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Managing the Adjunct Pool for Consistent Student Learning Outcomes

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Colleges and universities are increasingly relying on adjunct faculty to provide flexibility in managing student enrollment. With the proper adjunct management system, a college can maximize student learning, ensure consistency in outcomes, and build a culture of excellence. This paper describes such a system which utilizes student and faculty feedback to inform faculty development and assignment.

The Value of Adjuncts

Discussions on the use of adjunct faculty often focus on negative factors and neglect the ways in which adjuncts can enhance educational quality. Many adjuncts staff positions in adult evening and weekend classes at satellite campuses which full-time faculty at the home campuses may not desire. At Indiana Wesleyan, the part-time employment of adjuncts is crucial to staffing a wide variety of courses in diverse locations. A comparison of the student evaluations of full-time with adjunct faculty at Indiana Wesleyan University shows few significant differences. This indicates support for Gappa and Leslie's (1993) contention that adjuncts can be excellent teachers if given proper support and training. At Indiana Wesleyan, adjuncts are carefully screened, carefully trained and supported. This results in a highly skilled faculty who enthusiastically support the mission of the university. They bring years of practical experience that is in high demand among adult students. When adjunct faculty understand and are committed to the mission of the university they are highly effective. The system for managing the adjunct pool makes use of full-time faculty recruiters, an eight-hour online/on site orientation program, peer mentoring, end of course surveys, and peer classroom evaluations.

Managing Faculty Quality through Systematic Selection and Orientation

The recruitment of adjunct faculty includes a three stage screening process: 1) faculty recruiter interview; 2) candidate evaluation meeting with teaching demonstration; and 3) academic director/dean interview. Once an adjunct faculty candidate has been approved by the academic director/dean, the candidate is required to attend two four-hour new faculty orientation sessions: 1) Orientation for New Faculty, and 2) Orientation to Adult Instruction. Candidates may be required, depending on their previous academic experience, to participate in faculty peer mentoring.

Managing Faculty Quality through the Use of Assessment Data

Once the faculty member is in the classroom, they are monitored closely through a system of surveys. End-of-course and end-of-program surveys are designed by department faculty and administered through the Office of Institutional Effectiveness. Students are asked for feedback on both the instructor and the curriculum. There are also some general questions about their experience with the university as a whole. Using this survey process enables the college to track the quality of all faculty, curriculum and services.

The college uses both paper and online surveys. All new faculty are surveyed via paper in their first two classes and at least once a year thereafter. These paper surveys are sent to a class representative (a student) who is responsible to administer the survey and return it to the main campus via Business Reply Mail. This system produces a 60% return rate. Surveys are scanned into Remark Office OMR (by Principia, a division of Gravic) which will put data into a spreadsheet, including written comments. These are saved in an SPSS database through which reports are run. Reports include mean scores for the class, all classes for the particular course, and the department as a whole. At the end of the report are the student comments which have been scanned into the database. The turn-around time for surveys is two weeks or less, providing directors and deans with sufficient time to follow up with faculty before they teach another class.

Online end-of-course surveys (implemented through Websurveyor) are available for students who do not get a paper survey. This provides a way to quickly catch a problem that may be occurring with a faculty member who teaches far from the main campus. The college also uses online surveys for all online classes. The questions are identical to the paper survey. Online survey reports are also put into the SPSS database and produce the same reports. When program directors get these reports, they review them and send them with their comments to faculty. These reports are saved in PDF files so that they can be accessed by program or faculty name. In online classes, faculty often give extra credit points for completion of the end-of-course survey. This boosts the response rate to nearly 100%.

In addition to the end-of-course survey, information about faculty quality often emerges in the end-of-program survey, which is administered to students who are about to graduate. As they reflect on their program, graduating students often give valuable information about the effectiveness of certain

aspects of the curriculum. These surveys are processed the same way same way other surveys are processed and reports are regularly sent to program directors and deans.

Managing Through Peer Evaluation and Improvement Plans

End-of-course and end-of-program surveys are two of the reports used in the oversight of adjunct faculty. Peer classroom evaluations, and Faculty Improvement Plans are also used. Specific comments from students about their instructor on end-of-course and end-of-program surveys are very important to manage the adjunct pool, work with adjuncts on their professional academic growth, and obtain consistent academic program outcomes. Quantitative feedback from the class in regard to specific survey items, such as “Overall, I think the instructor did a good job,” are also critical indicators of how a specific faculty member has taught in the classroom. Adjunct faculty members who have unacceptable end-of-course survey results are put into a Faculty Improvement Plan by the academic director or dean.

Peer classroom evaluation is another tool used to manage the adjunct pool. An adjunct faculty member usually has a peer classroom evaluation in his or her second or third course assignment and is reviewed by the academic director/dean. Adjunct faculty members with peer classroom evaluations determined to be unacceptable are put into a Faculty Improvement Plan. Course assignments for adjuncts in Faculty Improvement Plans are also frozen and/or withdrawn. The Director of Faculty Development has oversight of all Faculty Improvement Plans. Once the adjunct has completed his or her Improvement Plan, a recommendation is made by the Director of Faculty Development to reactivate course assignments or permanently remove the instructor from the adjunct pool.

In some instances a Faculty Improvement Plan may not be necessary to help an adjunct faculty member in his or her professional growth and peer mentoring/coaching is more appropriate. Peer mentoring/coaching is recommended by the academic director and/or dean, with mentoring/coaching sessions conducted by full-time or affiliate faculty. A mentoring form is completed and returned to the university by the faculty mentor. The academic director/dean will determine if subsequent action is indicated by the mentoring report.

Rewarding Adjuncts for Quality Outcomes

Adjunct faculty members have an opportunity for a change in their status. Adjunct faculty, who are recognized by their academic director/dean as excelling in their teaching and area of discipline, can be

elevated to affiliate faculty status. These affiliate faculty are guaranteed a minimum number of teaching assignments. They also receive an extra stipend for participating as peer classroom evaluators and peer mentors/coaches.

Faculty development is a way to build community among adjunct faculty. It also fosters an environment for professional development, and a culture of excellence among faculty. Thus faculty development is an integral process in managing the adjunct pool. Adjunct faculty are required to attend two faculty development sessions each year. There is a wide selection of development sessions from which they can choose. These sessions are offered both onsite and online. Faculty members who do not attend the mandatory number of sessions have their course assignments frozen and receive targeted communication about faculty development workshops.

Business & Management Programs also use a departmental adjunct faculty ranking score to aid in the selection of adjunct faculty course assignments. To determine an adjunct's rank score, a rubric is used to measure four attributes: 1) academic qualifications and credentials, 2) teaching experience, 3) understanding of adult learner, and 4) mission fit with IWU. An adjunct faculty member is usually ranked by the department after their first peer classroom evaluation. The departmental adjunct faculty rank score is an additional factor to consider when managing adjunct faculty and determining teaching assignments.

Conclusion

This system of faculty selection, orientation, assessment and development produces a cadre of adjunct faculty who are committed to the mission of the university and well equipped to promote quality student learning outcomes. When combined with a system of outcomes assessment, this faculty management system promotes consistency in quality regardless of program location.

References

Gappa, J., & Leslie, D. (1993). The invisible faculty. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.