

Best Practices for Supporting Adjunct Faculty

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As instructional costs have risen over the past several decades, the percentage of course sections taught by part-time faculty members in North American colleges and universities has increased steadily. More recently, state legislatures, business leaders, and others have challenged higher education to serve growing numbers of place- and time-challenged students and align educational programs with economic development goals. These mandates as well are being pursued largely through reliance on adjunct faculty. Where once their teaching supplemented full-time faculty, the role of adjunct faculty members is today a strategic component in pursuing many institutional missions. When properly-trained and supported, adjunct instructors provide a flexible, affordable way to achieve our goals, while maintaining overall instructional quality (Leslie and Gappa, 2002).

Part-timers are far from a homogenous cohort of like-minded, “gypsy scholars.” In their research, Judith Gappa and David Leslie (1993) formulated a typology of part-timer instructors, based upon their lifestyles and motivation to teach.

Specialist, expert or professionals are those who are employed full-time outside of their teaching, and include businesspeople, those from the medical professions and the public sector who teach in career-oriented programs. Nationwide it is the largest cohort of adjunct faculty, approaching half of all those who teach part-time.

Freelancers are those, who by choice, are employed in multiple part-time jobs, including a regular teaching assignment. They include artists of many types, consultants, and others. *Freelancers* are thought to be the smallest group of part-timers nationwide, but are numerous, and critical, in critical discipline areas.

While *career enders* are concluding their work lives, they want to maintain a connection to the energy of a serious endeavor. Historically comprising a small subset of part-time instructors, *career enders* are increasing with the retirement of activist Baby Boomers.

Aspiring academic are those who have recently completed, or are about to complete, their graduate programs. Although they represent an estimated 20 to 25% of part-time instructors across all disciplines and institutions, their ratios are perceived to be higher within urban areas that are home to large universities, and within certain disciplines – especially the humanities. Aspiring academics receive the most press attention, which fosters a perception among the public of being the largest or even the exclusive profile of adjunct professors.

Adjunct faculty provide expertise in critical courses that perhaps no full-time faculty member on staff possesses; their evening and weekend availability enable us to expand class schedules to serve time- and place-challenged students; their passion for teaching enables our students to achieve “real world” perspectives; and they do it all for typically modest remuneration. Since most adjunct faculty members are employed in other jobs, often have family responsibilities, and teach at irregular hours and locations, they

typically lack the opportunity to participate in professional development initiatives designed especially with full-time faculty in mind.

A growing number of institutions are realizing that preparing and supporting their part-time faculty members is essential for the achievement of institutional effectiveness. Best practices are grounded in sound research, both secondary and primary. In the 1996 study that undergirds one of the best practices, Lyons found that part-time instructors require:

1. A thorough orientation to the institution, its culture and practices;
2. Adequate training in fundamental teaching and classroom management skills;
3. A sense of belonging to the institution;
4. Both initial and ongoing professional development;
5. Recognition for quality work that is perceived as appropriate and adequate

Each best practice highlighted here was developed with a modest investment of financial, physical and human resources. Each has achieved success because its leaders recognized the need to secure support from top-level administrators, instructional leaders who interface with part-timers regularly, and the full-time faculty. Each initiative incorporated regular data-gathering into its management, so that improvements were integrated continuously. Lastly, each had one or more “champions” – someone who made it a top priority, who pursued opportunities to communicate its mission, and who advocated on behalf of adjunct instructors to align processes with their needs.

The University of Central Florida is home to 300 part-time instructors, evenly divided among “specialist, expert or professionals,” “aspiring academics,” “freelancers” and “career enders.” As in many metropolitan areas, Orlando is a competitive market for part-time instructors. In 2006, UCF’s Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning identified a need to retain its part-timers and enhance their classroom effectiveness, and initiated an orientation regimen for achieving those objectives. To accommodate the busy lifestyles of its adjunct faculty, they employed a three-pronged delivery system: a series of workshop sessions that spanned the academic year, a day-long retreat, and an online program. Early data demonstrates meaningful results from their initiative.

Also in a competitive market, the University of Louisville developed a program for its adjunct faculty after conducting a thorough needs assessment. Its six session program serves primarily newer instructors, and is scheduled with late-afternoon and early evening options that include a light meal, and provide a stipend and certificate for its completers. Stakeholders in the initiative expressed universally positive perceptions, and plans have evolved to expand the program in the future.

Formed in 1994, the Kansas City Professional Development Consortium (KCPDC) is a collaborative effort of seven institutions – community colleges and universities, as well as public, private and for-profit institutions. In 1999, the KCPDC recognized that the growing population of part-time faculty members was underserved by existing programming, and expanded its offerings to address their needs. The following year,

KCPDC began delivering an extensive program to prepare part-time faculty that is providing preparation and support of part-timers at all its member institutions.

Valencia Community College serves Central Florida, and employs approximately 1000 adjunct instructors, with a turnover rate of 10% each term. To provide a stable, yet flexible, professional development system for its adjunct instructors, Valencia implemented in 2003 a creative new program. Its centerpiece is an online, scenarios-based, course entitled *Teaching in the Learning College*, and also includes face-to-face seminars to create a “blended learning” program. The initiative has evolved into the Associate Faculty Program that provides a step in pay and a new title for adjunct faculty, in exchange for their commitment to help the college improve student learning.

Mentoring has long provided a rich, flexible and affordable professional development tool for those in higher education. Alberta, Canada’s Grant MacEwan College and Delgado Community College, in New Orleans, have leveraged its advantages to support their part-time faculty members in quite different ways.

Initiated in 2002, the Grant MacEwan program matches new part-time instructors with a veteran instructor whose skill set provides the best opportunity to provide their specific, identified needs. A majority of the dyad matches are cross-disciplinary, which helps to reduce the barriers between the College’s four instructional sectors and fosters improved focus on instructional processes and philosophy.

At Delgado, an Adjunct Mentoring Coordinator position was implemented within its Communications Division. The division coordinator mentors all of its new part-time faculty for the entire academic year. Feedback from the pilot study was so positive that a proposal was made to staff a coordinator position for all instructional divisions. Plans to fully-implement the proposal were sidelined by Hurricane Katrina, but as the College recovers, it is pursuing putting the proposal in place.

Thirty miles from Chicago, Governors State University (GSU) serves a growing population of recent community college graduates and working adults who seek a higher education in order to advance their careers. In 2004, GSU implemented a course entitled “Applied Communication: Community College Teaching,” to prepare part-time faculty members of the community colleges in its geographical area. Its success has enabled the university to support its mission, and foster more collegial relationships.

At the start of the 2005-06 academic year, Ivy Tech Community College (ITCC) Southwest in Evansville, Indiana launched a program, with grant funding, to develop, support, and retain part-time faculty with an end goal of enhancing student learning. ITCC Southwest formulated three strategies for this professional development initiative: enhanced orientation of faculty, a system of mentoring for newer faculty, and an online faculty development course called “Teaching in the Learning College.”

Florida’s Indian River Community College leveraged the dissertation findings of an incoming instructional dean to implement a comprehensive adjunct faculty development

program, in 1996. Its components include: an checklist-driven orientation; a course entitled “Instructor Effectiveness Training” – delivered in both face-to-face and online versions; mentoring opportunities; a dedicated section in the campus library focused on the needs of part-timer instructors; online resources professional development resources; brown bag professional development luncheons; and a spring reception that incorporates a recognition program for outstanding adjunct faculty members.

Several institutions have implemented a strategy that identifies proven adjunct instructors among its ranks, which provides advanced training that bestows advanced status and pay.

California’s College of the Canyons implemented its “Associate Program,” in 1989, to provide professional development to its participants in three phases: a specific set of instructional skills that are essential in planning and implementing a successful lesson; topics that affect the planning of an entire course or propose the introduction of an entirely new approach or teaching practice; and a teaching demonstration in which the adjunct instructor, working with a mentor, plans and delivers a lesson in a real-world classroom.

The University of Connecticut implemented its “Adjunct Faculty Associates Program” to increase instructional competency and leadership at its regional campuses. While in the program, Associates learn to use technological tools for course and curriculum enhancement, and create innovative course materials. The advanced status bestowed completers has provided credibility for their delivering professional development to their colleagues, and empowered them to serve as leaders in additional ways.

The sheer number of classes assigned to adjunct professors makes a powerful argument for investing in the teaching of adjunct instructors. As the financial survival of the institution relies increasingly on the adjunct faculty, so too does the academic quality of the teaching and learning enterprise. If good teaching that produces evidence of student learning is to be anything other than random, then institutional policies must deliberately support the development of all instructors.

With the quality of higher education under increased criticism from key circles (*Inside Higher Ed*, 2006) and rising pressure from regional accrediting associations, it is essential that leaders consider the role of part-time faculty in institutional effectiveness. Strategic-minded leaders have begun to see the wisdom in leveraging the potential benefits that adjunct faculty members provide to deepen student learning, improve student retention and achieve other accountability outcomes. These benefits can only accrue when adjunct faculty members are well-prepared and systematically supported. In addition, part-timers’ potential for contributing to your effectiveness extends far beyond their teaching alone, by driving support of various types toward the institution. *Best Practices for Supporting Adjunct Faculty* provides insights into strategies for achieving those added benefits.

One of the beauties – and sometimes challenges – of the North American system of higher education system is that institutions are so diverse in mission, culture, student population and other critical factors. Although there is no “one size fits all” solution to

increasing the effectiveness of your institution's adjunct faculty, the best practices featured will provide practical ideas for enhancing student learning and improving accountability outcomes.

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