

# University of Iowa Faculty Stay Conversation Framework

This framework aims to provide best practices and strategies to guide academic leaders in their efforts to have effective stay conversations with their faculty members as an efficient way to increase retention.

## Understanding Stay Conversations

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It is costly to replace faculty. Stay conversations offer a low-cost, informal way for leaders to re-affirm a faculty member's engagement and commitment to the institution. These discussions help assess job satisfaction, identify what makes the institution a positive place to work, and identify opportunities to make improvements. They also strengthen relationships and build trust. Stay conversations should occur regularly, ideally before a faculty member begins considering departure.

### **Benefits of conducting stay conversations include:**

- Demonstrating that faculty are valued
- Clarifying expectations
- Opening lines of communication
- Enhancing collaboration
- Gathering meaningful and actionable information

The most effective stay conversations are structured, conversational, and informal. This approach helps faculty feel recognized and appreciated, reinforces that leadership cares about more than just performance, and signals a willingness to make changes that increase satisfaction.

## Preparing for Stay Conversations

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### **1. Build trust.**

- Meet in a comfortable space. Consider a faculty-centered space or coffee.
- Meet regularly so these conversations become a normal practice.
- Approach with openness; avoid defensiveness or judgment.
- Center the discussion on workplace experience and institutional improvement, not performance.
- Keep the process simple.

### **2. Actively listen - about 80% of the time.**

- Treat as a listening session, not a review. Use your 20% to ask clarifying questions and gently guide the conversation.
- Reserve feedback for follow-up conversations.

### **3. Set clear expectations.**

- Briefly explain the purpose; to learn, support, and identify opportunities for positive institutional change.
- Reinforce that this is distinct from reviews.

### **4. Use thoughtful prompts, such as:**

- What do you look forward to in your work?
- What barriers do you perceive to your teaching/scholarship success?
- What part of your role would you change if you could?
- Why do you stay here – and what might pull you away?
- How does the university help you do your best work?
- What support or resources would improve your experience?

### **5. Act on their feedback.**

- Acknowledge their input.
- Make changes where possible and provide updates, especially for long-term or challenging efforts.

## Conducting Stay Conversations

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### COMMENCE

Thank the faculty member for their willingness to share feedback. Stay conversations can be scheduled or informal (e.g., a walk-through), but always prepare 4–5 questions that explore what faculty value and what improvements they recommend.

If the meeting is scheduled, send the questions one week in advance and clearly state the purpose is to understand how to better support them—not to evaluate performance. Keep prompts focused on motivations, goals, and concerns rather than performance.

### CONVERSE

Hold the conversation in person to support open, honest dialogue. Ask thoughtful follow-up questions to understand the “why” behind their responses and to ensure accurate interpretation.

Clarify that the purpose is to gather input that will guide future improvements. Create a safe, comfortable setting that encourages candid feedback.

Take notes so you can accurately summarize themes and define next steps. Adapt to your own style (e.g., taking notes during or following the meeting), while maintaining the purpose and spirit of the conversation.

If difficult feedback arises, avoid defensiveness and treat it as an opportunity for constructive change. Prioritize listening and capturing their insights accurately.

### CONCLUDE

Summarize key themes to confirm shared understanding. Faculty should leave knowing their input will be reviewed and taken seriously.

Express appreciation and follow up afterward—whether the feedback results in changes or acknowledgment. Implement improvements whenever possible; even small, low-cost actions or recognition can significantly strengthen faculty engagement and commitment.

## Stay Conversation Follow Up

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The process doesn’t end when the conversation concludes.

Leaders should review all feedback and develop action plans that strengthen key motivators, support faculty goals, and address emerging issues or concerns. Identify actionable trends and themes to guide these plans.

Thoughtful analysis of the feedback—followed by meaningful implementation—can positively influence workplace culture, enhance morale and engagement, and ultimately improve faculty retention.

## Resources

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**Finnegan, Richard (2015). *The Stay Interview*.** Finnegan Institute. AMACOM Books; 1st edition (March 1, 2015). <https://www.finneganinstitute.com/stay-interviews/>

**Active Listening: The Secret to Effective Communication** (LinkedIn Learning): <https://www.linkedin.com/learning/activelisting-the-secret-to-effective-communication/active-listening-16025537?u=42573940>

**Rules of Analog Note-Taking** (LinkedIn Learning): <https://www.linkedin.com/learning/enhance-your-productivity-with-effectivenote-taking/rules-of-analog-note-taking>