An Evaluation of the Experiences and Needs of Adjunct Faculty at a Midwest Community College

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Abstract: In the fall of 2009 a focus group-based evaluation of 12 adjunct faculty members at a Midwestern community college was conducted. Three primary themes of Communication, Technology, and Institutional Environment were found to have a significant impact on the experiences of the faculty members. Based on these findings five specific recommendations were made.

Introduction

At the request of the Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning, at a Midwest Community College, we conducted a focus group evaluation of the experiences and needs of adjunct faculty members. Two focus groups were conducted. The data was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed, resulting in the findings and recommendations in this report.

The first focus group was conducted at a secondary campus on Tuesday evening November 17, 2009. Four adjunct faculty members attended and participated in the first focus group. The second focus group was conducted on Saturday morning November 21, 2009 at the main campus. Eight adjunct faculty members attended and participated in the second focus group. The courses taught by these adjunct faculty include the following: Accounting, Business Administration, Composition, Economics, English Literature, Health Science, Human Resource Management, Medical Assistant, Music Appreciation, Psychology and Sociology. The tenure with the college for the twelve adjunct faculty members ranged from four months to twenty years. The focus groups were semi-structured with questions including, but not limited to, the following: How would you describe the communication you receive from the college as an institution?; How do you receive information from the college?; What is your experience with using technology in the classroom?; What type of evaluation or feedback do you receive about your teaching?; How has the Center for Teaching and Learning been helpful or supportive of your teaching?; What can the Center for Teaching and Learning be supportive of your teaching in the future? The data generated in response to these questions resulted in three major themes, Communication, Technology and Institutional Environment, each with sub-themes, that were present in the experiences of the adjunct faculty members in this evaluation. These themes are identified and described here:
Communication

Institutional Communication

All of the adjunct instructors in this evaluation said that the majority of the communication they receive from the college comes via email. They feel that this is an effective form of communication for them and are supportive of this remaining the primary form in the future.

Program Chairs

The majority of institutional communication, feedback and support for adjunct faculty came through their respective program chairs. More communication occurred between the adjuncts and their program chairs than with any other institutional employee. However, the amount of support the adjuncts felt, and the quality of the support, feedback and communication they received from the program chairs varied greatly. Some adjuncts sang the praises of their program chairs and felt high levels of support, while others expressed concern about the level of support they felt from their program chairs, with one even voicing a feeling of “abandonment.”

Ten of the twelve adjunct faculty members in this evaluation reported experiences of having their teaching evaluated by their respective program chairs. Like their experience of support and communication, the quality of the feedback received from these teaching evaluations varied greatly. Some adjuncts felt their program chairs used the evaluations to offer support and constructive feedback, while others either received no feedback from the evaluations or felt the feedback was not helpful in developing them as teachers.

Technology

Technology in the Classroom

Several of these adjunct faculty members in this evaluation taught online courses for the college, but even in their live “face-to-face” courses their use of technology was widespread, though not universal. The primary technologies used in classrooms include:

- laptop computers and projectors
- TVs, DVD and video players
- Sound systems and speakers
- PowerPoint
- Numerous Internet sites
- Blackboard

Location and familiarity influenced the use of technology. The newer secondary campuses received high marks from the adjunct faculty in terms of the availability of technology and ease of use of technology. The lack of infrastructure support for technology on the main campus was also noted by the adjunct faculty. Hence, the adjunct faculty members reported higher rates of use of technology on the secondary campuses than on the main campus. Two of the adjunct faculty members in this evaluation reported using little or no technology in their classes. The reasons given for this lack of use were a lack of familiarity with what technologies are available and inexperience in using the technologies.
Teaching Online/Internet Courses

Several, though not all, of the adjunct faculty members in this evaluation have experience teaching online courses. All online courses taught for the college by these adjunct faculty members was taught using “Blackboard” course management software. Those who teach online must finish a six week training program in using the Blackboard software system prior to being allowed to teach online. All of these adjunct faculty members found the training program to be valuable and encourage the continuation of its use.

Of the adjunct faculty members who teach online courses, several expressed frustration at the “canned” nature of the courses. Apparently, all of the teaching materials and evaluative assignments in online courses are standardized and pre-loaded into the online courses. The adjunct faculty members feel constrained and restricted by having all of these materials and assignments pre-loaded into their online courses. The adjunct faculty members viewed this as a threat to their own academic freedom to construct the courses as they feel will best serve the learning needs of their students. They also see this as hypocritical when viewed in contrast to the freedom they have to develop their live “face-to-face” courses. One suggestion that several members of the second focus group voiced support for was to continue with all the standard materials already pre-loaded in the courses, but allow the instructors to add their own materials to their online courses to tailor it to the teaching style of the individual instructors and the learning needs of their students.

Another frustration voiced by the adjunct faculty members about online teaching was the lack of preparedness of many of their students taking online courses. Several said they used what they felt was an inordinate amount of time at the beginning of each semester teaching students how to use Blackboard, rather than teaching course content. The adjunct faculty members felt that a potential solution was to require students wishing to take an online course to take a training session, like faculty must do, prior to participating in an online course.

Training for Technology Use

As noted above, those adjunct faculty members who participated in the Blackboard training program felt it was useful. Nearly all of the adjunct faculty members said they would value the opportunity for more training, especially training about the availability and use of technology. While there was strong agreement about the value of this potential training, there was equally strong disagreement about the preferred format and times for delivery of this training. There was strong support for all of the suggested formats: Live training programs on weekday evenings and during weekdays, weekend training programs, and online training programs. Perhaps a solution to this dilemma is to offer training programs in multiple formats and at multiple times.

Another issue that divided the adjunct faculty members in this evaluation was the best method to motivate adjuncts to participate in more training. Many said that they would participate in the training simply for the internal motivator of becoming a better teacher, without any external rewards, while many others said that they would need some sort of external motivator to participate. None of the suggestions for external motivators was large, though, ranging from making the training sessions more social to small monetary incentives.

Also noted above, the adjunct faculty members feel that a required training program for students before they are allowed to take online courses would be beneficial.
Institutional Environment

Student Learning Needs

A recurring theme in both focus groups was a high sense of commitment on the part of the adjunct faculty members to meet the learning needs of their respective students. However, a parallel experience of the adjunct faculty members was perceived frequent institutional barriers that interfere with their abilities to meet their students’ learning needs. Some of the barriers cited by the adjunct faculty members included: “canned” online courses, institutional policies (like large class sizes), and institutional politics. This last barrier is especially frustrating to the adjunct faculty members. They recognize that since they are not full-time faculty members they may not fully understand the institutional politics, but they see the politics interfering with their students’ learning experiences and feel frustrated that they cannot intervene on their students’ behalf. Some of the adjunct faculty members in this evaluation felt threatened by full-time faculty members when attempting to intervene on behalf of some students.

Sense of Security

A sense of vulnerability permeated both focus groups. While not a universal experience, several adjunct faculty members voiced a fear of reprisal if they complained or questioned anything. The level of this sense of vulnerability seemed to vary with the importance of the pay received from this adjunct position. For those who are not dependent on their adjunct pay for basic living expenses, their voiced sense of vulnerability was low. For those who are dependent on their adjunct pay for basic living expenses, their voiced level of anxiety and sense of vulnerability was high. The two identified sources of this sense of vulnerability were full-time faculty, who one adjunct faculty member in this evaluation termed “intimidating,” and the program chairs, from whom some adjunct faculty members felt an implied threat that they may not be rehired in future semesters if they “rock the boat.”

Sense of Community

“Isolated” was a term that was heard frequently in both focus groups. Many of the adjunct faculty members in this evaluation voiced a desire for more opportunities to meet, get to know, socialize with, and share ideas with other faculty members, both adjunct and full-time. While acknowledging that this could occur informally, many adjuncts felt that if this was institutionally facilitated more faculty would participate. Several of the long-term adjunct faculty members in these focus groups lamented the loss of the training program formerly sponsored by the Center for Teaching and Learning in the afternoon prior to adjunct faculty orientation sessions prior to each semester. Those who experienced these training programs found them to be informative, but also an opportunity to meet and socialize with other adjunct faculty members.

Recommendations

While a careful reader, no doubt, noticed a few recommendations imbedded in the themes reported above, we are including specific recommendations here, both earlier identified and new (to follow), in an easy list format:

1. We recommend that the Community College use the information from this focus group evaluation to develop a survey that can be administered to all of the adjunct faculty in the region to get a broader understanding of the experiences and needs of its adjunct faculty.
2. Training currently provided by the Center for Teaching and Learning, especially training for technology use, is valued by adjunct faculty members and should be continued and perhaps enhanced in the future. The possibility of combining training programs with other opportunities for socialization among adjunct faculty members should be considered, thus enhancing the development of a sense of community for adjunct faculty members and decreasing their sense of isolation.

3. Allow faculty teaching online courses, both adjunct and full-time, more freedom in organizing and teaching their courses. This would only make teaching online courses consistent with teaching live “face-to-face” courses.

4. If not already available, the college should consider developing and requiring student training in the use of Blackboard prior to allowing students to take online courses.

5. The role of Program Chair appears to be the tie that most closely binds the adjunct faculty member to the institution, but it also appears to be its weakest link. The wide variability of experiences these twelve adjunct faculty members had with their respective Program Chairs demonstrates that this is the point at which the institution is most vulnerable in its relationship with adjunct faculty members. A review of policy and procedures in how Program Chairs work with adjunct faculty members may be in order. A training program for Program Chairs in working with and supporting adjunct faculty members may be needed.

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