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Building Community and Developing Professionally through FUN Final Friday Sessions

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FUN Final Fridays (FFFs) are a professional development effort resulting from a pandemic-inspired virtual pedagogical meeting. Over the past three academic years, Faculty for Undergraduate Neuroscience (FUN) has hosted FFFs as monthly professional development sessions. These sessions offer a mechanism to address current issues in higher education with emphasis on topics relevant to neuroscience educators. Broadly, topics covered in FFF sessions fall under three areas: a faculty focus that addresses issues of wellness and professional opportunity; a diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging focus that addresses how to advocate for justice through education; and a pedagogical focus that address classroom strategies and issues that affect student learning. We share here our experiences and lessons learned regarding selecting topics, identifying facilitators, navigating timing across a semester, and engaging participants with a goal of providing a framework for successful professional development so that other institutional and departmental leaders can contribute meaningfully to the growth and development of their colleagues.

Key words: Professional Development, Building Community, Virtual Conversations, Faculty, Pedagogy, DEIB

Professional development (PD) workshops are efforts to stimulate growth and development for faculty and staff members working in higher education. Historically, PD sessions have focused on providing instructional materials and strategies through in person, virtual, or hybrid formats. Effective PD experiences are often collaborative, interactive, and focused on solving specific instructional challenges (Pelletreau et al., 2018; Çetin and Bayrakcı, 2019). Discipline-independent and institutionally specific PD are frequently facilitated through collegiate offices while discipline-specific PD are more often addressed by professional societies or institutional departments and/or divisions.

Every third summer since 1995 FUN has organized and hosted an in-person pedagogical conference providing concentrated professional development, scholarship, and networking (Ramirez, 1997). In recent history, these workshops have also been a source of collaboration and visioning (Johnson et al., 2012; Hardwick et al., 2015; Calin-Jageman et al., 2018). In Summer 2020, in lieu of an in-person workshop given COVID-19 restrictions, FUN hosted its first Summer Virtual Meeting (SVM; (Basu et al., 2022)). This three-day conference was a resounding success with over 40 talks and poster presentations, indicating that virtual pedagogical meetings were a viable and meaningful way to gather FUN members together. Consequently, some FUN members sought additional opportunities to spend time together, build community, learn, and share best practices for undergraduate STEM education. The success of the SVM demonstrated the viability of virtual PD while decreasing the demands of planning due to on-ground logistics.

In the fall of 2021, four FUN members volunteered to organize and host the FUN Final Friday (FFF) professional development sessions, modeled in part on regular Friday afternoon FALCoN virtual sessions hosted by the National Institute on Scientific Teaching (National Institute on Scientific Teaching, n.d.). Both FALCoN and FFF are free virtual sessions on a topic facilitated by guests, held on Friday afternoons at 4:00 pm Eastern time, and are accessible by prior registration. The first FFF was held on the last Friday of July 2021 and sessions have continued on a nearly monthly basis during the academic year since then. FFF sessions continued throughout the 2022-23 academic year, making 2023-24 as FFF's third academic year during which we will offer approximately eight virtual PD sessions. FFFs hosted 284 participants across the 10 sessions held between December 2022 and October 2023. This attendance included 170 unique emails used for registration, with 70 from R1 institutions, 35 from primarily undergraduate institutions, and 58 from non-R1 graduate level institutions, medical schools and non-higher education affiliated industries.

This article describes the implementation of the FFF professional development sessions and our experience developing best practices for a community-guided PD program. Herein, we discuss leadership team and facilitator recruitment, topic identification and coverage, session announcements, and format and logistics of hosting PD events. Examples and explanations of our experiences are aimed toward the goal of providing a framework for other PD implementations rather than to be prescriptive.

Leadership Team Development and Structure

The FFF leadership team is a group of FUN members who are passionate about facilitating continuing opportunities for FUN colleagues to learn with and from each other. None are trained as faculty developers and were identified by a simple email listserv call for interest. The initial team consisted of a former FUN President and three current or former members of FUN's Education Committee. The current four-member team includes neuroscience educators from a variety of types of institutions (small private to large public), faculty career stages (early to late), and STEM departments (biology and psychology). Although the initial team members did not know each other well, we shared an interest in building, strengthening, and sustaining the strong learning community of FUN through monthly virtual PD sessions that allowed us to work together well with common goals and diverse experiences.

The four leaders hold at least one, one-hour organizational meeting each semester to discuss dates, topics, and equitably delegate responsibilities by topic alignment and/or availability. When selecting dates, leaders, and topics we consider typical holiday and summer breaks, especially demanding times of the academic year, and timing of conferences such as the Society for Neuroscience's Annual Meeting. This timing has caused a few sessions to be offered on the first Friday of a month instead of the last. The monthly sessions are then planned largely independently by one member of the team, with the other members available as support and organizational backup. At the time of topic selection, we discuss potential facilitators, share ideas, contacts and resources related to the session, and organize our work through virtual workspaces. Though a team of four volunteers have organized all 19 sessions, we have only directly facilitated one-third of them, indicating that taking on an organizing role does not, by default, necessitate presentations by the organizers.

It is important to note that FFF sessions are necessarily virtual to bring together individuals in and beyond the FUN membership at many institutions nationwide. Many of the principles and practices described here can also be applied to in-person PD sessions designed for a single institution. The virtual format has several key advantages, including providing more inclusive access, reducing costs associated with in-person meetings, increasing the range of facilitators, and allowing flexibility in methods of participation. We have also encountered limitations of this format including confusion about timing related to time zones and technical issues inherent to virtual meetings. In our experience, the virtual format works best when the strengths of this modality are highlighted, such as encouraging use of interactive chat features in addition to verbal contributions.

Topic and Facilitator Selection

We created our first list of topics by surveying FUN members regarding PD topics about which they wanted to learn more. The initial FFF meeting was primarily focused on developing a list of topics by the FUN community. We engaged the membership in the creation of topics around several themes developed by the leadership team using a virtual whiteboard and breakout rooms to crowd-source areas of interest and potential facilitators. Thirty-two areas of common interest were identified and were the basis for the initial topic list. In addition, the leadership team organized sessions on "hot topics" reported on by the *Chronicle for Higher Education* and/or *Inside Higher Ed* and articles published on the scholarship of teaching and learning. In the second year, we developed an overarching theme to guide the topic selection. Entering 2023-24, many new ideas emerged from the Summer 2023 in-person FUN pedagogical workshop that will guide topic and presenter suggestions for the future.

We have also intentionally scheduled topics to match opportunities for implementation within the arc of the academic semester. For instance, a session on creating an inclusive syllabus was presented in early December so that significant changes could be made in advance of the Spring semester. In another instance, a FFF session on more effectively incorporating empirical articles was presented mid-semester because the implementation mainly involved in-class revision of an article discussion strategy that could be adjusted on short notice.

Session facilitators were selected in three ways. First, we reached out to the FUN membership via listserv with a topic idea to ask for interested experts. Second, we called upon colleagues who have expertise based on publication authorship or prior leadership of PD sessions. Lastly, the leadership team took on the role of facilitator when we had some expertise and/or a strong interest. Many of our facilitators, including all FUN members, have generously donated their time but, when possible, we have provided small stipends to external speakers to recognize their efforts in joining our membership for a FFF session.

Across all sessions, the facilitators approximately equally represent each of the above groups. When working with other facilitators, the designated FFF team leader meets at least once to discuss the presentation. On the day of the session, we enter the virtual meeting space well in advance of the start time to ensure that technology issues can be addressed prior to the start of the presentation so that the session will run smoothly.

Topics Covered

During the first year of FFF, we did not intentionally create thematic links between the topics as we organized our session. The topics covered were scheduled simply based on interest and on a schedule that worked for the leadership team. FFF's second year was thematically focused on addressing the "Changing Landscape of Higher Education." At the end of FFF's second year, we were able to identify retrospectively sessions with a faculty focus, pedagogy focus, and diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) focus. We recognized significant overlap in these topics but sorted the session based on the primary focus and the community discussion at the end of the sessions. Table 1 provides an overview of the sessions related to the themes and indicates sessions with overlapping themes. Although balancing and/or diversifying sessions may be desirable, we observe that FFF participants vary month to month, with some overlap, and attendees are typically willing to engage

Faculty Focus	DEIB Focus	Pedagogical Focus
Re-imagining the future of neuroscience education		
Promoting interdisciplinary learning using TILT and asset-based thinking		
Faculty wellbeing and justice		ChatGPT
FUNapalooza (updates from FUN committees)	Inclusive syllabus design	Course-based undergraduate research experiences (CRE)
Productive planning for program review	Resources to promote diversity and Project DIVINE	Creating interdisciplinary neuroscience courses
	Building an antiracist lab	Core competencies and core concepts
	Gender and racial representation in textbooks	
	So you want to be a Neuroscientist?	
	Storytelling in STEM	
		How the pandemic changed the classroom
		Incorporating empirical articles
		Inspiring curiosity
		Student panel on the return to in-person instruction

Table 1. Overview of all FFF sessions, categorized across the three main foci.

on a variety of topics and themes.

Given that FFF was developed, in part, as a monthly extension of FUN's pedagogical workshop, it is not surprising that the majority of topics directly address pedagogy. In addition, topics related to classroom strategies and issues that impact student learning generated the longest list of ideas initially from the membership. Due to a variety of reasons including current sociopolitical factors and the COVID-19 pandemic, DEIB topics are also of strong interest to the participants and are prevalent and central in the scholarship of teaching and learning and higher education literature. Though some FFF topics were focused intentionally on DEIB, many of the general pedagogy-focused sessions involved discussing issues of diversity and/or inclusion. Issues of equity, inclusion and belonging are key retention factors in STEM fields (LaCosse et al., 2020; Shaw et al., 2021; Hansen et al., 2023), and the importance of including diverse voices and representation in the classroom remain at the forefront of best pedagogical practices (Schinske et al., 2016; Rainey et al., 2018; Frenzel and Harrington, 2022). The final category, faculty focus, is one that FUN members would like to see more fully developed in future sessions to support wellbeing and stem the feelings of overwhelm and burnout that are rampant in higher education (Fernández-Suárez et al., 2021; Mijakoski et al., 2022).

As outlined in Table 1, FFF topics span a wide variety of content with some sessions offered in response to emerging topics, (e.g., ChatGPT) while others link to timely activities of the national FUN organization (e.g., re-imagining the future of neuroscience education, the theme of the 2023 in-person pedagogical workshop). In each session, participants received pre-reading at the time of registration, resources during the meeting, and/or access to a living document developed during the session.

Advertising, Registration, and Participation

As FFF sessions were initially conceived to be a FUN member benefit, FFF was predominantly advertised through the FUN listserv, website, and social media. We came to recognize that the virtual meeting license fee was the main cost, meaning that increased participation in the virtual FFF sessions was essentially free, and allowed more STEM educators an opportunity for well-developed learning opportunities. We therefore opened sessions to other organizations, such as the Society for the Advancement of Biology Education Research (SABER) and Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR), through email invitations. Given the advantages of free online professional development training, in the future we should consider increasing our outreach to graduate students and postdoctoral fellows; the BRAINS and IRACDA programs are examples of such groups. Many FFF session recordings are available on demand to active FUN members through the FUN Final Fridays section of the FUN website.

Email invitations for FFF sessions contained a Zoom registration link and were sent, on average, three weeks before the session date, and again each week following. Each invitation included a short description of the session topics with relevant links as background reading in some cases. Participants have indicated that being reminded several times of the FFF sessions is helpful, both to allow for those who missed the original notice register and to remind those who did register of the session and timing.

In the 2022-23 academic year, 60% of registrants attended FFF sessions. Figure 1 demonstrates registration and attendance numbers as well as the percentage attending for a select number of sessions. Not surprisingly,
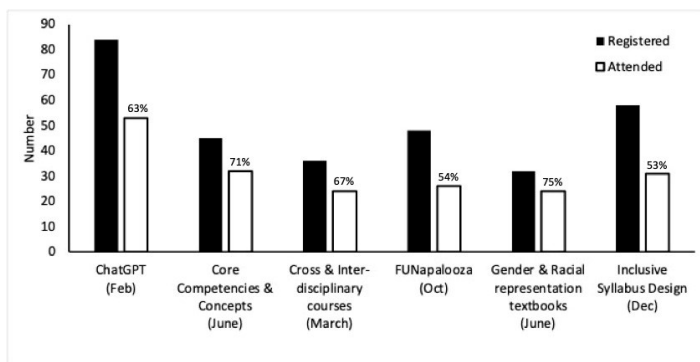
Figure 1. Number of participants registered and attended for a representative set of FFF sessions. The number above the empty 'Attended' bar indicates the percentage of registrants who attended the live session.

we observed increased attendance for sessions where additional groups (e.g., SABER, CUR) were invited and have found that "hot topics" also draw a crowd. For instance, the February 2023 ChatGPT session attracted the highest total attendance (53 participants). Participation in the core competencies and concepts and gender and race representations in textbooks had the highest percentage of attendance (71% and 75%, respectively). We attribute this turn out to a combination of the topic and those sessions taking place in June with potentially fewer competing demands. Together, these data suggest that the timeliness of the topic and the schedule are likely important factors in participant turnout. It is important to note, however, that total turn out is not a definitive metric for session success because a smaller participant group allows for more interaction and discussion and still conveys important information to an interested audience.

Session Format

The format of FFF sessions has varied from presentations to small group discussions. Different formats work better for different topics, but in general, FFF participants seem to prefer a blend of the two. FFF participants are typically very active discussants when facilitators open the floor for input, often negating the need to move into breakout rooms with a reasonably sized group. FFF participants are also avid users of virtual chat features to share ideas, best practices, appreciation, insights, and links to additional resources. Participants have also indicated that even short time periods to work on personal implementation during a session can be helpful.

In general, we recommend to facilitators that PD sessions plan for 10-15 minutes of discussion at the end of the session. Some presentations include only 5-10 minutes for questions while discussions may include >30 minutes of discussion time, sometimes in several discrete segments. A specific format and structure of each FFF session may be recommended by the leader, although format is ultimately determined by the session facilitator(s). We have found that more than two or three facilitators make FFF sessions feel overly busy and can put pressure on the last presenter to pay close attention to ending times and/or compress their comments.

Lessons Learned and Plans for Improvement

FFF sessions have successfully gathered the FUN membership and others in informal pedagogical and professional development spaces on a regular basis. Sessions have both addressed topics initially identified as areas of interest to the participants and also allowed space for emerging themes that led to engaged discussion and opportunities for growth. In a small informal request for feedback from FFF participants over the last 12 sessions, using a keep-stop-start format, respondents (N=24) stated that they appreciated the sessions, liked the variety of topics, and requested that we keep offering them at least at the same monthly rate.

In the original conception of FFF, a primary goal was to facilitate community. We have been less successful in creating a sense of camaraderie and opportunities for socializing, likely due to the virtual format. Although virtual meetings were a lifeline of connection to professional communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, they fail to replicate much of the organic nature of in-person interactions. Despite this limitation, virtual social opportunities may be a mechanism to engage a wider group of FUN members on a regular basis. To address the feedback desiring more community, in 2023-24 we are piloting an open breakout room in the Zoom call 15 minutes before the session begins so that participants can socialize while the leaders and facilitators prepare in the main room.

Friday at 4:00 pm ET may not be an ideal time for all, however, in surveys, FUN members indicate that it is the best time. We believe that holding the FFF sessions at a consistent time (and naming it for the Final Friday) is better for attendance than moving the sessions to various days to be able to attempt to engage those on other schedules. Occasionally when FFF sessions are scheduled for a Friday not at the end of the month, additional communication is planned. To address the likely conflicts that arise during the course of an academic year, we record most sessions for FUN members.

Friday afternoons are also not ideal for breakout rooms without clear instructions and time parameters. We have noted that some participants tend to leave when breakout rooms open, possibly due to a desire to listen more than actively engage in a discussion. Others may be driving or doing other activities that allow them to listen but not converse. Therefore, breakout room directions will be more explicit for future sessions and/or those who cannot join a breakout room conversation will be invited to stay in the main room or directed to a quiet room. We recognize that this observation stands at odds with participant's desire to create more community but prefer to honor the opportunity for people to be present than to force conversation.

National and institutional surveys have shown that women faculty members frequently report spending more time on activities related to teaching (i.e., preparing for class, advising/mentoring students, and in the classroom) and participating in academic service compared to male colleagues (Winslow, 2010; Misra et al., 2011; Guarino and Borden, 2017). Although we did not collect data on the gender identity of participants and are aware that FUN members identify across the gender spectrum, we would be

remiss not to mention the binary gender disparity we noted among our FFF participants. In nearly every session, the vast majority of our participants were female-presenting in physical traits, first names, or self-identified pronouns. Women and underrepresented minority faculty members may have a greater propensity to engage in additional service roles aimed at supporting their respective communities, thereby contributing to reshaping the historically white male-dominated academic landscape by amplifying their voices and influence (Baez, 2000; Guarino and Borden, 2017). Consequently, the demographic trend observed in FFF attendance may align with broader discussions regarding gendered differences in faculty time allocations to teaching, service, and research efforts.

In the future, more systematic analysis of factors that influence engagement, as well as the gendered attendance, would further advance the development of best practices. Based on our experiences, attitudinal surveys are insufficient to address the impacts of PD sessions because registrants are often self-selected to those who are most interested and therefore most likely to engage in FFF sessions.

CONCLUSION

FUN Final Friday (FFF) professional development sessions attempt to address a desire of the FUN membership for more community engagement and additional opportunities to share ideas. Herein, we have shared our approach and experiences in hopes of providing a framework for the future and to contribute to the development of best practices for post-pandemic PD sessions. Broadly, our experience indicates that high-quality PD is flexible, adaptable, and community-relevant. We identified timing, topic relevance, and community engagement as key factors that contribute to the ongoing success of FFF. These factors make PD sessions robust and adaptable to different presentation formats and a variety of topics. Additionally, focused effort to identify expert facilitators increases the impact of the sessions while simultaneously making session planning manageable for the leadership team. As a result, we hope our report, in combination with prior literature on professional development will stimulate innovative approaches to engaging diverse voices in this conversation.

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