Basic Course Leadership: Operational Transparency as a Best Practice for Adjunct Faculty Management

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Research suggests adjunct faculty receive little institutional support and feel a sense of disconnection from their campuses. Nearly half of all faculty at American colleges and universities are classified as adjunct faculty in recent National Center for Educational Statistics reporting. Thus, academic departments should consider strategies to better include and engage adjunct faculty on their campuses. This article explores transparency as a best practice for the administration of communication basic courses at a mid-sized, regional university. Further, adjunct faculty members' perceptions of the basic course administrators' transparency will be discussed.

In the fall of 2017, 47% of the faculty across all U.S. colleges and universities held part-time appointments (NCES, 2018). The rise of contingent faculty, particularly adjunct faculty, in American higher education institutions is attributable to a number of reasons. Adjunct faculty are economical hires for universities experiencing budget constraints and declining state appropriations (Ochoa, 2012). Adjunct faculty receive lower salaries and most receive few, if any, paid benefits, which results in further savings for the university (AAUP, 2014b; Eagan, Jaeger, & Grantham, 2015). In addition, as universities compete for the smaller population of traditionally aged college students projected in the future, institutions may opt to allocate increased funds on non-academic expenditures, designed to attract more students (Jones, 2019). Further, rival for-profit institutions rarely hire tenure-track faculty, an option that may appeal to consumer-minded trustees at not-for-profit universities (Ochoa, 2012). A small number of universities may recruit and employ practitioners with specific expertise in their fields as part-time faculty, but the primary reason for the increase in adjunct faculty hires is financial (Eagan et al., 2015). Most adjunct faculty do not hold professional careers outside of their teaching responsibilities (AAUP, 2014a).

Despite their prominence in higher education, adjunct faculty receive little institutional support. Adjunct faculty are frequently excluded from participation in campus governance and often have insufficient office space or access to computer support (AAUP, 2014a). Further, adjunct faculty are less likely to engage in professional development or curriculum decisions (Eagan et al., 2015; Kezar & Sam, 2013). As a

result, adjunct faculty members often feel a sense of disconnection to their campuses (Kimmel & Fairchild, 2017). In many cases, adjunct and full-time faculty rarely interact with each other, thus creating a divide among all faculty characterized by rank (AAUP, 2014a).

This study explores adjunct faculty members' perceived level of engagement at a mid-sized, southern regional university. In addition, the study examines adjunct faculty members' level of satisfaction with their basic course directors' transparency as administrators. Specific strategies, such as including adjunct faculty in the assessment process, will be discussed. In addition, the authors offer suggestions for course directors, department chairs, and other administrators to better support and engage adjunct faculty on their campuses.

The Basic Course at Eastern Kentucky University

Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) is a mid-sized, southern regional university. The approximate enrollment of undergraduate students is 16,000 (EKU Factbook, 2018). At EKU, the basic communication course consists of one of two classes: Introduction to Human Communication, or Public Speaking. The Introduction to Human Communication class is a survey course, designed to introduce students to the foundations of the communication discipline. The class contains a small percentage (approximately 25%) of public speaking. The Public Speaking class, however, is a semester-long introduction to the components of rhetoric, speech design and construction, and different types of public speaking, such as informative, persuasive, and impromptu speaking. While the classes differ in content offered, they both introduce students to the basic components of the communication discipline, with the goal of improving students' oral communication competence. Completion of the basic communication course fulfills a general education requirement for EKU students.

The primary role of the communication basic course director(s) is to ensure continuity in teaching in these classes, as with approximately 27 sections with 28 students enrolled per semester, there are an estimated number of 1,500 students who enroll in the basic communication course at EKU annually. The two primary ways that the basic course directors ensure continuity in communication education are by creating a common "master" syllabus for the class, as well as choosing a common textbook that all students use in the communication class, regardless of instructor. By creating a common syllabus that includes policies, assignment descriptions, and information for each chapter, the basic course directors try to send the message to all students and faculty that "we are all in this together." While there is no way to account for variations in classroom instructors' teaching style, the basic course directors ensure that all students receive the same educational content on similar topics, as well as complete the same assignments (speeches) for general education course assessment. The basic course directors have also spent an inordinate amount of time researching textbook options, in order to locate one that covers all the important

material for the introduction to the discipline, and offers students options to read the text in an electronic format as well as a print version. The common textbook used by all sections of the basic course at EKU ensures that students are reading and learning about similar communication concepts, presented in one cohesive message. In addition, the basic course directors administer the collection and analysis of general education assessment data every two years. They are responsible for sharing the results with university officials and implementing meaningful change to improve student learning outcomes.

A secondary, but no less important role of the basic course director, is that of manager for the adjunct faculty. At EKU, basic course directors work under the direct supervision of the department chair, and are responsible for the various management and oversight functions for adjunct faculty. These duties include screening, interviewing, and hiring adjunct faculty; conducting classroom observations; providing teaching observations and feedback; and facilitating the resolution of grade disputes.

While the basic course directors do retain significant management and decision-making authority over the basic course, they are also cognizant of the academic credentials and professional experience of the adjunct faculty serving the department. The basic course directors also understand and strongly defend the value of academic freedom in the classroom. To this end, the basic course directors mindfully utilized elements of participatory management with the adjunct faculty in an effort to create a more transparent working environment.

By allowing the adjuncts to observe and participate in the inner workings of the decisions made by the basic course directors, the basic course directors anticipated an increase in adjunct faculty's levels of engagement with the department and the campus as a whole. Additionally, the course directors projected that the participatory nature of the course management operations would allow adjunct faculty to take ownership in the basic course administration process, rather than interpreting the recommendations of the basic course directors as simple mandates.

The basic course directors utilized several strategies to implement this approach. The first of these was to include the adjunct faculty in the use of assessment data to create targeted teaching strategies for our basic courses. Webb, Wong, and Hubball (2013) indicated that professional development opportunities for adjunct faculty "can enhance scholarly approaches to teaching and learning practices" (p. 231). Meixner, Kruck, and Madden (2010) reported that adjunct faculty desire the sharing of teaching strategies as a means of developing their own skills. Additionally, Strada, Kimmel, and Fairchild (2019) demonstrated that using basic course assessment data during instructor training can help instructors to identify deficiencies in instruction and create teaching strategies to mitigate those deficiencies. Upon presentation of the assessment data, adjunct faculty were encouraged to interpret their own results and were collectively asked to determine the teaching focuses for the next year.

This transparent approach not only created a learning opportunity for the instructors, but also allowed instructors to use their professional expertise to enhance the basic course, and hence, the potential learning outcomes for our students.

A second example of transparent management practices involved selecting new textbooks for adoption in the basic course. The basic course directors initially gathered adjunct feedback on the potential need to change textbooks. Once the decision to change was finalized, the adjunct faculty were invited to give feedback regarding the specific texts that would be adopted for the basic course. Similar to the creation of teaching strategies, the transparent approach to textbook selection allowed the adjuncts to share their professional expertise and to participate in the direction of the basic course.

Survey Results

To ascertain adjunct faculty members' perception of institutional support and transparency, the authors distributed a brief survey to twenty part-time adjunct faculty in the Department of Communication at EKU. The survey included six Likert-type questions and one open-ended question. No identifying information was collected and all responses were anonymous. Nine adjunct faculty members responded.

The questions included in the survey, along with frequency scores for each question, are included in Table 1.

While the survey responses generally indicated a level of institutional satisfaction among the adjunct faculty, the data suggest the quality of the relationship between adjunct faculty and their campuses could be improved. Two of the adjunct faculty members believed they did not have sufficient opportunities to engage with other faculty, which indicates some degree of isolation and disconnect. In addition, two of the respondents selected "neutral" when asked about the availability of professional development opportunities for adjunct faculty, which may suggest a sense of isolation or division among part-time and full-time faculty. This finding supports previous research that adjunct faculty feel "unwelcomed" or "lesser" on their campuses (AAUP 2014a; Kimmel & Fairchild, 2017).

Only four of the participants submitted qualitative comments with their survey responses. However, those responses were exclusively positive. For example, one participant wrote, "I've served at [institution name] in many adjunct roles, and [Communication Studies] does a good of job of communicating as I've seen. I'm always aware of changes, PD [professional development] opportunities, and anything else I need to know." Another respondent stated, "I have always felt welcome in this department and any time I've ever had concerns I have gotten thorough, thoughtful and timely responses."

Table 1. Adjunct Survey Data

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I feel a sense of connection to my university.	1		1	3	4
I have ample opportunity to engage with other faculty.	1	1		6	1
I feel as though professional development opportunities are available to me as an adjunct.			2	3	4
I feel the basic course directors are accessible and communicative.				2	7
The basic course directors actively seek my input for decisions regarding the instruction and delivery of the basic course.			1	5	3
The basic course directors are transparent in their decision-making processes.				5	4

Discussion/Conclusion

The authors' research has led us to believe that utilizing transparent management practices with adjuncts can effectively contribute to adjunct engagement, and transitively, potentially enhance student learning outcomes. Meixner et al. (2010) indicated part-time faculty felt satisfied if full-time faculty and administrators "took the time to engage with them, if even for 5 minutes a week" (p. 146). In addition to the previously discussed strategies, there are many cost-effective ways to engage adjuncts in this manner. For example, mentoring programs that are designed primarily for part-time faculty would be one way to engage adjunct faculty on their campuses, as well as providing them an opportunity to listen and learn from other faculty. These informal discussions also allow part-time faculty time to voice their opinions and concerns. Furthermore, institutions can host more formal opportunities for full-time and part-time faculty to connect, share ideas, and learn from each other what the purpose of the basic communication course is, and how everyone can fulfill a role in making the courses successful. There are also many cost-effective opportunities for informal and casual gatherings on campus. For example, faculty can regularly schedule "brown-bag luncheons," where all faculty may come together for socializing as well as brainstorming about classroom issues. In addition, the basic course directors or other campus administrators could hold "drop-in office hours," in an on-campus coffee shop or in the library, and adjunct faculty could meet at a time convenient for them. This type of gathering would give adjunct faculty a

chance to speak informally with campus leaders in a non-threatening, casual environment. Any opportunities where adjuncts may participate and feel like they are members of the campus community could potentially increase transparency, with the hopes of increased student learning as the outcome. The college in which the Communication Department is a member sponsored a part-time faculty appreciation day during the previous academic year, which is a small gesture that pays dividends in goodwill and shows the adjunct faculty on campus that their contributions in the classroom are appreciated.

In conclusion, research suggests that adjunct faculty receive little institutional support and feel a sense of disconnection from their campuses. Given that adjunct faculty compose nearly half of all faculty members at American colleges and universities (NCES, 2018), academic departments should consider strategies to better include and engage adjunct faculty on their campuses. Transparency in basic course leadership can be a best practice for the administration of communication basic courses at universities similar to EKU. Many of the transparency behaviors that the basic course leadership have adopted or plan to implement are low-cost, low-risk, yet high reward, and can be implemented to improve the experience of adjunct instructors not just in the Department of Communication, but across campus as well.

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