



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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MENTORING ADJUNCT FACULTY TO IMPROVE STUDENT SUCCESS

*The world is full of magic things,
patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper.*
—William Butler Yeats

As we move towards a cultural norm in higher education of adjuncts carrying the brunt of teaching labor, there is a need to establish mentorship and support that currently does not exist. If we are going to be honest with ourselves about increasing student engagement and success, then we have to admit that we must change how we support these new-majority teachers. In an ideal world, there would be more opportunities for full-time positions. But until/if that happens, the best return on investment for institutional professional development is to advocate for mentoring, networking, and training adjunct faculty. This task, especially in an era of scarce funding for higher education, is daunting, but not impossible.

Here is something I know from my own decade of adjunct experience. Teaching, despite all of the interaction with students, is a lonely profession when you're a part-timer. Yes, there are some adjuncts who choose to stay part-time, but most of the ones I know would prefer being full-time faculty members. These are teachers who are often in the trenches of curriculum development with very little support and funding. They do not have the option to ask for release time, nor are they offered support for professional development opportunities. Students don't necessarily see the behind-the-scenes work of course development, but they do recognize and benefit from a well-designed class.

When I was hired as an adjunct, I got most of my support from the dean's administrative assistant who provided me with syllabi samples that were 10 years old. I was led back to the faculty lounge to a shelf of dusty binders filled with other aged syllabi. There was no consistency in the format, the outcomes, or the content. I remember flipping through them and wondering how I fit into this department. She also gave me a packet of handouts, which explained things like where to find my mail and how to operate the phone. I was then handed a key to an office I would share with 12 other

faculty members. In my department, the full-timers were assigned adjuncts to mentor.

Here's the thing: I was told that I would have a mentor, but I was fearful of looking like I didn't know what I was doing. If I asked too many questions, would they not hire me again? Would it look like I couldn't handle teaching? I struggled with balancing my need to network with my mentor with the common advice given to adjuncts "to keep your mouth shut until you have tenure." In the early years of my teaching career, I walked on eggshells hoping to stay on good terms with faculty members who might someday decide my fate as part of a hiring committee. I also held on to the magical thinking that if I worked hard enough and impressed the right people, the department would eventually hire me.

I did, however, have a few champions among the tenured faculty. When there were opportunities for grant projects or paid trainings, they made sure I was included. Simple gestures like forwarding me emails and putting notes on my office door were small nudges of encouragement. When those full-timers talked to me, they made me feel like a colleague, while others simply ignored me (or mistook me for a student). While differences between full-time and part-time faculty are quite tangible in terms of compensation, titles, and benefits, when it comes to teaching, we need to come together in a collegial and mutually supportive environment. Ultimately, missed mentorship opportunities can reduce the quality of the teacher-student relationship. If we really care about student success and student engagement, then we also must value these goals within our departments.

Many teachers, and especially adjuncts, have accepted the economic limitations that come with the profession, but they continue teaching because they love what they do. We should consistently strive to reinvigorate this sense of purpose. Sending faculty members to conferences is effective for the scholarly exchange of ideas and best practices, as well as providing opportunities for networking, but more immediate are the student-centered gains that are realized when we have senior faculty-driven professional development at our home institutions. Having teachers learn about best practices is meaningless unless they can share their failures and successes together. How do we foster this sense of community?

Start with discussions about course design that are particular to your institution's learning management system (LMS). Organize the full-time faculty who consistently participate in professional development, and ask them if new part-timers can observe their courses. Classes that are on your LMS are ideal for this type of asynchronous mentoring. The question teachers ask the most of one another is, "How do you do ____?" Providing new online teachers with access to a seasoned, exemplary class allows her to see a successful online pedagogy put into practice, and offers a starting point for the mentoring relationship to take root. This interaction can also help the new hire get a clearer sense of departmental pedagogies that concur with a larger set of institutional outcomes. New teachers should then be encouraged to email or stop by during office hours to discuss their observations and evolving knowledge.

If there is funding available, compensate part-timers for attending trainings and demonstrations done by other faculty members. I see these sessions as working in two complimentary ways. The full-timers get to showcase the goals they have for their departments, and part-time faculty are made to feel that their time and input are valuable. If remuneration is not possible, then give the presentation and training sessions a title that adjuncts can place on their curricula vitae. Compensated or not, it's in everyone's best interest to participate in professional development.

If you have professional development grants, open those up to adjunct faculty who are using innovative teaching methods. For instance, when I learned to use a lecture capture recording tool, I was paid to facilitate a faculty training session. Teaching my colleagues was rewarding because many of them later shared with each other a variety of uses for this new capability, thereby proving its utility and promoting an exchange of ideas. While companies will often send their own product trainers to demonstrate such tools, it is perhaps more effective when teachers learn how to use them from each other, given that this more local interaction can then be followed up more easily. Administrators see teacher evaluation numbers increase and students benefit from improved teacher presence via the new technology.

Setting up interdepartmental mentor relationships may be most beneficial. In the example above, my fear of appearing inadequate would have been diminished if my mentor had come from a different department. The teacher ego can be a fragile thing, and cross-disciplinary mentorship can enable teachers to talk about pedagogical practices without belaboring details of content. Oftentimes, when two teachers from the same discipline collaborate, they end up talking about their intellectual interests and not instructional design concerns. While teachers need content-intensive discussions, they also need assistance with classroom management, time management, and assessment strategies. Students benefit

when their teachers get a broader view of the experiences and perspectives of instructors in other departments.

Another source of mentoring has to originate at the administrative level. When new faculty are hired who have little or no pedagogical training, administrators need to invest in those faculty members. For instance, those teachers can benefit from the asynchronous tools mentioned above, but they also need face-to-face discussions. This is where adjuncts can help other adjuncts understand the culture of the institution. When you're new to a college and to teaching, you often do not know how to navigate the system. You don't know who to ask for the things you need in the classroom beyond calling the IT helpdesk or summoning security. Recognizing adjuncts who have invested in the institution by appointing them mentors to new faculty may help retain the best workers while creating a more cohesive and functional community.

Teachers who feel supported and valued transfer that satisfaction onto their students. Instead of seeing this task as daunting, we can facilitate professional development by understanding the symbiotic nature of student and teacher success. As we look for more ways to ensure student success, we have to think of ways to support teachers who have long-term goals and short-term contracts.

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Be sure to sign up for Alyson's webinar on Thursday, June 26:

Mentoring Adjunct Faculty to Improve Course Design and Student Success

Can two full-time and two adjunct faculty members, one dean, and an e-learning director create an online course to promote professional development for new adjunct faculty? The webinar facilitator shares strategies administrators at Everett Community College used to collaborate with faculty members and encourage them to use online resources to improve student engagement and retention. The college received a five-year Title III grant that administrators initiated in fall 2012 to strengthen academic programs by improving course delivery. The project focused on instituting faculty development initiatives to expand Quality Matters assessments, use e-learning tools, and develop annual cohorts of newly-hired faculty. Four faculty mentors from three different disciplines led the effort by providing training, one-to-one assistance, and assessment.

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