

Recruiting, Developing, Retaining Adjuncts

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Each time an adjunct faculty member teaches a course, your program's reputation is on the line. But how much do you know about this instructor? What have you done to ensure that his or her teaching methods are aligned with your program? If the instructor is good, what are you doing to encourage him or her to return semester after semester?

If your program employs adjuncts, these questions should be on the agenda, says Velma Lashbrook, a learning and leadership consultant. Through her consulting and her part-time teaching at three institutions (the University of Minnesota, Augsburg College, and the University of Phoenix Online), Lashbrook has found that

- academic departments often put forth very little effort to recruit adjunct faculty members,
- the screening process for selecting adjunct faculty members often is informal and less than thorough, and
- academic departments often do little to acculturate adjunct faculty members to the department.

Lashbrook was hired for two of her adjunct positions by approaching departments that she thought could benefit from her expertise rather than by being actively recruited, a fairly common practice in higher education, she says. By not actively recruiting adjunct faculty members, departments are hurting their chances to find the best candidates. "Because [hiring adjunct faculty] is kind of reactive for most colleges, they don't really take advantage of the resources in the marketplace," Lashbrook says. "Most college faculties still aren't diverse enough, and one way to improve diversity is to find [people] who are otherwise employed who could also teach as an adjunct in the program and add to it."

In some cases, departments are somewhat lax in checking references and verifying that the candidate has the credentials to teach a particular course, "which I think is a risk for the college," Lashbrook says.

Even if the faculty member does know the content well enough to teach, his or her approach to teaching may or may not fit with the department's teaching philosophy. Lashbrook tailors her teaching to suit the needs of the institution and encourages departments to help their part-time instructors do the same. "I'm vision driven, so it's important for me to understand the vision and the context and what the institution is trying to accomplish in order for me to figure out how I can teach to meet those needs," she says. "I want to know some things in terms of norms, in terms of what goes on in the classrooms, and

the kinds of learning activities that are typical. I want to know norms in terms of grading too, so I'm not out of line with the way that others in the department grade. I want to have access to information that can help me understand whatever is going on in the program. I think that's important to any adjunct to be able to fit in."

Pay is a perennial concern among adjunct instructors, as is a sense of belonging. For some this translates to office space, collegial relationships with full-time faculty members, and access to professional development opportunities.

The problem with many professional development activities is that they are difficult for part-time instructors to fit into their schedules, particularly when there is no monetary incentive for participation, Lashbrook says.

To improve adjunct instructors' teaching and understanding of the department's vision, Lashbrook recommends that departments

- regularly inform part-time instructors about all the professional opportunities that are available to them on campus via mail or email,
- require that all adjunct instructors participate in at least one mandatory department event annually,
- provide compensation for participation in professional development whenever possible, and
- develop an adjunct teaching evaluation system that considers more than just student evaluations.

When adjunct instructors become more familiar with the department's and institution's needs and are encouraged to develop their skills, you may find that an individual can contribute in ways you hadn't considered previously. For example, at Augsburg College, Lashbrook served on an advisory committee where the department learned of her expertise in assessment, and soon she was working on internal evaluation. Through these and other connections on campus, she became involved in marketing events and other activities. "They did a lot of things that made me feel connected on a personal level," Lashbrook says. "As more people got to know me, I became more like a member of the faculty. [Other faculty] now talk about adjuncts sometimes as if I'm not one." Imagine if all adjuncts felt that way.

Contact Velma Lashbrook at velmalashbrook@msn.com.