Retaining Quality Adjunct Faculty thru Faculty-led Mentoring

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Abstract

Social work programs are challenged to provide students with access to foundation and practice level courses and to an array of electives. Full-time, tenure track faculty cannot meet this challenge alone while fulfilling all the obligations of a university citizen associated with scholarship, service, and teaching. Therefore adjunct faculty are selected to bring valuable skills and expertise, from their social work practice, to the classroom and in so doing fill the gaps left by fulltime faculty.

The Challenge

As higher education budgets dwindle and enrollments rise, there has been an increasing need for adjuncts (Fagan-Wilen, Springer, Ambrosion, & White, 2006; Puzziferro-Schnitzer & Kissinger, 2005; Richardson, Alfano, Gerda, & Moos, 2007; Winn & Armstrong, 2005). This increasing use of adjuncts poses questions of cost and quality (Bettinger & Long, 2006).   Adjuncts are generally considered to be 80% less expensive than full-time tenured faculty; with some programs saving over $300,000 on average by using adjuncts in one academic year (Spalter-Roth & Erskine, 2004).

Even though adjuncts provide a valuable service to the institution and to students, there are challenges when they are in the classroom. Often adjuncts do not see the school's mission, curricular mandates, and institutional concerns as relevant to their role (Petersen, 2005; Garii & Pertersen, 2005).   They prefer "to maintain their pristine role solely in the classroom" (Petersen, 2005, p. 12) thus they are separated from the accountability to curriculum mandates associated with competencies and outcomes. They may "lack the teaching skills and teaching experience required in the classroom" (Banachowski, 1996, p.7). Likewise, adjuncts may not incorporate new teaching pedagogies and as such rely on outdated methods. Sometimes they are viewed by students as not having an understanding of the school's program, as being unavailable (Atkinson, 1996), and as easy graders (Fagan-Wilen, et al., 2006; Petersen, 2005; Umbach, 2007).   They lack the understanding of the integrity of curriculum design and are less interested in theory application and knowledge integration than they are about specific practice applications (Petersen, 2005; Garii & Petersen, 2005).

The Solution

"If good teaching that produces evidence of the student learning is to be anything other than random, institutional policies must deliberately support the development of the teacher" (Peterson, 2007, p.49). "Adjuncting" is the future and adjuncts continue to be needed (Atkinson, 1996).

As such, various models have been developed to respond to the needs and concerns of adjuncts. Including mentoring programs of various kinds (i.e. peer mentoring, feminist co-mentoring, virtual mentoring, minority mentoring) training programs, in-service trainings, adjunct faculty handbooks, newsletters, video tapes of instructional issues orientation programs, brown-bag luncheons, and social programs, adjunct faculty liaisons, facilitator development programs, consortiums, blended learning programs, team-led mentoring, one-to-one partnerships, and many others (Lyons & Kysilka, 2000; Richardson, et al., 2007; West, 2004; Winn & Armstrong, 2005; Yee, 2007). Some of these programs offer additional incentives for adjunct faculty members to participate (Winn & Armstrong, 2005).

Success and effective use of adjuncts rests on mentoring and valuing adjuncts (Lyons, 2007). Administrators must help adjuncts 1) familiarize themselves with the university and program, 2) learn about aspects of effective teaching, and 3) explore scholarship and career opportunities (Peters & Boylston, 2006). The benefits will vary but ultimately it will create a connection to the program and the adjunct will feel valued.

The Program

Faculty at a large mid-western university with an enrollment of over 850 MSW students embarked on a mentoring initiative in early January of 2007. The initiative paired 11 full-time faculty with adjuncts to aid in course preparation, program and curricular familiarization, and support as they taught the same courses as full-time faculty. Some features of the program were:

Mentors met regularly with adjuncts,

Provided syllabi,

Trained in web-based class management software and classroom management,

Developed and graded assignments, and

Developed grading rubrics for assignment assessment.

The Results

To date the program has been successful in creating course consistencies by recruiting and retaining a cadre of 30 adjuncts per year, in practice, theory, and various course electives. Adjuncts not suited for teaching are more quickly identified. Initial qualitative findings indicate that adjuncts think the school is providing more support in regards to their teaching role; they have a greater identification with the program; and have a better understanding of how to grade assignments and where their courses fit into the curriculum. Although not all full-time faculty are comfortable with the role of mentor, many have embraced adjuncts as members of the faculty. As a result students are more satisfied with their adjuncts.