



# Useful Professional Development

A question for my wise and worldly readers.

By [Matt Reed](#) / September 2, 2021

In a webinar Tuesday called “The Road Ahead for Community Colleges,” Keith Curry, the president of Compton College in California, mentioned a few times that his college has moved aggressively toward online professional development for its faculty and staff. He noted that as the world changes, students’ needs change, and it’s important that colleges ensure that their faculty and staff are equipped to be effective as they change.

He’s right, of course. But as I reflected on it, I realized that the way I interpret “professional development” has changed over the years.

When I started as faculty, I interpreted the phrase – which I had literally never heard as a graduate student – to mean conference travel in my academic discipline. The point of professional development, in my mind, was to stay current in my scholarly field. That necessarily implied that professional development would be different for faculty in different disciplines; the only common denominator was the funding mechanism and a few thou-shalt-nots. (“We will not reimburse for alcohol,” for instance.) To the extent that I saw much of an active role for administration in my professional development, it consisted in setting a few ground rules and making sure the checks didn’t bounce.

My view has evolved. Maintaining currency in the discipline is important, but it’s only part of the picture. There’s so much more to these jobs than that.

That said, I’ve also endured some truly horrific attempts at campuswide professional development. The worst happened at DeVry, when they brought in a motivational speaker who tried to enlist us to do rope tricks. I actually walked out. Luckily for me, I had built enough credibility by that point that when my boss asked why I did that, a roll of the eyes was enough to settle the issue.

The institutional challenges around professional development are several. There’s the obvious issue of cost and the fear of funding boondoggles. (Admittedly, COVID has rendered that largely moot for the moment.) But the more basic issue is relevance. Given that people have different jobs and personalities, what can you find that’s relevant at scale?

As always, with questions like these, I’ll turn to my wise and worldly readers. What’s the most useful in-house (meaning, not conference travel) professional development you’ve had? What made it good? Concrete answers are especially welcome.