Recruitment and Development of Online Adjunct Instructors

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Abstract

Adjunct faculty is used heavily in the community college setting. Community colleges are market-sensitive, and strive to serve the community. With the advent of distance learning, community colleges now serve a global community. Distance learning managers will frequently recruit faculty from the institutional full time faculty pool. However, with recent exponential growth of online programs, the use of both local and "distant" adjunct instructors can meet the growing staffing need. Yet, the use of adjuncts in large numbers leads to a variety of management and training issues.

Online adjunct faculty can be local to the institution, or in some cases residing at a distance from the institution for which they are teaching. The latter requires careful management. Despite the size and geographic personnel base of the adjunct program, there are several operational elements that provide the basis for a comprehensive and organized online adjunct program. This paper will present an overview of the adjunct recruitment, development, and evaluation process, highlighting the issues and challenges.

Administrative Organization

Recruiting, hiring and developing adjuncts for a distance learning program is no easy task. The operational process is a sequential strategy consisting of recruitment, screening, hiring, training, course preparation, support and mentoring, and evaluation. At the heart of the process must be a commitment to educational quality and a commitment to adjunct faculty retention. Quality is at the heart of accreditation. Accreditation should not be affected by proportion of adjunct instructors, as long as quality is maintained. Essentially, adjunct faculty must meet the same educational, professional and scholarly requirements and standards as their full time counterparts.

The literature on part time faculty is replete with reports of abuse, poor working conditions, and cases of labor law issues (Church, 2000; Papp, 2002; Naquin, 2001; Wright, 2002). Each institution, in the interest of principled human resource management, should strive to create the best possible environment for adjunct faculty while still meeting institutional demands. Many adjuncts are attracted to the flexibility and autonomy of part-time teaching, yet are conscious of the disadvantages such as lack of advancement, job security, benefits and also

experience a feeling of disengagement from the traditional campus culture (Cassebaum, 2001). Excellent, committed, quality instructors are retained by excellent, committed, quality faculty support.

The structure for the management and support of adjuncts varies to a large extent as a result of institutional factors such as size, mission, and organization. A department-level support model organizes all adjunct recruitment efforts and support under the academic department or the distance learning department. A central office model organizes all adjunct-related initiatives under a central office, such as Human Resources. The central office then screens applicants and filters information to the academic departments. A shared model of adjunct support seems to work best, whereby academic departments take the initiative in screening, hiring and training adjunct faculty, with overall support from the central Human Resources office.

In a shared model, a partnership between the academic department and the central Human Resources office should be formed. The hiring manager must become versed in legal issues and considerations, as well as hiring processes and procedures, including offers, salaries, benefits (if any), paperwork and certification requirements. The hiring of distance learning faculty who are not in the geographic area will present questions and concerns. How does the hiring manager verify identity without a face-to-face meeting? Upon hiring, should the candidate be required to sign a state loyalty oath for the state in which the institution is located? How can the institution provide faculty training and support across a given distance? There are no legal or objective answers to these questions, though they need to be addressed at the individual institution level with the guidance and support of the central Human Resources office.

The screening process is a mutual review. Quality instructors will want to teach for institutions that demonstrate a commitment to quality, and to its employees' professional and personal development and overall satisfaction. To this end, part of the preparation for the interview should also be assembling and providing information about adjunct support, benefits, perks, and opportunities.

Critical to any organizational approach is clerical and mentor-level staffing for adjunct support proportionate with the volume of the recruitment initiative. Applications require correspondence, telephone calls, scheduling assistance, and filing support. Newly hired employees require a mentoring process, whereby the hiring manager guides the candidate through the process of hiring, paperwork, certification, orientation, training, and course preparation. Anticipated volume will determine the support staffing needs.

Distance learning adjunct staffing also raises support issues particular to this type of delivery. Distance learning faculty support entails instructional design, and varying levels of technical support and mentoring. What services are available online for these instructors? Are administrative forms online? Is software online? Is training online? If the institution will recruit local adjuncts, are secretarial support, mail services, telephone services, software, and computers available?

A realistic assessment of available support services will inform the decision of where and how many to recruit. The recruitment stage is the point at which the institution can realistically assess staffing and support patterns, and tailor advertisements as much as possible to attract candidates that meet the instructional need. For example, if training is only available locally, then any recruitment efforts outside of the local area may be customized to specify a preferred or required level of experience. Marketing sources may also be targeted

to attract a certain level of experience and knowledge.

Recruitment: Who is the Adjunct?

Professional development, financial incentives, personal growth, creativity, and the hope of securing full time employment are all among the muses that inspire adjunct instructors.

Who are adjunct applicants? From our experience, we have identified eight types of adjunct candidates:

1. The Philosopher is a candidate who is likely not professionally employed in the field in which she is degreed. She may be degreed in a high enrollment, low faculty availability area such as Philosophy, Humanities, or Religion. These areas are also typically the lowest areas of full time faculty participation in distance learning, thus creating an even greater dearth of available instructional staff for alternate delivery. This type of candidate may perceive the recruitment advertisement as an opportunity to finally make use of her advanced degree. Teaching and online technologies experience may vary.

2. The Traditional Teacher may have a wealth of instructional experience in the classroom as both a full time and adjunct instructor at different institutions. Classroom-based teaching experience is high, but online technologies experience may be limited.

3. The Moonlighter is employed full time at another institution, yet is seeking adjunct work to supplement her salary. Teaching and online technologies experience may vary. Time commitment may be a concern, and should be discussed candidly in the screening process.

4. The Full-Time Part-Timer is an online adjunct employed at several institutions. Teaching and online technologies experience will be high, yet it is important to be cognizant of the fact that paradigms of "online teaching" vary by institution. Online classes, depending on the institution, may take various forms: interactive and synchronous or less interactive and more akin to the independent study.

5. The Administrator is typically an internal institutional employee. Teaching and online technologies experience may vary. These candidates are easily trained, familiar with the organizational environment and student body, easily contacted and may have high accountability to the institution. They are an excellent, but frequently untapped instructional staffing resource.

6. The Graduate is a candidate who is recently graduated from an advanced degree program and is seeking her first teaching position. Teaching and online technologies experience may vary, but often teaching experience is limited.

7. The Seeker is looking for a full time faculty position at a higher education institution. She perceives the adjunct position as a stepping-stone. Teaching and online technologies experience may vary.

8. The Retiree is a candidate who is seeking part time work. Teaching and online technologies experience may vary. This type of adjunct is another excellent resource, as the desire to teach is typically a chief motivator of the Retiree.

Each type of adjunct candidate will be motivated by some combination of personal and extrinsic factors. Many too will come with misconceptions or different expectations about

online teaching and learning, have experience teaching at other institutions, or approach the idea with curiosity and a guarded skepticism. The role of the manager/interviewer is to be prepared to answer questions, and create a set of expectations and standards about what distance learning means to the individual institution.

Screening and Hiring

There may be no "ideal" adjunct candidate. Yet, managers can make a list of instructor characteristics that are important to the institution and program, and then tailor interview questions to assess those characteristics. Scenario-based questions are especially helpful, as they encourage creativity and help the interviewer assess the candidate's ability to deal with problems as they arise - a critical skill in the distance learning environment. For example, in the community college distance learning setting, the nontraditional online learner is the majority of the student population. These students are older than the traditional 18-22 year old student and have a different set of work and personal obligations that may at times compromise or conflict with their academic pursuits. A question to assess the candidate's perceptions of the nontraditional learner will help the interviewer evaluate the candidate's willingness, patience and ability to manage the special circumstances of such students.

Screening adjunct instructors for distance learning delivery can be problematic. Whether it is a telephone interview for a "distant" candidate, or an in-person interview for a local candidate, it is imperative to employ some method of assessing online tone, grammar, and spelling. Email exchange exercises, conferencing software, or the use of the actual Learning Management System (LMS) to communicate with the candidate, as part of the screening process is invaluable. Participation in a one to two week screening course may also be useful to assess pre- and post-training online technologies competencies.

The decision to hire should culminate in an offer. A teaching contract may be presented. Since distance learning is a relatively new teaching and learning paradigm, a contract can help clarify instructional and technical expectations and standards for performance. A signed teaching contract assures awareness of the conditions of employment, and provides a legal stamp to the understanding. A teaching contract can especially help clarify expectations for student response time and instructor feedback.

Orientation and Training

An orientation program should immediately follow the hiring decision. An online program is preferable, and required, if the adjunct pool is comprised of any new hires who are not local to the institution. The purpose of the orientation program should be to acquaint and assimilate. Two national studies conducted in the 1990s revealed that both two and four-year colleges generally do a poor job of helping adjunct faculty to feel a part of the institutional environment (Gappa, 1983; Rouche, 1995).

Distance learning adjuncts, especially those who are physically removed, are particularly vulnerable to feeling disconnected from the institutional environment. The orientation program is the occasion to create an informative and welcoming experience for new adjuncts. The orientation must include information for administrative and technical support points of contact, an explanation of administrative procedures, instructional procedures, instructional requirements, technical requirements, technical resources for teaching online, curriculum processes, copyright guidelines, and standards and expectations for distance learning instruction. There should also be discussion of strategies for solving teaching

concerns, and strategies for teaching online. Problem-solving exercises and frequently asked questions are excellent resources.

For an online orientation, streaming video can be used to create a virtual walking tour of the institution, and virtual "meet and greets" with key support staff. Many programs issue a teaching handbook. This is an excellent resource, and can be placed on the web for access. If the institution offers an online training program and professional development series for online faculty, then adjunct faculty should be enrolled in these programs following the orientation. Some pedagogical training should complement basic technical training. For example, online or site-based workshops in topics such as building interactivity, online teaching and learning strategies, ADA-compliance and course design, and class management are essential. At the conclusion of the training, a process should be created to assess the learned competencies.

Building a Teaching Community

Adjunct faculty should not function in isolation. Adjunct faculty teaches 25-33 percent of the credit hours in the community college setting, making them an integral part of higher education (Roueche, 1995). Yet, sometimes the institutional climate and the nature of distance learning places adjunct faculty in a state of isolation. It is not uncommon for full time faculty to disregard adjunct faculty as being less than true academics. Further, some mainstream faculty still regards distance learning with skepticism, and adjunct faculty teaching distance learning may bear the brunt of these perceptions.

The management opportunity is to create collegial interactions between full and part time faculty that foster a teaching community – with quality instruction and learning outcomes as the central focus. The goal should be to build a community of online teachers that includes adjuncts and full time faculty. The best way to create a teaching community is to create collaborative opportunities for and interaction and professional exchange. The orientation program is an excellent opportunity to involve and invite full time faculty to share their expertise. Many institutions use mentoring programs to create a network of peer-based support for distance learning faculty. The value of creating mentoring interactions between full time faculty and adjuncts cannot be understated. The benefits are many: full time faculty become involved and active in the process of adjunct development, full time faculty builds respect and working relationships with adjunct faculty, adjunct faculty directly benefits from the knowledge and expertise of full time faculty, and adjunct faculty feel more involved and engaged.

Teaching community can be facilitated online or on-site. For distance learning faculty, the use of technology and web-based resources can mediate distance. "Online teaching communities" can be created as asynchronous forums within the LMS or as listservs to allow all faculty teaching online to communicate and share information, whether they are full or part time. "Online faculty lounges" can be created as a simple website with resources and interactive tools.

Evaluation

Faculty evaluation processes should be referenced during the interview and orientation periods. Performance evaluation is the capstone of quality instruction, courses and programs. The evaluation process must have purpose and structure. It must also incorporate a feedback loop, with formative and summative processes. Ideally, every class should be evaluated and

in fact, accreditation associations recommend this standard. However, insufficient support resources sometimes necessitate partial or rotating program evaluation.

There are two general forms of faculty performance evaluation: the student evaluation and the supervisor or administrative evaluation. We believe that the all instruments and processes for both types of evaluation should be the same as that used for full time faculty. For first time adjuncts, the evaluation process should be ongoing so that potential problems can be addressed immediately. The use of mentors can help ease the administrative burden on the program managers, yet program managers will find much time devoted to continuous evaluation and improvement.

Conclusions

"Adjunct faculty are increasingly important players in the teaching and learning process. It is in the college's best interest of appreciating the investment value of them, and ultimately in the interest of establishing and maintaining the college's reputation for teaching excellence" (Roueche et al, 1995, p. 120).

A comprehensive online adjunct recruitment and hiring process includes the sequential components of recruitment, screening, hiring, orientation, training, supervision, mentoring and evaluation. These components are most effective when designed with pragmatic analyses of existing support resources, and to fit the unique institutional environment. Increasing demand for online instructors can position the hiring department to obtain support and momentum for transforming institutional employment policies and procedures, including hiring and evaluation processes.

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