

CASE STUDY

Scaling Faculty Development: UTRGV's Strategic Partnership with NCFDD



The following is a case study focused on how the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) partnered with NCFDD to scale its faculty development efforts and serve a broad range of faculty needs to help drive the institution's strategic goals.

A University at an Inflection Point

When the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) began accelerating its trajectory toward greater research intensity, expectations for faculty scholarship, productivity, and career progression were rising across the institution. Leaders recognized that supporting faculty through this transition required more than incremental adjustments to existing development efforts. It required expanded capacity, specialized expertise, and sustained programming that internal structures alone could not easily provide.

Interim Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs Robert K. Dearth stepped into this work shortly after UTRGV adopted NCFDD, taking on the role of helping the institution translate that investment into meaningful faculty development.

"We knew becoming an R1 institution was not a question of if, but when," he said. "With that comes increased expectations for faculty, and we had to think carefully about how to support them through that shift."

At the same time, he recognized the practical limits of what the Office of Faculty Affairs could provide on its own.

"There's only so much time, personnel, and resources," he said. "You have to make strategic decisions about what you deliver and how you deliver it."

UTRGV confronted a strategic challenge: how to expand faculty development in ways that matched the university's ambitions while remaining sustainable for the institution.

Recognizing the Structural Limits of Informal Systems

Like many universities, UTRGV had historically relied on a combination of mentoring relationships, workshops, and informal guidance from senior colleagues to support faculty development. These efforts reflected genuine commitment from faculty leaders, but they also depended heavily on individual availability and departmental culture.

Dearth noted that these approaches were often shaped by longstanding practices across higher education.

"We had been operating within more traditional models of faculty development," he said. "Some of which were outdated or misaligned with where the institution was headed."

While these efforts could be valuable, they did not always translate into consistent experiences across the institution or align with evolving expectations for faculty success.

"At some point, you have to step back and ask whether those approaches are aligned with your strategic goals," he added.

As research expectations increased across the institution, experiences like these raised a broader question for UTRGV's leadership: whether existing approaches to faculty development could support the university's next stage of growth.

Expanding the Definition of Faculty Development Capacity

UTRGV's faculty affairs leadership began looking beyond traditional models of development programming, exploring how new approaches might complement the work already happening on campus. Programs focused on mentoring, research productivity, and career development offered clear opportunities to broaden support for faculty.

Dearth described this moment as a shift in perspective. "There are so many opportunities now that didn't exist where expertise lies outside the institution," he said.

In August 2024, UTRGV formalized a partnership with NCFDD as part of its strategy for expanding faculty development across the university. "Partnering with NCFDD allowed us to provide faculty with development opportunities we simply could not have built internally," Dearth said. "It expanded what we could offer while allowing our office to focus on guiding faculty toward the resources that would help them succeed."

"What became quickly apparent to us was the depth and amount of resources and knowledge that NCFDD has."

-Associate Vice Provost of Faculty Affairs Robert Dearth

The partnership opened access to structured coaching programs, professional development curricula, and an extensive library of faculty development resources used by institutions nationwide.

"What became quickly apparent to us was the depth and amount of resources and knowledge that NCFDD has," Dearth said. "The challenge quickly became figuring out how to share all of that with our faculty."

Making those resources useful for faculty required more than simply providing access. Faculty needed a clear way to understand how the programs connected to their professional goals and how to begin engaging with them.

Designing a Faculty Development Ecosystem

From the outset, the Office of Faculty Affairs worked closely with NCFDD to determine how development opportunities would be introduced across campus. Faculty encountering a large portfolio of professional development resources often face a practical challenge. “When I first logged in, my reaction was, ‘Where do we start?’” Dearth said.

For UTRGV’s leadership, the partnership would be most effective if faculty had clear guidance on how to engage with the resources available. “The institution needs to be the guide,” Dearth said.

Working with the Office of Faculty Affairs, NCFDD curated development resources aligned with faculty needs and institutional priorities. Programs were organized around themes such as research productivity, planning, mentoring, and well-being, and mapped to different faculty career stages.



Dearth noted that this collaborative approach helped translate a large body of development resources into something faculty could actually use. “We talked about our faculty population and our university’s needs, and NCFDD helped identify workshops, presentations, and programs that would resonate with them.”

These materials were brought together through a best-in-class, centralized faculty development hub created by the Office of Faculty Affairs.

The hub organizes development opportunities by career stage and topic area, giving faculty a single place to navigate writing programs, mentoring resources, planning tools, and professional development opportunities.

Materials from NCFDD’s mainstay programming and resources are integrated into a single site designed to simplify navigation. “Faculty don’t have to search for these resources,” Dearth explained. “They can simply go to the site, click, and access what they need.”

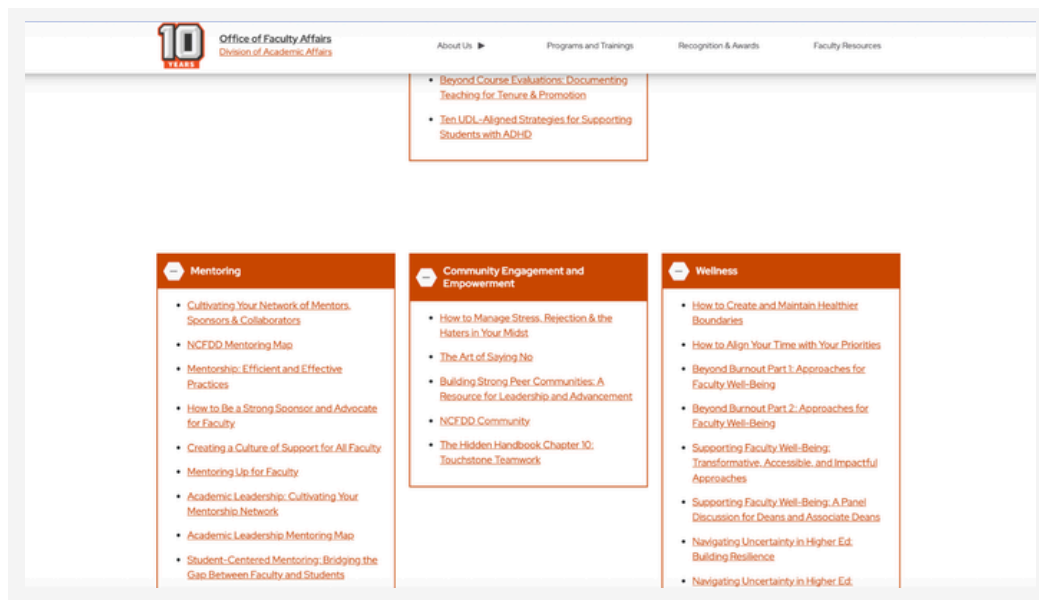
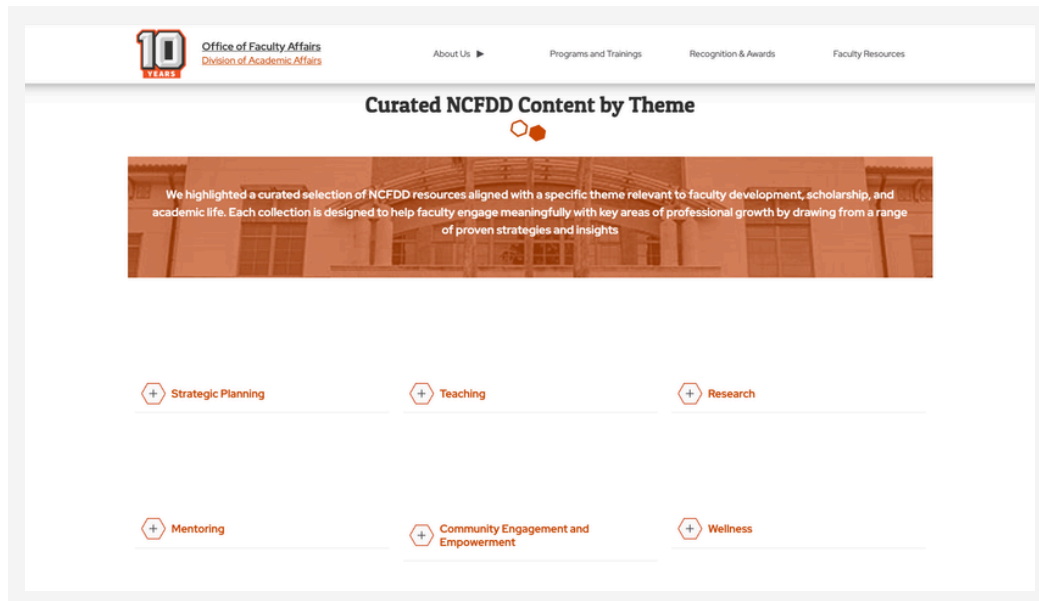
Faculty can move directly to resources tailored to their professional context. Early-career faculty seeking support with writing productivity can identify programs designed for assistant professors, while department leaders interested in strengthening mentoring can locate curated materials focused on mentoring practices and faculty support.

The hub serves as a central organizing point for UTRGV’s development model. Instead of searching across multiple platforms, faculty engage with a single entry point that connects them with development opportunities aligned with their goals.

Maintaining this ecosystem requires ongoing curation and connection. The Office of Faculty Affairs works closely with their NCFDD partner team to review resources, highlight programs aligned with institutional priorities, and update materials as faculty needs evolve.

“The site is designed to be continuously evolving,” Dearth said. “We regularly check back with NCFDD to see what new resources are available and then add them to the site.”

These conversations ensure that the hub remains responsive to the university’s goals while continuing to guide faculty toward relevant development opportunities.



Activating Faculty Engagement

Within this ecosystem, UTRGV introduced structured entry points designed to help faculty begin engaging with the resources.

One of the first initiatives was a campus-based 14-Day Writing Challenge.

The program invites faculty to write for at least 30 minutes each weekday for two weeks while logging their progress through an accountability platform. The structure encourages participants to dedicate consistent time to scholarly work while connecting with colleagues pursuing similar goals.

The Office of Faculty Affairs introduced the writing challenge through campus communications and outreach to faculty. Deans and department chairs also shared the opportunity within their units, helping expand participation across departments.

Faculty described concrete progress during the challenge:

“I always put other things first, and writing was a second- or lower-priority,” one participant wrote. “During this period, I felt some pressure in a good way and dedicated time to write. This led to significant progress. I completed my manuscript that had been on my to-do list since summer.”

“I expect the habit I gained from this challenge will make me **more productive.**”
- 14 Day Writing Challenge Participant

Another participant reflected on the role of accountability: “To me, daily accountability was the key in this challenge. I really valued the daily check-ins and the feeling of being able to say, ‘Yes, I did,’ when asked whether I met my goal. I expect the habit I gained from this challenge will make me more productive.”

For many participants, the writing challenge served as an introduction to the broader development opportunities available through the partnership.

From Entry Point to System-Wide Engagement

Participation in the writing challenge expanded as the program was repeated and promoted across campus. Registrations grew from 16 early participants to 108 — a 575% increase — and 77 participants remained actively engaged throughout the challenge, consistently logging writing sessions during the two-week period.

Participation extended across the faculty population. Assistant professors represented the largest share of participants, but associate professors, full professors, research faculty, and administrators also joined the challenge. Faculty from arts and humanities, education, health sciences, social sciences, and STEM disciplines all participated.

As faculty experienced the value of structured writing support, engagement expanded into longer-term development opportunities such as the Faculty Success Program.

Among UTRGV participants in the program, 86% reported increased productivity and 71% reported improved work-life balance, while 100% reported overall satisfaction with the program.

Institutional engagement expanded as well. The number of faculty accessing development resources increased from 176 early users to 305, representing 79% growth across the institution.

The partnership was beginning to extend beyond early participants and become integrated into the university's broader development environment.

Impact Metrics Over Time



79%

Increase in
Resource/Program
Engagement



100%

Satisfaction with
Faculty Success
Program



575%

Increase in Writing
Challenge
Participants

Institutional Impact

As participation in NCFDD programming expanded, the partnership began to change how faculty development operated across the institution.

Before the partnership, the Office of Faculty Affairs often spent significant time identifying development resources, responding to individual requests for guidance, and assembling programming on a case-by-case basis.

The new, NCFDD-powered ecosystem shifted that work. With curated programs and resources already organized through the faculty development hub, staff could direct faculty to structured opportunities aligned with common academic challenges such as writing productivity, mentoring, and career planning.

This shift allowed the office to focus less on locating individual resources and more on helping faculty engage with a coherent development system.

Department chairs and deans also gained consistent tools they could recommend to faculty within their units. Instead of relying primarily on informal mentoring arrangements or isolated workshops, leaders could point faculty toward programs designed specifically to support research productivity and career progression.

As these opportunities became more visible across campus, faculty began interpreting them as a signal of institutional investment. One participant described this shift directly, saying “I value the way UTRGV cares about faculty having time and support for research.”

For Dearth, that perception was an important outcome of the work. “With increased expectations comes a responsibility to provide the support and structure faculty need to be successful,” he said. “You can’t just raise the bar without also thinking about how you’re helping people meet it.”

A Model for Scaling Faculty Development: Lessons for Institutions

UTRGV continues refining its faculty development ecosystem through ongoing collaboration with NCFDD. The Office of Faculty Affairs works with NCFDD to align programming with institutional priorities. When the university began exploring ways to strengthen mentoring, mentoring resources were curated and highlighted within the faculty development hub, demonstrating how the ecosystem can evolve as institutional priorities change.

Recent findings from [NCFDD’s State of Faculty Development report](#) suggest that the challenges UTRGV confronted are not unique. Across institutions, faculty report strong demand for structured support in core areas of academic work, including writing productivity, mentoring, and career planning. Yet institutional investment often falls far short of those needs.

One example illustrates the scale of the gap. 77.3% of faculty report high need for support related to well-being and sustainability, while only 10.2% report strong institutional investment in that area, creating a 67-percentage-point difference between need and support.

UTRGV's approach offers a practical response to this challenge. Rather than attempting to build every development program internally, the university created a coordinated ecosystem that connects institutional leadership with curated development resources and structured pathways for engagement.

Several principles emerge from this experience:

Guide faculty through the development landscape.

Faculty often encounter a wide range of professional development resources but lack clear guidance on where to begin. UTRGV addressed this challenge by organizing development opportunities through a centralized hub that helps faculty identify programs aligned with their needs and career stage.

Create structured entry points for engagement.

Programs such as the 14-Day Writing Challenge allow faculty to experience the benefits of structured development quickly and introduce them to a broader ecosystem of resources.

Align development resources with institutional priorities.

Through ongoing collaboration with their Partner Success team, UTRGV curates programs that support the university's evolving priorities, including mentoring and research productivity.

Maintain institutional leadership.

External partnerships expand the range of resources available to faculty, but institutional leaders remain central in guiding participation and connecting development opportunities to faculty needs.

UTRGV's experience shows how universities can strengthen faculty development without attempting to build every component internally. By combining institutional leadership with curated resources and structured engagement pathways, the university created a development system that continues to evolve alongside its research ambitions.

Increasingly, this approach is being recognized as a model other institutions can follow.

"Our flagship institution in the University of Texas system saw what we were doing and asked if they could adopt the model," Dearth said. "Sharing best practices allows all of us to move forward."

If you'd like to learn more about NCFDD, visit www.ncfdd.org or contact us at membership@ncfdd.org.

To explore UTRGV's resource hub, visit www.utrgv.edu/facultyaffairs/programs/ncfdd.