A Model for Continuous Training and Mentoring of Adjunct Business Faculty

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ABSTRACT

As colleges and universities face increasing pressure to increase revenue and lower costs, adjunct and contingent instructors are being employed on a wider basis. Research indicates that these instructors consistently identify a need for continuous training and mentoring, particularly for courses taught online or at a distance. Regional and business school accreditation also requires sufficient training of part-time instructors. Elements of a successful training and mentoring program for such instructors include goal focus, accessibility, expert mentor leadership, interactive community building, and adequate administrative support. In this analysis, a discipline-specific program model for ongoing training and mentoring of adjunct business faculty is proposed. The program model employs an online platform for ongoing, two-way communication between department chairs or program coordinators, full-time faculty members, course developers, and adjunct instructors. The program is designed to be accessible to instructors regardless of their delivery mode: traditional face-to-face, accelerated face-to-face, distance, or online faculty. It also provides a platform for distribution of assessment materials as well as submission of required assessment instruments and related data.

Keywords: Instructor training; faculty mentoring; distance learning; assessment.

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Increasing financial pressure on institutions of higher education has created a growing need for the use of adjunct faculty. It is now not unusual for part-time instructors to outnumber full-time university faculty, and adjunct faculty have become a majority at many community colleges and institutions with large distance programs. U.S. Department of Education data from 2003 indicate that approximately 46 percent of all college faculty members are part time, and for community colleges, the proportion is an estimated 67 percent (Schmidt, 2008). It is estimated that as much as 75 percent of credit hours are taught by community college adjuncts (Selingo, 2008).

Yet adjunct faculty may not be given adequate support in pursuing faculty development activities, and the integration of adjunct faculty into the campus culture may be lacking. In a survey of several hundred adjunct faculty in eastern Kentucky, it was found that less than half felt adequately supported in assistance and professional development opportunities, and approximately as many felt they were not perceived as part of the campus community and were not respected by salaried faculty and administrators (Louis, 2009).

Schools of business are no exception to this trend. Because many business degree programs are relatively large and business degrees are often offered at a distance and online, business schools tend to rely heavily on part-time instruction. To address concerns related to the growing reliance on part-time faculty, this analysis outlines five elements of a successful discipline-specific continuous training and mentoring program for adjunct business faculty regardless of their role as distance or traditional face-to-face instructors. A model for an online module designed to provide continuous instructor training and mentoring is then proposed.

THE NEED FOR CONTINUOUS ADJUNCT TRAINING AND MENTORING PROGRAMS

Most studies of training for adjuncts focus on formalized technology training for distance faculty, particularly those teaching online, since these faculty members often are part-time instructors. However, distance programs may also include training in the building of learning communities, online learning theory and strategy, instructional design, course development, online facilitation, and course administration (Blignaut and Trollip, 2003). The technical nature of online delivery necessitates initial training, which often takes the form of faculty workshops for course development or instruction in course management software such as Blackboard, Angel, WebCT, or eCollege. Yet the pressing need for additional institutional support in the form of increased training and course development assistance was consistently found in an in-depth analysis of the research on online teaching (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). In spite of this expressed need, a report from the National Center for Educational Statistics points out that only 60 percent of higher education institutions had programs offering faculty training for distance education in the late 1990s (Lewis and Farris, 1997). In a more recent study of 61 AACSB-accredited institutions providing distance education, it was discovered that 63 percent of the faculty reported having no formal training and were self-taught in distance education delivery (Perreault, Waldman, & Zhao, 2002). Only 31 percent of these faculty members reported that their schools offered mentoring or coaching-type training.

Studies of training for distance educators also cite a need for training and mentoring available on a continuous basis. In a survey of 35 faculty teaching online at two-year colleges,

Pankowski (2004) found that four major components of a successful training program should include not only technical training, pedagogical training, and online coursework, but also ongoing mentoring. In that study, faculty participants in focus groups also expressed a need for mentoring as a type of training and a means of learning best practices. According to Pankowski, in the absence of formal mentoring, "many of these faculty said that, without the assistance of a particular colleague, they doubt that they would have continued to teach online" (p. 4). To identify the type of education, assistance, and support needed for distance education delivery, a survey of 207 faculty and 30 administrators in a Midwestern university was conducted by Rockwell, Schauer, Fritz, and Marx (2000). Although not ranked at the highest level of importance, results indicated that faculty with less than 10 years of experience specifically should be targeted to provide assistance with connections for peer support, among many other items. Peer support included peer feedback and working with a mentoring faculty partner. Roman, Kelsey, and Lin (2010) also studied the effectiveness of an online preparation training program and found that support mechanisms after the training should be emphasized for program success.

Mentoring of part-time faculty by full-time faculty and community building between the two groups may also be necessary to more fully integrate adjuncts into the academic environment. Tensions between full- and part-time faculty are cited by Maria Schnitzer, instructional program manager for distance learning at Florida Community College at Jacksonville (Lorenzetti, 2003). In that institution's mentoring program, one goal is to promote inclusion of online adjunct instructors into the college community through breaking down barriers between those instructors and the full-time faculty. This is necessitated by the insulation of adjuncts from campus concerns, as well as possible full-time faculty resentment toward online instructors. John S. Levin, Director of the California Community College Collaborative, states that when part-time faculty are heavily relied upon, "it is difficult to have a coherent academic culture" of people working together within departments (Schmidt, 2008, p. 3).

Besides the need for support expressed by the faculty members themselves and the institutions in which they teach, the need for continuous training and mentoring has become mandatory under regional and business school accreditation rules. For instance, the Higher Learning Commission, a large regional accrediting body, requires that an institution "has a process for assuring that faculty members are current in their disciplines" (2010). The Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs' (ACBSP) Criterion 5.7.2 requires that a business program "must provide an opportunity for faculty and staff development consistent with faculty, staff, and institutional needs and expectations. Part-time faculty should participate in appropriate faculty development activities" (ACBSP, 2010, p. 35).

All available evidence suggests a void often exists in the training and mentoring of adjuncts. Thus what is needed at most business schools is a means to facilitate part-time faculty access to information necessary to improve teaching and learning, and to promote interaction with their peers and the full-time faculty through a formal mentoring process that is easily and continuously accessible to all regardless of status. A program designed to meet these requirements could be achieved at any of four administrative levels: the college, the department (which could comprise several disciplines), the discipline, or the specific course. This study focuses on the discipline as the level for program distribution to ensure that discipline-specific procedures and unique pedagogical issues are addressed. However, the model could be readily adapted for a college, department, or course level version. The program includes the continuous delivery of an online module using the institution's course management software platform.

ELEMENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL DISCIPLINE-SPECIFIC CONTINUOUS TRAINING AND MENTORING PROGRAM

A successful program for continuous training and mentoring must include a strategy incorporating the following five basic elements: goal focus, expert mentor leadership, accessibility, interactive community building, and adequate administrative support.

Goal Focus

Before a training and mentoring program is devised, the goals of the program must be clearly defined with input from the stakeholders involved, including administration and both full- and part-time faculty. Program goals may encompass a focus on the understanding and development of curriculum content, teaching strategies, dissemination of information on guidelines and procedures, providing advice and feedback on pedagogical issues, creating a forum for faculty peer discussion, and devising a means of distribution and collection of assessment materials. Well defined goals lead naturally to related choices such as the proper administrative level for program delivery or the assignment of program leadership.

Accessibility

A continuous training and mentoring program will succeed only if it is easily accessible to all instructors, regardless of their contingency status or their teaching mode—face-to-face on a home or main campus, face-to-face at distant satellite campuses, or online—and if it meets the needs of diverse recipients. Widespread participation in the program requires such ease of accessibility and flexibility. Feist (2003) found that instructors preferred professional development opportunities that they could use immediately or were related to a current project, fit into their busy schedules, and had built-in follow-up procedures. Savage, Karp, and Logue (2004) advocate a mentorship program that is flexible, allowing for individual preferences. Because online course management platforms are typically established and made available to instructors in all modes for grading and distribution of course materials, an online module could provide a means of relatively easy access to training and mentoring available on a widespread and continuous basis. However, some instructors may require initial training in the course management software, so an initiation process must be provided by the institution.

Expert Mentor Leadership

A necessary condition for a mentoring program's success is the designation of an expert leader or leaders and a definition of the role of such leaders. A conceptual framework of faculty mentoring devised by Lottero-Perdue and Fifield (2010) includes an "actions" dimension describing mentor actions in the mentoring relationship or program. Mentor actions include collaboration, sharing of information, teaching observation, giving advice and feedback, offering encouragement and celebrating successes, being accessible and available, modeling good practices, and facilitating networking. All of these actions would be necessary for a successful adjunct group mentoring program delivered in an online module.

Program leadership could be assigned to a chair, program director/coordinator, or course developer, or the program could include a variety of these. Feist (2003) found that instructors

particularly wanted programs that included leadership from the program chair for professional development and information on available resources. Program directors of distance programs typically have frequent contact with instructors and already may be mentoring part-time faculty on an informal basis. If the program is designed on a course-specific level, a course developer or assigned course leader could most effectively address concerns relevant to requirements of a specific course.

Interactive Community Building

Although expert leadership forms the foundation of a successful training and mentoring program, there is need for establishment of interactive community building to bridge the communication gap between full- and part-time faculty and to create a mechanism for peer support. Group mentoring, as defined by Lottero-Perdue and Fifield (2010), consists of many faculty members forming a mentoring community, while peer mentoring involves those of a similar status exchanging experiences, ideas, and concerns. Both forms of mentoring could be used effectively in an online module that incorporates discussion boards for conversation and information exchange. In an evaluation of a six-week online training program, Roman, Kelsey, and Lin (2010) found that a majority of faculty in the program identified the discussion board as an effective means of communication with instructors and peer participants. The online mode would also provide a flexible format for participation that fits into the busy work schedules of faculty.

Adequate Administrative Support

A successful training and mentoring program must be backed by administrative support, including adequate funding and dedicated resources as well as encouragement. As Instructional Program Manager Maria Schnitzer has pointed out, the development of part-time faculty is ultimately the institution's responsibility (Lorenzetti 2003). In a responsibility matrix for e-learning stakeholders devised by Wagner, Hassanein, and Head (2008), the institution has responsibility to instructors to provide training in instructional design and technology as well as to enforce standardization of courses. In addition, the institution bears responsibility for adherence to accreditation standards and to provide evidence of quality assurance. Since adjunct training can facilitate assessment required by accreditation, it is in the best interest of the administration to develop and promote formal training and mentoring programs.

Of course, budgetary constraints may hinder such program development, so creative solutions to funding may be required. When the University of North Texas recognized the growing need for faculty support and training, it established the Center for Distributed Learning with a unique self-sustaining funding model in which the university's colleges receive a returned percentage of distant learners' tuition, and they have discretion to expend these funds for distance-learning activities such as travel, hiring, etc. (Huett, Moller, & Young, 2004). The Center then takes 13 percent of the returned tuition to fund its operations.

Budgetary restrictions plus an emphasis on return-on-investment measures may also hinder an emphasis on learning outcome success (Wagner et al., 2008). Institutions may view the use of part-time instructors as merely a cost-saving measure, or distance education may be promoted as a revenue generator, and learning enrichment may be devalued. It then becomes the accrediting body's responsibility to ensure that institutions create curricular consistency and

provide evidence of student learning outcome attainment through appropriate assessment. A training and mentoring program would support curricular consistency by ensuring that part-time instructors understand assessment criteria, follow guidelines, and properly submit assessment materials.

Because training is a time-demanding activity, processes to adjust faculty workloads to allow training are needed (Rockwell et al.,1999). This is true not only for trainers and mentors but also trainees and mentees. Adequate release time or compensation would ensure that participation occurs on a continuous basis.

Finally, the administration can encourage program development by creating a culture of inclusion in which adjunct and contingent faculty are viewed as a crucial element in the attainment of the university's goals. By recognizing adjunct faculty needs for mentoring, peer support, and community building, the administration not only can ensure curricular consistency but could also reinforce the common mission of all members of the institution.

An Online, Discipline-specific Instructor Training and Mentoring Module

The following proposed discipline-specific training module is designed for distribution through an online platform such as Blackboard, WebCt, or eCollege. All full- and part-time faculty in the discipline would have access to the module, which alternatively could be designed on a college, department, or course-specific level.

Six activities are included in separate sections of the training module:

1. Leader Homepage: This introductory section provides the identity and role of the mentor/leader as well as relevant contact information.
2. Announcements: This section provides a continuous means of alerting participants to new information and upcoming events or deadlines.
3. Question and Answer with Leader: This discussion board provides a question-answer thread in which adjuncts can seek more detailed information about current concerns.
4. Discussion boards: This is a peer-community exchange in which issues such as textbooks, teaching strategies, and development of assignments are discussed.
5. Assessment: This section describes the importance of assessment, outlines procedures and guidelines, and provides a means of distribution and submission of assessment instruments (e.g., through dropboxes).
6. Manuals: This repository for various manuals, including policies and procedures manuals, technical manuals, or faculty manuals, allows easy access to important guidelines and information.

CONCLUSION

Because institutions of higher education have become more dependent on the use of part-time faculty members, the need to train and mentor adjunct and contingent faculty is now crucial to the success of educational programs. This is particularly true for business programs because their high demand typically places them among the first to be offered at a distance, a mode which relies heavily on hiring part-time instructors. To reinforce academic integrity, institutions should promote, facilitate, and financially support adequate training for adjunct instructors through developing training modules such as that proposed in this analysis. By incorporating five basic

elements—goal focus, expert mentor leadership, accessibility, interactive community building, and adequate administrative support—a business program can ensure the ultimate success of its lifelong learners.

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