q9), responses averaged 42.6 on a 0–100 scale, indicating that declines were more common than stability or improvement. Nearly half of respondents reported that their well-being had worsened. Nearly two-thirds (63.9%) reported declines in well-being (26.3% substantially; 37.6% somewhat), while 33.1% reported some level of improvement (21.7% somewhat; 11.4% substantially).

This decline is not evenly distributed. Early-career faculty and adjunct faculty report particularly sharp strain, reflecting limited autonomy, heightened job insecurity, and expanding service expectations. Faculty at research-intensive institutions also report lower well-being, often linking strain to funding uncertainty and productivity pressure.

These are not isolated struggles. Faculty remain committed to the work, but many describe feeling depleted by the systems that are supposed to support it.

Open-ended responses give texture to these patterns. Faculty frequently describe burnout, emotional exhaustion, and mental health strain. Many referenced operating in a state of “constant triage,” prioritizing immediate demands while deferring recovery, reflection, or longer-term planning. Others described “emotional erosion,” noting that the cumulative effect of overload and uncertainty has made it harder to remain engaged or optimistic about their work.

These responses suggest that well-being challenges are not episodic or individual. These are not isolated struggles. Faculty remain committed to the work, but many describe feeling depleted by the systems that are supposed to support it. They reflect ongoing conditions that shape how faculty experience their roles and assess their capacity to continue.

5.2 Faculty Time and Structured Accountability

Underlying much of the reported decline in well-being is the strain of balancing competing priorities. Faculty describe competing demands across teaching, research, service, mentoring, and administrative work, often without clear guidance about priorities or limits.

Open-ended responses emphasize that workload strain is not simply about volume, but about fragmentation. Faculty describe competing demands across teaching, research, service, and administrative work that make sustained focus increasingly difficult, even as expectations continue to accumulate. As one respondent explained, “There is no uninterrupted time to do any one part of the job well. Everything is broken into small pieces, and nothing gets the sustained attention it needs.”

Exhibit 5. Faculty Time Pressure and Workload Strain

In this context, faculty express strong demand for professional development that addresses time, boundaries, and sustainability directly. Development focused on efficiency, workload negotiation, stress reduction, and realistic goal-setting is described as far more valuable than abstract frameworks or aspirational “best practices.”

Faculty are not asking to be told how to do more. They are asking for tools that acknowledge constraints, tradeoffs, and exhaustion. Professional development that helps faculty make informed choices about where to invest limited time and energy is increasingly seen as essential.

This demand reflects a broader shift in how faculty evaluate support. Development that ignores workload realities is often dismissed. Development that engages directly with time pressure and role conflict is seen as immediately relevant and worth protecting time for. The demand for structured accountability is striking: 63.8% selected writing and accountability groups as a priority support mechanism (Q15), suggesting that time scarcity is not only about workload volume, but also about sustaining focus and follow-through under fragmented demands.

6. What Faculty Want (and Aren’t Getting)

6.1 High-Demand Development Areas

Faculty were asked to rate how important different areas of support are to their work (Q8). The responses point to a clear set of priorities.

The highest-rated areas include faculty well-being, writing and publishing productivity, work-life balance and time management, mentoring and faculty development, and leadership development. In each of these areas, a strong majority of respondents rated the need as high.

Exhibit 6. Areas of Professional Support Rated as High Need

These priorities are notable not because they are new, but because of what they represent. They are not peripheral interests or optional enhancements. They reflect conditions that faculty see as necessary to continue performing core academic work. Writing productivity, mentoring, and leadership development are tied directly to research output, promotion, and institutional continuity. Well-being and work-life balance are tied to whether faculty can sustain effort at all.

Open-ended responses reinforce this framing: respondents explicitly linked unmet support needs to stalled research progress, withdrawal from service, and uncertainty about how long they could remain in their roles. One faculty member wrote, “Everything feels urgent and nothing feels sustainable,” while another noted, “Teaching and service take everything, leaving no time for research.”

Across the ten areas of support included in the survey, which span faculty well-being, writing and publishing productivity, work-life balance and time management, mentoring and faculty development, leadership development, and related forms of professional support tied directly to faculty roles, most faculty reported high levels of need. In eight of the ten areas, more than 60% of respondents indicated high need, and the single highest-rated area reached 77.3%: well-being (Q8).

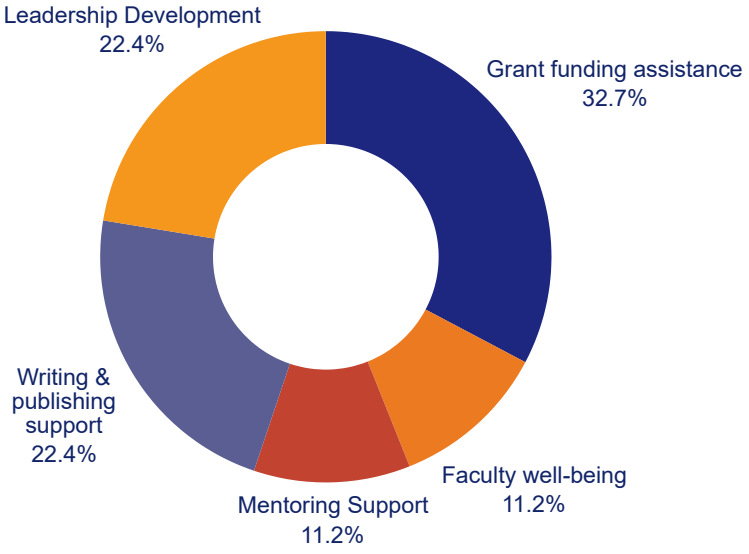
This distribution clarifies how faculty are thinking about professional development right now. Rather than prioritizing prestige-oriented or résumé-building opportunities, faculty are seeking support that helps them sustain day-to-day work, maintain continuity in teaching and research, and continue contributing meaningfully within their institutions under current conditions. These same ten categories were used to assess how much institutional support faculty perceive in each area.

6.2 Where Institutions Are Investing

Faculty were also asked to rate how much their institution is investing in those same areas of support, using the same professional support categories faculty rated for need (Q10). The contrast with faculty priorities is stark.

Across all ten areas measured in this framework, perceived institutional investment is low. Even in the area with the strongest perceived support, grant funding assistance, only about 29% of respondents reported strong institutional investment. In other areas faculty identified as high priority, such as faculty well-being, writing and publishing support, mentoring and faculty development, leadership development, and work-life balance support, fewer than one in five respondents perceived strong institutional investment.

Exhibit 6. Perceived Institutional Investment in Professional Support Areas



This pattern appears consistently across institution types and roles. Faculty report limited investment in precisely the areas they identify as most critical, including well-being, writing support, mentoring, and leadership development.

Open-ended responses suggest that this disconnect shapes how faculty interpret institutional intent. Several respondents described feeling that institutions emphasize outcomes such as productivity, retention, and leadership succession without investing in the support required to achieve them. One faculty member wrote, “there is a lot of talk about supporting faculty but no resources to back it up,” while another noted, “the institution wants results but will not invest in what produces results.”

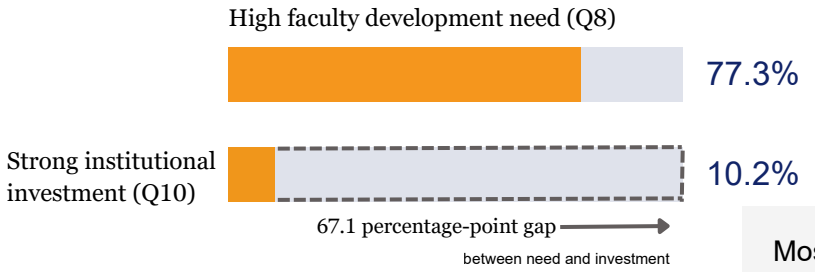
The data do not suggest that institutions are redirecting substantial investment to other forms of faculty development. Instead, perceived support appears thin across nearly all of the professional support categories included in the survey. No category exceeded one-third of respondents reporting strong institutional investment. The highest level of perceived support, grant funding assistance, reached 29.2%, while several categories, including faculty well-being and mentoring support, clustered near 10% reporting strong institutional investment (Q10).

6.3 The Size and Consequences of the Support Gap

The patterns described above point to a deeper structural issue: a substantial gap between what faculty say they need and what institutions are currently resourcing. Across all ten professional support categories measured, faculty reported substantially higher levels of need than perceived institutional investment.

Exhibit 7. The Faculty Support Gap

Faculty development is widely needed, but strong institutional investment remains rare.



Most institutions **fall short** of addressing faculty development needs

In every support area measured, the proportion of respondents reporting high need exceeds the proportion reporting strong institutional investment. The widest gaps appear in areas most closely tied to sustainability, including work-life balance, faculty well-being, writing productivity, and mentoring. In several of these categories, the difference between reported need and institutional investment exceeds 50 percentage points.

This gap is not a matter of perception alone. It reflects a structural mismatch between what faculty require to remain engaged and productive and what institutions are currently resourcing. For example, in one category related to faculty well-being and sustainability, 77.3% of respondents reported high need, while only 10.2% reported strong institutional investment, producing a gap of 67.1% (Q8, Q10).

If left unaddressed, this misalignment carries long-term risk. Faculty describe compensating through informal networks, unpaid labor, or personal expenditure, strategies that are unevenly available and difficult to sustain. Over time, reliance on these workarounds erodes trust, weakens community, and deepens inequity.

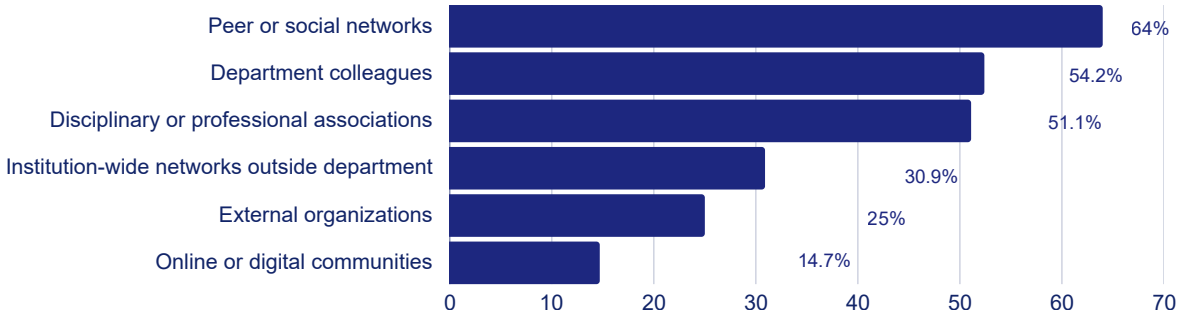
The data suggest that institutions face a choice. Treat faculty development as discretionary and accept widening gaps, or reframe it as essential infrastructure for academic stability, performance, and retention.

7. Faculty Community, Isolation, and Informal Networks

Faculty report uneven access to a supportive professional community. When asked to rate the extent to which they feel supported by a professional community (Q12), responses averaged 55.5 on a 0–100 scale, suggesting that many faculty experience partial or inconsistent support rather than strong, reliable connection.

When asked where they actually turn for support, faculty report relying primarily on peer networks (63%) and department colleagues (52%). Far fewer report relying on institution-wide communities or online platforms. These patterns suggest that most community-building is happening informally and locally, rather than through structured or institutionally supported systems.

Exhibit 8. Where Faculty Turn for Professional Support



At the same time, faculty express strong interest in more organized, sustained forms of community. When asked what types of support would be most valuable, faculty consistently selected writing and accountability groups (61%), mentoring networks (59%), and leadership development cohorts (48%). These preferences point toward community models that offer continuity, shared purpose, and accountability over time.

Open-ended responses help explain this demand. Faculty describe informal networks as fragile and uneven, dependent on personal relationships, timing, and emotional labor. One respondent noted that "support depends on luck and who you know," while another wrote, "I've built informal support networks because there's nothing else." While peer support can be powerful, it is often difficult to sustain alongside heavy workloads and is not equally accessible to all faculty. Several respondents emphasized that they had built their own support structures out of necessity rather than preference, leaving many—especially early career, marginalized, or overextended faculty—without reliable connection.

Faculty are effectively building their own scaffolding: nearly two-thirds (64.0%) rely on peer or social networks, while only 30.9% turn to networks within their institution outside the department and just 14.7% rely on online or digital communities (Q13). While these informal efforts reflect resilience and care, they also reveal a systemic gap.

This approach is not sustainable. Without intentional resourcing, informal networks cannot reliably absorb the pressures faculty are facing. Institutions that continue to depend on individual faculty to create and maintain community risk deepening isolation, burnout, and inequity.

The survey findings point toward a critical shift: community and mentoring cannot remain informal. They must be treated as shared institutional responsibilities and embedded within faculty development structures. This conclusion aligns closely with findings from NCFDD's white paper with Harvard's COACHE, *Redefining Mentoring in Higher Education*, which emphasizes that mentoring effectiveness depends not on individual relationships alone, but on intentional institutional design.

> "Mentoring is not merely a tool for individual advancement but a strategic imperative for higher education institutions."
>
> *-Redefining Mentoring in Higher Education*

COACHE data reinforce the stakes of this shift. Faculty who report effective mentoring are significantly more satisfied with their institutions (73.4%) than those who report ineffective mentoring (44.2%), underscoring the role that structured, reliable support systems play in faculty engagement and retention.

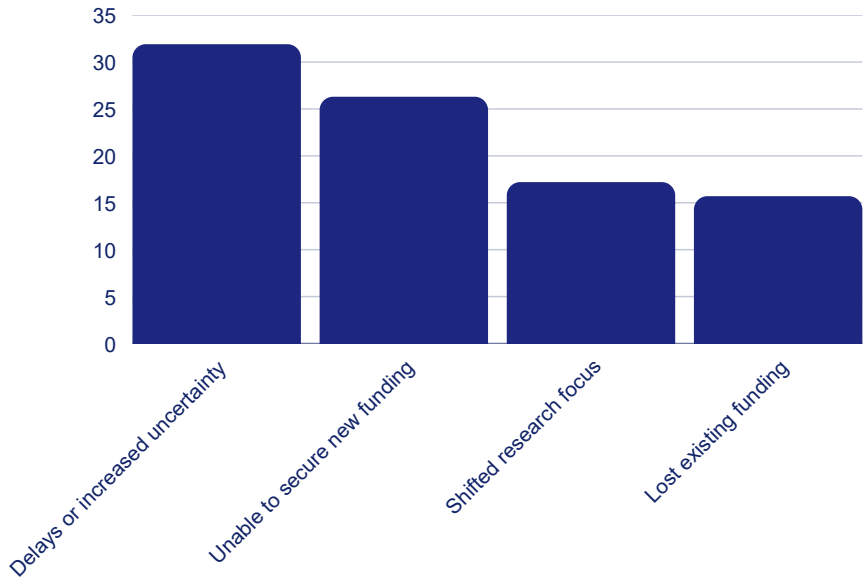
Together, the survey data and mentoring research suggest that faculty are not asking institutions to replace peer relationships, but to strengthen them through frameworks that provide consistency, equity, and continuity over time.

Recognizing mentoring and community as institutional infrastructure sets the stage for examining how broader systems, resources, and leadership decisions either reinforce or undermine faculty success.

8. The Ripple Effects of Research Funding Instability

Research funding instability has become a significant stressor shaping faculty development needs. Funding disruption is widespread and multi-dimensional: 31.9% reported delays or increased uncertainty in funding decisions, 26.3% were unable to secure new funding, 17.2% had to shift research focus due to funding changes, and 15.7% reported losing existing research funding (Q16).

Exhibit 9. Impacts of Research Funding Instability



Faculty who reported being affected by funding changes also reported lower well-being, weaker professional community, and higher overall stress than those who did not. These patterns suggest that funding disruption does not operate in isolation. It compounds existing workload pressures and erodes the conditions that support sustained academic engagement.

Open-ended responses illustrate how this pressure reshapes faculty behavior. Many faculty describe narrowing their focus to grant-related activities as a survival strategy. Teaching innovation, mentoring, service, and even professional development unrelated to immediate funding success are often deprioritized. One respondent noted that “everything that doesn’t move the grant forward feels like a risk.” Another described stepping away from professional development altogether in order to preserve limited research time, noting, “I have not sought any grants at this time… I need to finish a book.”

These dynamics are particularly pronounced at research-intensive institutions, where grant success is closely tied to job security, promotion, and institutional expectations. Faculty in these contexts describe operating in a state of continual contingency, where the loss or delay of funding has cascading effects on workload, morale, and future planning.

These experiences are not isolated. They reflect a broader system in which funding scarcity and institutional dependence collide. As outlined in NCFDDs white paper, *Redefining Grant Funding in Higher Education*, most federal agencies now fund fewer than one in five proposals, even as expectations for volume, complexity, and public impact grow. Faculty are expected to keep multiple proposals in motion, despite having little control over outcomes or timelines.

> "The problem is not that faculty are unwilling to do the work. It is that they are routinely asked to do it without the time, tools, or community that make sustained grant seeking possible."
>
> *-Redefining Grant Funding in Higher Education*

This funding climate is reshaping the role of professional development. It's no longer just a growth opportunity. For many faculty, it's become a critical support structure, and a way to stay afloat in a system that outsources risk and underwrites uncertainty.

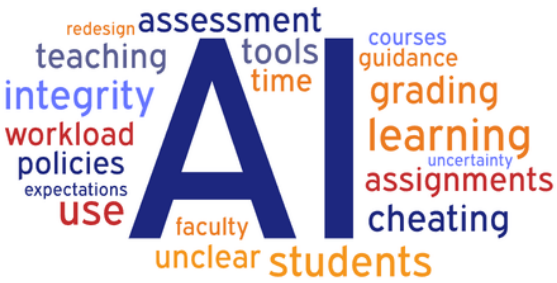
Faculty consistently call for development that protects research time, supports proposal development, and reduces the hidden burden of staying competitive. When institutions fail to provide this, they leave faculty to navigate instability alone, which leads to deepening burnout and eroding retention.

Ultimately, funding volatility must be recognized not as an anomaly, but as a structural condition. Institutions that respond accordingly, by building support systems that reflect this reality, are better positioned to retain talent, sustain research pipelines, and reinforce academic vitality.

9. AI, Disruption, and Faculty Uncertainty

AI-related disruption has emerged as a persistent source of uncertainty in faculty work. Although the survey did not set out to specifically ask about AI, faculty repeatedly raised it in open-ended responses. These responses describe AI as reshaping teaching, assessment, research practices, and professional expectations, frequently in the absence of clear institutional guidance.

Exhibit 10. AI as an Emerging Source of Faculty Uncertainty



Faculty describe anxiety around instructional design and student assessment in particular. Many express concern about how to maintain academic integrity, design meaningful assignments, and evaluate student learning in contexts where AI use is increasingly difficult to detect or regulate. As one respondent noted, “Students are using AI to complete assignments and it’s unclear what counts as learning now,” while another shared, “It’s becoming harder to assess student learning when AI can generate passable work.” At the same time, faculty note a lack of clear institutional guidance, leaving them to make high-stakes decisions independently and often in isolation.

This ambiguity compounds existing workload and role strain. Faculty describe spending additional time redesigning courses, revising assessments, and responding to student use of AI tools, often without clarity about institutional expectations or protections. Several respondents framed this as another example of responsibility shifting downward without accompanying support. One respondent wrote, “I feel like I’m redesigning everything in real time without guidance,” while another noted, “There is no institutional clarity and every faculty member is improvising.”

Notably, faculty do not express a desire for uniform mandates. Open-ended responses consistently push back against one-size-fits-all approaches to AI. Faculty emphasize disciplinary differences, pedagogical values, and personal boundaries, arguing that rigid policies risk undermining both teaching quality and faculty autonomy.

Instead, faculty express interest in professional development that offers frameworks rather than prescriptions. They want space to think through when and how to integrate AI, when to resist its use, and how to experiment cautiously in ways that align with their values and institutional context. Development that supports dialogue, shared norms, and principled decision-making is viewed as far more useful than compliance-oriented training. One respondent summarized this tension directly: “Faculty are being asked to respond to AI without time, training, or shared policy.”

> “Faculty are being asked to respond to AI without time, training, or shared policy.”

The data suggest that AI is not simply a technical challenge. Faculty describe it as another source of uncertainty layered onto already strained roles and expectations. It intersects with workload, well-being, and professional identity, often leaving faculty feeling exposed and unsupported as they make consequential decisions on their own. Faculty development that acknowledges this complexity and provides structured, values-aware support is increasingly critical as institutions navigate AI-related change.

10. Faculty Agency and Autonomy in Professional Development

Across multiple survey questions and open-ended responses, a consistent principle emerges: faculty value agency in how they engage with professional development. This preference appears in how faculty talk about AI, community, workload, and development itself.

Faculty repeatedly emphasize the importance of choice. Around AI, respondents describe wanting the ability to decide whether, when, and how to integrate new tools into their teaching and research. One faculty member explained, “I don’t want to ban AI, but I also don’t know what expectations should be.” Around professional development more broadly, faculty express similar priorities. They want flexibility in format, pacing, and purpose, rather than prescribed pathways that assume uniform needs or goals.

This is reinforced by resistance to mandatory or one-size-fits-all approaches. Open-ended responses frequently critique required trainings and prescriptive “best practices,” describing them as disconnected from disciplinary context, career stage, or lived workload realities. Faculty often interpret these approaches as additional obligations rather than meaningful support. As one respondent noted, “Required trainings feel like one more thing added to an already full plate.”

Instead, faculty describe higher engagement when development opportunities are modular and adaptable. They value options that allow them to opt in based on immediate need, revisit content over time, and engage at different levels of intensity. Development that can be shaped around personal goals, institutional context, and shifting capacity is viewed as far more sustainable. Another faculty member described seeking development that “fits into my actual workload, not an idealized version of it.”

> The data suggest that faculty engagement increases when autonomy is treated as a design principle rather than a risk to be managed.

This emphasis on agency does not reflect a rejection of institutional involvement. Rather, it reflects a desire for development structures that recognize variation across faculty roles, identities, and career stages. Faculty are not asking institutions to step back. They are asking institutions to design support in ways that respect professional judgment and acknowledge constraint.

The data suggest that faculty engagement increases when autonomy is treated as a design principle rather than a risk to be managed. Professional development that supports choice, adaptability, and alignment with faculty values is more likely to be used, trusted, and sustained over time.

11. Strategic Recommendations for Institutional Leaders

The findings in this report point to a clear set of implications for institutional leaders. These are not abstract best practices. They reflect what faculty say they need in order to remain productive, engaged, and sustainable under current conditions.

Fund what faculty actually prioritize.

Faculty consistently identify well-being, writing and publishing support, mentoring, leadership development, and time management as high-need areas. These priorities are directly tied to research output, teaching quality, and retention. Continued underinvestment in these areas widens the gap between expectations and capacity and signals misalignment between institutional goals and faculty realities.

Pair agency with structure in faculty development

Faculty development is no longer experienced as enrichment or optional enhancement. It supports adaptation, productivity, and continuity under increasingly constrained conditions. Faculty are clear that they want both agency and support: the ability to choose how and when they engage in professional development, without having to build those pathways entirely on their own. Institutions add the most value not by prescribing a single path, but by providing clear structure, resourcing, and coordination that allow faculty to exercise choice without carrying the full burden alone.

Build and resource community-based development structures.

Faculty express strong demand for writing groups, mentoring networks, and leadership cohorts. These models address multiple needs at once, including accountability, isolation, skill development, and professional identity. Institutions that rely on informal networks without resourcing them place the burden of community-building on unpaid faculty labor.

Provide values-based, common sense guidance around AI.

Faculty are navigating AI-related disruption without consistent institutional frameworks. Development efforts should focus on helping faculty make informed, principled choices rather than enforcing uniform mandates. Guidance that respects disciplinary differences and professional judgment is more likely to be trusted and used.

Protect time for research and writing through systems, not slogans.

Faculty under pressure consistently describe time scarcity as a central constraint. Meaningful support requires structural mechanisms that protect focused work time, not just rhetorical commitments to balance or productivity.

Align language about faculty support with visible action.

Faculty are attentive to whether institutional commitments are backed by resources. When rhetoric about supporting faculty is not matched by investment, trust erodes. Visible, sustained action is essential to rebuilding confidence and engagement. Visible action can include budget allocations, workload adjustments, protected time policies, and funded access to structured development opportunities.When institutions communicate a commitment to supporting faculty, that commitment should be reflected in budgets, policies, and resourced practices, not solely in messaging.

These recommendations follow directly from the survey data. They reflect the conditions under which faculty development can function as a stabilizing force rather than an additional demand. Institutions that respond to these signals are better positioned to support faculty success and institutional resilience in the years ahead.

12. The Path Forward for Faculty Development

Faculty are not resistant to change. The survey data show that they are actively seeking ways to adapt to shifting expectations, technological disruption, and institutional uncertainty. What they lack is not motivation, but clarity, structure, and visible institutional commitment.

Professional development in 2026 is no longer primarily about acquiring new skills or credentials. It has become a central mechanism for sustaining academic careers, managing strain, and preserving a sense of purpose in environments that feel increasingly unstable. Faculty are turning to development for community, orientation, and practical support because other structures have weakened or disappeared.

The signals in this report are consistent and specific. Faculty want development that is resourced, relational, and responsive to real constraints. They want support that respects professional judgment, protects time, and acknowledges the cumulative pressures shaping academic work.

The opportunity ahead is not simply to expand professional development offerings, but to realign them. When institutions ground professional development in the realities faculty face, it can function as a stabilizing force for academic culture, leadership continuity, and long-term productivity.

This report does not call for reinvention. It calls for alignment. The data make clear what faculty need. Recognizing faculty development as essential academic infrastructure allows institutions to strengthen stability, trust, and shared purpose during periods of sustained uncertainty.

Appendix A. Faculty Needs and Priorities Survey Instrument

This appendix reproduces the full survey instrument administered as part of the NCFDD Faculty Needs and Priorities Survey. The survey was administered via Qualtrics and designed to be completed in approximately five minutes. All responses were anonymous.

Survey Introduction

Thank you for taking a few minutes to complete this brief faculty development survey. It should take no more than 5 minutes. Your feedback will help inform our annual State of the Industry report, which aims to highlight the realities and priorities of faculty in higher education today.

If you would like to receive a copy of the report once it is released, you will have the option to share your email address at the end of the survey. All responses are anonymous.

Background and Demographics

Q1. What is your role in higher education?
- Faculty member – also Department Chair or Head
- Faculty member – Assistant Professor
- Faculty member – Associate Professor
- Faculty member – Professor
- Faculty member – Other
- Administrator – Chancellor or President
- Administrator – Provost or Chief Academic Officer
- Administrator – Vice Provost, Academic Affairs, or Dean

Q2. Where is your institution located?
- United States
- Outside of the United States: Canada
- Outside of the United States: Other country
- I am not a part of an institution

Q3. At what type of institution do you work?
- Community College
- Comprehensive University
- Liberal Arts College
- R1 Research University
- R2 Research University
- R3 Research University
- Not Applicable
- Other

Q4. When you think of the future of higher education, what words come to mind?
(Open-ended response)

Professional Development Context

Q5. In the last year, how has the importance of your own professional development changed?
Response scale:
- Less important than before
- Same as before
- More important than before

Q6. In the last year, how has your institution's funding for your professional development changed?
Response scale:
- Decreased substantially
- Decreased somewhat
- Same as prior years
- Increased somewhat
- Increased substantially

Q7. What are the top challenges you face in your role?
(Open-ended response)

Faculty Development Priorities

Q8. What areas of faculty development are most important to you?
Response scale: None at all | A little | A moderate amount | A lot | A great deal
- Faculty well-being
- Writing and publishing productivity
- Mentoring and faculty development
- Leadership development for faculty and administrators
- Work-life balance and time management
- Career advancement and promotion/tenure
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education
- Grant funding and research support
- Department chair and academic leadership training

Q9. How has your personal well-being changed over the last year?
Response scale:
- Declined substantially
- Declined somewhat
- Same as prior years
- Improved somewhat
- Improved substantially

Q10. Over the last year, what areas of faculty development has your institution invested the most resources and funding in?
Response scale: None at all | A little | A moderate amount | A lot | A great deal

- Faculty well-being
- Writing and publishing productivity
- Mentoring and faculty development

Institutional Support and Well-Being

Q11. What could be done to help improve well-being at your institution?
Response scale: None at all | A little | A moderate amount | A lot | A great deal

- Leadership development for faculty and administrators
- Work-life balance and time management
- Career advancement and promotion/tenure
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education
- Grant funding and research support
- Department chair and academic leadership training
- Faculty retention and institutional culture

Professional Community

Q12. To what extent do you currently feel you have a supportive professional community?
Response scale: Not at all | A little | A moderate amount | A great deal | Completely

Q13. Where do you find your strongest sense of professional community? (Check all that apply)

- Within my department
- Within my institution but outside my department
- Disciplinary or professional associations
- External organizations
- Online or digital communities
- Informal peer or social networks
- Other (please specify)

Q14. When you think about your professional community from the previous question, how has being part of these communities impacted your…
Response scale: Very negatively | Somewhat negatively | No impact | Somewhat positively | Very positively

- Research productivity
- Teaching effectiveness
- Career advancement
- Sense of belonging
- Well-being

Community Resources and Research Funding

Q15. What kinds of community-based resources would be most valuable to you? (Check all that apply)

- Mentoring networks
- Writing or accountability groups
- Leadership development cohorts
- Online discussion spaces
- Other (please specify)

Q16. Have you personally experienced an impact on your research funding due to changes or uncertainty in the funding landscape?
Response options:

- Yes, I have lost existing research funding
- Yes, I have been unable to secure new funding

Q17. In what ways, if any, has the current uncertainty in the research funding landscape impacted your ability to secure or maintain funding for your work?

- Yes, I have experienced delays or increased uncertainty in funding decisions
- Yes, I have had to shift the focus of my research due to funding changes
- No, I have not experienced any impact
- Prefer not to answer

End of survey instrument.

About NCFDD

Founded in 2010, NCFDD is the leading provider of professional development in higher education. Working with over 340 colleges and universities and thousands of individuals in schools nationwide, we are 100% devoted to supporting faculty members, postdocs, and graduate students in making successful transitions throughout their careers.

NCFDD provides on-demand access to the mentoring, tools, and support needed to be successful in the Academy. We focus on four key areas that help achieve extraordinary writing and research productivity while maintaining a full and healthy life off campus: strategic planning, explosive productivity, healthy relationships, and work-life balance.

Our Approach to Faculty Development

Faculty development is most effective when it is responsive to real working conditions. NCFDD's approach emphasizes:

- **Structure that supports focus and follow-through,** even under heavy workload and uncertainty
- **Community-based support** that reduces isolation and normalizes shared challenges
- **Agency and flexibility,** allowing faculty to engage in development in ways that align with their goals, values, and capacity
- **Sustainable practices** that support writing, research, teaching, mentoring, and well-being over the long term

Learn More

Institutions and academic leaders interested in supporting faculty development as core academic infrastructure can learn more about NCFDD's institutional partnerships and resources at www.ncfdd.org.

For questions about institutional partnerships, contact membership@ncfdd.org.