

**Improving Staff Participation in Governance and
Professional Development at Community Colleges**

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Course Title: EDR-610 - Research Proposal

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Date: 06/29/2025

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Introduction to the Research Topic

Classified staff in community colleges are essential contributors to student success and institutional operations, yet their voices are often underrepresented in institutional decision-making processes and professional development initiatives. The Maricopa Community College District (MCCCD) provides a compelling case study in examining this issue, as structural barriers and workplace culture frequently inhibit inclusive participation from non-faculty employees. Despite commitments to shared governance and leadership development, staff participation remains limited.

Statement of the Research Problem

Student-Affairs staff at MCCCD report low morale, concerns about pay and benefits, and a sense that their voices are not included in institutional decision-making. Contributing factors include fear of retaliation, lack of support from supervisors, cultural barriers, and inconsistent awareness of opportunities. Insights from the Cycle 0 questionnaire further reinforce these trends, showing strong concerns related to salary adequacy, recognition, inclusion in governance, and workload constraints that hinder participation.

Summary of Prior Literature

Gagné and Deci (2005) apply Self-Determination Theory to the workplace, emphasizing the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. They differentiate four types of extrinsic motivation—external, introjected, identified, and integrated—that lie on a continuum from least to most autonomous. In autonomy-supportive climates, where employees feel trusted and empowered, individuals tend to internalize these extrinsic motivations, fostering stronger

engagement and job satisfaction. In contrast, controlling environments suppress intrinsic motivation and psychological well-being. This dynamic is directly applicable to MCCCCD, where staff report constrained decision-making authority and limited voice. The observation that low morale among Student-Affairs staff stems from limited autonomy, inequitable rewards, and weak relatedness is based on internal survey findings and feedback gathered during my term as Co-President of Staff Representation. These concerns were further substantiated by the Cycle 0 questionnaire results, which revealed significant dissatisfaction with areas such as recognition, compensation, and access to shared governance. These patterns directly map to the core psychological needs identified in SDT and help explain the organizational disengagement experienced across campuses. If staff are granted meaningful choices and their perspectives are authentically valued, Self-Determination Theory predicts higher morale and commitment—key outcomes this study seeks to explore. This aligns directly with the problem of practice at MCCCCD, where staff report feeling excluded from meaningful decision-making.

Berends, Boersma, and Weggeman (2003) present organizational learning as a dynamic, socially negotiated process. Their findings highlight how rigid institutional structures can be reshaped by employee agency, providing a model for how classified staff might navigate or reform governance practices through informal and formal strategies.

McGrath, Liljedahl, and Palmgren (2020) analyze how Communities of Practice (CoPs) are applied across education sectors, cautioning against superficial engagement and emphasizing the value of mutual learning and shared purpose. Their taxonomy helps evaluate the authenticity of participatory structures within MCCCCD and guides the design of effective, inclusive governance bodies.

These works collectively offer theoretical frameworks and empirical grounding for examining and addressing the barriers classified staff face in governance and professional development.

Statement of the Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of classified staff at MCCCCD with regard to participation in shared governance and professional development. The research aims to identify perceived barriers, assess the role of supervisors, and explore strategies that can increase staff engagement and equitable involvement in institutional decision-making.

Cycle 1 Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of classified staff regarding their opportunities to participate in shared governance and professional development at the college or district level?
2. How do supervisors and administrators perceive their role in supporting or limiting staff participation in institutional decision-making and professional growth opportunities?
3. What factors do staff identify as barriers or motivators to their engagement in leadership roles, committees, or campus-wide initiatives?

Research Participants

Participants will include classified Student-Affairs staff from two campuses within MCCCCD—Chandler-Gilbert Community College and South Mountain Community College as well as District Staff Association Senators who will serve as pilot participants. These groups were selected due to reported morale concerns and represent a cross-section of district-wide staff perspectives.

Apparatus and/or Instruments

Data will be collected using a revised 15-item questionnaire grounded in the Job Satisfaction Survey (JSS; Spector, 1985) and tailored to this study's PoP. The questionnaire includes 13 Likert-scale items and 2 open-ended questions addressing pay, benefits, recognition, governance participation, and morale. The instrument was piloted with peer staff and revised per feedback.

Research Design and Procedure

This mixed-method study will utilize survey distribution via Qualtrics to staff during scheduled team huddles and via paper copy during Staff Association meetings. Participants will be given 15 minutes of release time to complete the survey. Responses will be anonymous, and all data will be collected and stored securely in alignment with IRB and institutional guidelines.

Data Analysis

Placeholder for proposed data analysis.

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