

## Article

# Hierarchical Needs-Driven Development: Evidence-Based Strategies for Teachers in Chinese Private Colleges and Universities

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to systematically explore the current status of teachers in private colleges and universities, with a focus on enhancing the overall quality of the teaching staff and promoting the sustainable development of higher education within these institutions. Specifically, the study examines key dimensions affecting faculty members, including their survival needs, career development prospects, and social identity, through the lens of hierarchical needs theory. By analyzing empirical data and relevant literature, the research identifies critical factors influencing teachers' professional satisfaction and retention. Findings indicate that while the current salary levels are generally sufficient to meet teachers' basic living requirements, there remains room for improvement in compensation to boost motivation and reduce turnover. Moreover, a robust social protection system plays a vital role in fostering teachers' sense of security and stability. The presence of harmonious and collaborative teaching teams contributes significantly to teachers' feelings of belonging and emotional support, which in turn enhances their commitment and engagement. Public respect and societal recognition further inspire dedication and professional pride among faculty members. Lastly, a well-established and comprehensive training and development system equips teachers with opportunities for continuous learning and career advancement, enabling them to better realize their personal and professional potential. Based on these insights, the paper proposes evidence-based strategies tailored to address the diverse hierarchical needs of faculty members, aiming to build a stable, motivated, and high-quality teaching workforce in private higher education institutions.

**Keywords:** hierarchy of needs; teachers in private colleges and universities; evidence-based strategy

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## 1. Introduction

Private colleges and universities represent a vital component of China's education sector. After over three decades of vigorous development, they have emerged as a significant force in the country's higher education landscape. As these institutions continue to evolve, their growth trajectory has shifted from mere expansion in scale to a focus on internal development (development in terms of quality and content, hereafter referred to as "internal development"). Despite remarkable progress in recent years, the foremost challenge impeding the sustainable development of private colleges and universities is the stability of their faculty—a critical factor that also constrains their steady growth and core competitiveness.

The renowned American psychologist Abraham Maslow proposed the Hierarchy of Needs Theory through his research, identifying five fundamental human needs: physiological needs, safety needs, social needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs. These five needs provide a theoretical foundation for the construction of faculty teams in private colleges and universities. Based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory, strengthening

faculty development and cultivating a stable, high-quality, and research-oriented teaching force that meets the demands of the times is crucial for the sustainable development of private colleges and universities.

Since their inception, private colleges and universities have rapidly risen to prominence in China's higher education sector, leveraging their flexible operational mechanisms and effective market strategies. Over the past thirty-plus years, they have not only achieved rapid growth in quantity but also made significant strides in quality, contributing substantially to the popularization of higher education in China. However, as they transition into a new phase of high-quality development, private colleges and universities face unprecedented challenges and opportunities, with faculty stability emerging as a particularly pressing issue. Faculty members are the core resource for institutional development, and their stability directly impacts teaching quality, research innovation capabilities, and social reputation. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory elucidates the underlying motivations behind human behavior, revealing that individuals progress through five hierarchical needs—physiological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualization—in their pursuit of self-fulfillment. Applying this theory to faculty development in private colleges and universities necessitates a comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach to understanding and satisfying teachers' needs, thereby fostering a stable and efficient faculty team.

Specifically, physiological needs represent the most fundamental requirements for teachers, encompassing reasonable remuneration and a conducive working environment, which serve as the foundation for attracting and retaining talent. Safety needs pertain to job security and work stability, requiring private colleges and universities to establish robust employment systems and provide continuous career development opportunities to enhance teachers' sense of job security. Social needs focus on communication and cooperation among teachers, as well as their sense of integration within the institution and society, necessitating the creation of a harmonious interpersonal atmosphere that facilitates knowledge sharing and experience exchange. Esteem needs emphasize recognition and respect for teachers' personal values, including academic freedom and decision-making participation, which contribute to their sense of professional honor and belonging. Finally, self-actualization needs represent the highest level of aspiration for teachers, involving the realization of personal potential and contribution to societal value. Private colleges and universities should support teachers in achieving this dual advancement by providing extensive research platforms and abundant academic resources. Therefore, strengthening faculty development in private colleges and universities based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory is not only a responsibility towards teachers' personal development but also a key driver for the sustainable development of these institutions.

## **2. Hierarchical Need Disparities: Multidimensional Dilemmas in Faculty Development at Private Colleges and Universities**

According to research findings based on data from the Ministry of Education, in 2019, full-time faculty members aged 35 and under accounted for over 36% of the total faculty in regular higher education institutions across China, and this proportion is even higher in private colleges and universities, sometimes exceeding 50%. This data vividly reflects the youthful characteristic of faculty teams at private colleges and universities. The significant presence of young teachers stems from the relatively short development history of these institutions, which have continuously recruited needed faculty members during their growth. Young teachers, with their vitality, innovative capabilities, and adaptability to new environments, have injected fresh impetus into the development of private colleges and universities [1]. As invaluable assets and core forces in the development of private higher education, teachers play a pivotal role. They are not only disseminators of knowledge but also catalysts for research innovation and guides for students' personal growth.

However, in today's rapidly evolving higher education landscape, faculty members at private colleges and universities face numerous challenges. Salary and benefits, as the most direct form of livelihood support, often fall short of meeting the expectations of young teachers, particularly in first-tier cities and high-consumption regions, where economic pressure has become a significant factor constraining faculty stability. Inadequate performance-based incentive measures result in delayed and unfair recognition of teachers' work achievements, undermining their work enthusiasm. The pressure of teaching and research is evident in the acquisition of research projects and publication of academic papers, with private colleges and universities relatively lacking in research resources and platform construction, requiring teachers to exert greater efforts to achieve results. These factors collectively contribute to the difficulty in ensuring faculty stability at private colleges and universities, with high turnover rates becoming a bottleneck restricting their development.

Taking Shaanxi Province as an example, research indicates that the faculty team at private colleges and universities in the region primarily consists of retired teachers from public institutions and self-recruited young and middle-aged teachers. While this structure partially addresses the shortage of faculty members, it also introduces complexities and instability to the teacher cohort. Retired teachers from public institutions, although experienced, may face challenges in maintaining high-intensity teaching and research tasks over an extended period due to age-related factors. Self-recruited young and middle-aged teachers, on the other hand, exhibit high mobility due to lack a sense of belonging and unclear career development prospects. Taking the School of Humanities and International Education at a university in Xi'an as an example, in 2020, the school had a total of 184 faculty members, including 76 part-time teachers and 33 retired teachers from public institutions. This data reflects the dilemma in faculty development at private colleges and universities: a significant shortage of full-time faculty members, a high proportion of part-time and retired teachers, and an unreasonable faculty structure. In 2020, the school recruited 18 teachers while 8 resigned; in one department alone, 3 new teachers were hired while 5 resigned, indicating a severe shortage of faculty members. Behind these figures lies the reality of high faculty turnover at private colleges and universities, a pressing issue that demands immediate attention. From the aforementioned data, it is evident that private colleges and universities still face a substantial shortage of full-time faculty members, and even without considering professional titles, stability remains under significant pressure, with high turnover rates persisting. To retain young and middle-aged faculty members at private colleges and universities, it is essential to provide not only relatively generous economic and material support but also to satisfy their emotional needs and facilitate their self-actualization within these institutions. Therefore, strengthening faculty development at private colleges and universities is an urgent and ongoing task that requires a comprehensive, multi-pronged approach [2].

### **3. Demand-Driven Mechanisms: The Causal Chain Linking Teacher Behavior and Turnover Risk**

The demand-driven mechanism underlying the turnover risk of faculty members at private colleges and universities can be attributed to a causal chain formed by unmet hierarchical needs, with the pathway of influence progressing from basic survival needs to higher-level development needs. Based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory, the driving factors can be integrated into the following dimensions:

#### *3.1. Dual Pressures at the Survival and Safety Need Level*

The lack of economic security constitutes the primary driver of faculty turnover. The salary structure of faculty members at private colleges and universities exhibits 'dual low characteristics': absolute salary levels are significantly lower than those at public institutions (typically by 20%-30%), and there is a lack of a graded growth mechanism linked to

teaching experience and performance. This salary dilemma is directly associated with teachers' survival pressure, particularly in the face of real-life needs such as housing and marriage, compelling them to prioritize economic returns in their career choices. In today's environment of soaring prices, low salaries struggle to meet teachers' basic living needs, let alone support a higher quality of life. More critically, the employment structure characterized by fixed-term contracts introduces job insecurity, affecting teachers' sense of stability and creating challenges in meeting their survival and safety needs. This uncertainty makes it difficult for teachers to focus on their work and remains in a state of long-term tension, affecting their work efficiency and career development [3]. Surveys reveal that the annual turnover rate among faculty members aged 35 and under due to mortgage payment pressures reaches 18.6%, significantly higher than the corresponding level at public institutions. This data serves as a warning that economic security and safety needs are the foremost concerns for young teachers and key factors constraining their stability.

### *3.2. Systemic Deficiencies in the Career Development Ecosystem*

The disruption in the teaching and research support system exacerbates barriers to professional growth. Faculty members at private colleges and universities face a 'polarized' team structure: retired re-employed teachers are limited in energy and unable to fulfill mentoring responsibilities, while young and middle-aged teachers are left to navigate their professional development independently. This unreasonable team structure results in a lack of effective guidance and support for young teachers, hindering their rapid growth. Data indicates that only 23% of faculty members at private colleges and universities have participated in teaching and research projects above the institutional level, with research funding intensity less than one-fifth of that at public institutions. This scarcity of resources and disruption in the mentorship mechanism trap teachers in a cycle of "low-level repetition," making it difficult for them to achieve breakthrough progress. More concerning is the "involution" characteristic of the training system: 86% of training takes the form of short-term on-campus lectures, with on average less than one-third of an opportunity per year for off-campus advanced studies, resulting in knowledge updates lagging behind the forefront of disciplinary development [4]. This training approach fails to meet teachers' diverse learning needs and prevents them from staying abreast of industry trends and the latest research findings, limiting their professional growth and career development.

### *3.3. Self-Reinforcing Effects of the Social Identity Crisis*

The professional dignity of faculty members at private colleges and universities suffers from multiple forms of deconstruction. Differences in student quality (with admission scores generally 30-50 points lower) weaken teachers' sense of teaching accomplishment, while societal stereotypes further amplify this sense of frustration. Labels such as 'low threshold' and 'market-oriented' in public perception contribute to a sense of professional stigmatization among faculty members. This identity crisis exacerbates turnover through two pathways: it directly leads to professional inferiority among 35% of teachers and indirectly undermines their teaching commitment, forming a negative cycle of "low identity-low performance-even lower identity." Within this cycle, teachers struggle to find motivation and direction for their career development, ultimately choosing to leave private colleges and universities in search of better opportunities.

The aforementioned need gaps constitute a complete chain driving faculty turnover: survival pressure prompts economically motivated career mobility, safety deficiencies trigger precautionary saving behavior, development obstacles lead to human capital depreciation, and the identity crisis ultimately erodes organizational commitment. The cumulative effect of these need deprivations leads to faculty members at private colleges and universities showing tendencies toward high turnover intentions and weakened organizational commitment. Therefore, to address the issue of faculty turnover at private

colleges and universities, it is essential to construct a comprehensive and systematic support system that meets teachers' multi-level needs, including improving salary and benefits, enhancing the career development ecosystem, and strengthening social identity. This approach will enhance faculty stability and loyalty, thereby promoting the sustainable development of private colleges and universities [5].

#### **4. Evidence-Based Intervention Strategies: Constructing a Tiered Demand-Oriented Faculty Development System**

##### *4.1. Survival and Security Guarantee System: Multi-Dimensional Salary Structure and Qua-Si-Tenure Management*

Addressing the prevalent survival and security needs gaps among faculty members in private higher education institutions necessitates the construction of a salary framework that emphasizes both "market competitiveness" and "developmental incentives." Specifically, a dynamic salary benchmarking mechanism should be implemented to ensure that the base salary levels are no less than 85% of those in public universities, thereby effectively enhancing teachers' economic security and reducing talent attrition due to salary disparities. Simultaneously, a performance reward pool closely linked to teaching and research outputs should be established, accounting for 30% of the total salary, to stimulate teachers' work enthusiasm and creativity through clear performance indicators and reward mechanisms, encouraging them to achieve more in teaching and research.

Furthermore, an innovative model combining "on-campus salary + industry-university-research revenue sharing" should be introduced, granting teachers undertaking enterprise-sponsored horizontal projects 20%-40% of the revenue as technology transfer rewards [6]. This not only diversifies teachers' income sources but also promotes the deep integration of industry, university, and research, enhancing teachers' practical abilities and social service capabilities.

In terms of personnel systems, concurrent efforts should be made to advance a long-term contract system with probation and permanent phases by implementing a '3+2' employment contract model, where the initial employment period is three years, and upon successful evaluation, it transitions to an indefinite contract. This provides teachers with stable career expectations and reduces the uncertainty associated with temporary employment. Additionally, a seniority allowance system should be established, offering supplementary pension insurance to teachers who have served for five years, thereby mitigating their perception of temporary employment through institutional stability and enhancing their sense of belonging and loyalty, ultimately constructing a stable and harmonious faculty team.

##### *4.2. Developmental Ecosystem Support System: Three-Dimensional Growth Platform and Collaborative Network*

To foster the comprehensive development of teachers, a three-dimensional development ecosystem integrating teaching, research, and practice is essential. Firstly, a mentoring mechanism pairing "retired professors with young faculty" should be established, requiring retired professors to provide four hours of weekly mentoring to young teachers, complemented by teaching innovation workshops and teaching observations to facilitate the inheritance and innovation of teaching experiences and enhance young teachers' teaching abilities. Secondly, a university-level key laboratory open fund should be set up to support young teachers in forming interdisciplinary teams to apply for projects, increasing project success rates (recommended to reach 40%) and providing research start-up funds (ranging from 50,000 to 200,000 yuan per project) to offer necessary research support and resource guarantees for young teachers, aiding their rapid growth into research leaders [7].

Moreover, industry-education integration bases should be established, mandating professional teachers to complete six months of enterprise practice every three years and incorporating horizontal projects into the title evaluation system to encourage teachers to actively participate in enterprise collaborations and promote the deep integration of theory and practice. Through teaching salons, research alliances, and other platforms, a spiral growth path of "pre-set learning + generative practice" should be formed to stimulate teachers' intrinsic potential and creativity, driving continuous breakthroughs in teaching and research.

#### *4.3. Value Identity Empowerment Mechanism: Tiered Honor System and Career Achievement Visualization*

To enhance teachers' sense of value identity and professional honor, innovative approaches to constructing teacher identity should be adopted. A 'Three-Tier Honor Program' should be implemented, including a university-level 'Young Scholars Climbing Plan,' providing academic leave and 100,000 yuan in research funding to support selected individuals in conducting cutting-edge research; a "Teaching Innovation Leadership Award," rewarding teachers who have made outstanding contributions to teaching innovation with a prize equivalent to 50% of their annual salary, demonstrating the institution's emphasis on teaching; and provincial-level recommendations for the "Outstanding Contributions to Private Education Award," forming a multi-tiered, multi-dimensional honor incentive system that recognizes and rewards teachers at different career stages.

Simultaneously, teacher development archives should be established, featuring honor corridors in core campus areas to showcase the achievements of teachers who have received provincial-level or higher awards, serving as role models to inspire more teachers to strive for excellence. A "Teacher Development Digital Portrait" system should be developed to visualize and track teachers' career achievements, enabling them to clearly see their growth trajectories and development directions. Furthermore, a 'Private Higher Education Teacher Certification' system should be introduced, granting certified teachers secure certificates with verification features and linking professional certification to title promotion, creating accumulable professional capital and enhancing teachers' professional identity and self-worth, thereby constructing a positive, vibrant teacher development ecosystem.

### **5. Conclusion**

Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory offers profound insights into the construction of faculty teams in private higher education institutions. This theory posits that human needs progress from lower-level physiological needs to higher-level needs such as safety, social belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Based on this theory, in constructing faculty teams in private higher education institutions, we must not only address teachers' lower-level physiological needs, such as economic security and job safety, by establishing a survival and security guarantee system that provides stable salaries and career development environments but also guide them towards fulfilling higher-level needs, such as social belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. By constructing a developmental ecosystem support system and a value identity empowerment mechanism, we can offer teachers broad development spaces and rich growth resources, stimulating their work enthusiasm and creativity and promoting their holistic development.

Through the construction of a tiered demand-oriented faculty development system, we can further unleash teachers' intrinsic potential and motivation on the basis of meeting their basic needs, fostering a more mature, stable, and high-quality faculty team in private higher education institutions. This not only enhances the overall educational quality and competitiveness of private higher education institutions but also supports the sustainable development of higher education, promoting improvements in quality, efficiency, equity, and long-term viability.

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