Supporting online adjunct faculty through building community

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Abstract: When programs grow, institutions may need to rely on adjunct faculty. When these adjuncts are working in an online learning environment, training them to address students' needs and teach content as competently as full-time faculty can be a challenge. A variety of strategies have been implemented to build a team of adjunct faculty who are trained specifically for the online learning environment. These strategies emphasize valuing, training, and building community for adjunct faculty.

Introduction

In 2011, adjunct faculty comprised 50% of the total faculty in United States degree-granting institutions, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2013). With enrollment in higher education continuing to increase, (Caruth & Caruth, 2013), institutions will continue to employ adjunct faculty in order to provide adequate staffing (Hoyt, 2012). In fact, since 1976, there has been an 86% increase in adjunct faculty employment (Caruth & Caruth, 2013). Higher education benefits from adjunct faculty because these educators are part-time employees hired as needed (Caruth & Caruth, 2013), highly qualified (Morton, 2012), but cost less than full-time professors (Dolan, 2011), and bring real-world perspectives and experience to students (Caruth & Caruth, 2013).

Flexibility in scheduling adjuncts (Dolan, 2011) enables institutions to handle increasing enrollment while still providing quality educational experiences to students. Therefore, one would imagine a supportive environment for these instructors within the institution. However, adjunct faculty typically do not receive professional development (Komos, 2013; Morton, 2012), health insurance or benefits (Caruth & Caruth, 2013), recognition for quality work (Dolan, 2011), or opportunities to network with full-time professors (Durso, 2011).

In a grounded theory qualitative research study, Dolan (2011) interviewed 28 adjunct faculty members to determine their perceptions regarding institutional affiliation. During the interviews, the adjunct faculty reported that (among other things) they "did not see themselves as part of a team working with a common vision and goal" (p. 70). When adjunct faculty do not feel supported or respected as contributing members of an institution, retaining quality adjuncts becomes even more challenging (e.g., Dolan, 2011). It is imperative that higher education administrators understand the value of cultivating adjunct faculty (Hoyt, 2012) as this growing body of educators directly affects the university mission and student and institutional success (Caruth & Caruth, 2013).

Create Opportunities to Foster a Sense of Belonging

In online learning environments, technology-based communication alone is not enough for adjuncts to feel like a supported valuable part of the university culture (Dolan, 2011). According to research, administrators must purposely work to create a sense of belonging by implementing a variety of strategies such as invitations to meetings

(e.g., Bergmann, 2011; Caruth & Caruth, 2013; Hoyt, 2012), departmental and college activities (Bergmann, 2011), and social events (Dolan, 2011; Morton, 2012). Including adjunct faculty in relevant departmental meetings and activities, administrators send the message that the adjunct is an appreciated member of the team (Morton, 2012), which can result in a sense of belonging and personal value (Dolan, 2011). Activities that encourage adjunct faculty to interact with full time faculty and other adjunct faculty can facilitate feelings of collegiality. For adjuncts, these feelings indicate that the administrator respects and values their contribution (Eagan et al., 2015).

Small efforts such as providing some office space or business cards can help promote a sense of community (Caruth & Caruth, 2013). Other options for building community with adjuncts include providing opportunities to serve on committees (Hoyt, 2012), recognizing quality work (Caruth & Caruth, 2013; Morton, 2012), and providing consistent and frequent feedback (Dolan, 2011; Durso, 2011; Komos, 2013). Dolan (2011) explained that for adjunct faculty to gain a sense of affiliation "a high level of contact is required between management and employees, as well as between employees and their peers" (p. 66). Administrators can accomplish this by assigning a faculty mentor (Bergmann, 2014; Caruth & Caruth, 2013; Hoyt, 2012; Komos, 2013; Williamson, 2014), sending frequent emails (Durso, 2011), providing information on best practices (Dolan, 2011), asking for input regarding decisions and planning (Hoyt, 2012), and giving feedback on performance (Komos, 2013; Williamson, 2014).

In fact, research indicates that recognition for quality work is vital for adjuncts to feel encouraged and motivated to persist (e.g., Dolan, 2011; Komos, 2013; Morton, 2012; Santisteban & Egues, 2014). Through Dolan's (2011) study, adjunct faculty suggested the creation of social networking opportunities so that all supervisors could share ideas, provide mutual support, and even discuss things outside of academia.

The graduate programs in the College of Education have shown exponential growth over the course of the past seven years. The courses offered by one of the departments at this regional institution are all eight weeks and completely online. The number of the students in any one class can range from 30 students to over 100. To maintain personal attention and a variety of instructor experiences for the students, adjunct faculty have been hired to help lead professors within the courses different courses. A variety of strategies have been implemented to build a team of adjunct faculty who are trained for the online learning environment. Adjuncts must be able to address any issues in class immediately since the course sessions are only 8-weeks. Each long semester has two 8-week sessions and the summer has one 8-week session. Meeting students' needs promptly is the priority of the department, so that students do not miss time on task.

Team

Each member of the adjunct faculty team needs to know that they are valued. They directly interact with the students most often, so their insight concerning course content, student progress, and teaching strategies is invaluable. A Google Form has been developed in an effort to collect data from the adjuncts related to specific courses and assignments. Questions on the form request their perspectives concerning the best student examples, students who struggled, if the assignment demonstrated mastery of the identified objective, and if the resources provided the necessary information for the students to be successful. Adjuncts are asked to complete the brief form each week while their ideas and opinions are fresh and specific.

Department-wide group meetings at the beginning of each session help with the implementation of strategies for team building, training, and community. A minimum of two adjuncts is typically assigned to a course. These adjuncts will meet with the lead professor of a course at the beginning of long sessions. If adjuncts are unable to attend in person, then they will attend via videoconference. However, the value of this meeting is shown in the number of adjuncts who will travel from out of town to attend. Camaraderie is developed during this initial meeting and a working collaboration of communication is established from the start of the session.

To continue this open communication among the adjuncts in a course, they are encouraged to share communication. The lead professor will start by modeling appropriate communication and copying all of the adjuncts. As the term continues, adjuncts are given more responsibility for communication within the course. They will respond to questions from students and may send out class-wide announcements on a rotating basis.

Training

Each semester when the adjuncts attend the course meetings, they are also offered a general meeting where they learn how to use the general tools in each course. Any course-specific tools are addressed in the individual course group meetings.

In addition to the meetings, each course includes a hidden tab that is only accessible to the instructors. Within this tab, the lead instructors have placed sample emails and announcements to encourage communication between adjunct instructors and students. Examples of each assignment to demonstrate expectations have also been included. These may include assignments that are of high caliber, so adjuncts are able to determine exceptional work, but may also include assignments that do not meet the expectations.

Lead instructors also send information that is specific to certain modules within a course. This information may include suggestions for assignments, reminders for due dates, or such details that need to be emphasized based on previous experiences.

Community

Focusing on one course at a time for adjuncts can be isolating. To address this isolation, both lead professors and adjunct instructors were enrolled in a Blackboard organization specific to meeting the needs of all those employed by the department. Many of the resources used during the general training meetings are stored in the organization so that adjuncts can review the information as needed throughout the term.

Using the tools available in the Blackboard organization, weekly announcements are sent focusing on any issues that may have appeared. In addition to the information, these announcements are also used to spotlight an individual adjunct each week. These spotlights help the adjuncts get to know more than just each other's names, as it includes personal details such as hobbies, family, and future goals.

Within the instructor organization, a discussion cafe has been included. The department employs about 50 adjuncts for every 8-week session. The discussion cafe helps the adjuncts stay in contact without worrying about trying to keep up with all of the different emails. They are also able to share other local community information such as seminars that may be helpful for others on the team.

In addition to the general meeting and individual meetings at the beginning of the sessions, social events have been planned for the end of each long semester. The end of any session can be fast-paced and stressful, so a more relaxed event has been planned for the end of the semester. Rather than overwhelming everyone's schedule every session, the general meeting is only held at the first of each long semester and the social event is at the end of each long semester.

The authors have provided a variety of strategies implemented to meet the needs of adjuncts for this proposal. The paper will address the lessons learned through the implementation of these strategies.

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