Managing Virtual Adjunct Faculty: Applying the Seven Principles of Good Practice

Maria Puzziferro-Schnitzer
Associate Dean of Virtual College and Student Success
Florida Community College
Jacksonville, FL.
mschnitz@fccj.edu

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Abstract

Since the publication of the Seven Principles of Good Practice in 1987 by Chickering and Gamson, distance education has become a major delivery method for higher education. Virtual adjunct faculty have largely carried higher education into the cyber classroom. Adjunct faculty have always been broadly used in higher education, especially in the community college setting. Nationally, adjuncts teach 30-50% of all credit courses. At community colleges, adjuncts compose about 60% of all faculty (Gappa and Leslie, 1993).

Florida Community College at Jacksonville (FCCJ) has one of the largest distance learning programs in the state of Florida with yearly enrollments of more than 35,000. About 80% of all online course offerings are taught by virtual adjuncts. About 70% of the active 250 adjuncts teaching in the program reside in the state of Florida , and the other half in assorted states. This paper offers best practices for the support and management of online adjunct faculty within the framework of the Seven Principles for Best Practice.

Background

The growth of online learning seems to continue steadily. According to the 2003 Sloan Survey of Online Learning, the number of students taking at least one online course is projected to increase by 19.8 percent over the one-year period from Fall 2002 to Fall 2003, to include a total of 1.9 million students (Allen, 2003). For public institutions, the National Center for Education Statistics reports that in 2000–2001, 90 percent of public 2-year and 89 percent of public 4-year institutions offered distance education courses (NCES, 2003).

The Sloan Survey also cites that convincing faculty of the benefits of online teaching and learning remains a challenge, and concludes that some, but not all, faculty have welcomed online education. As colleges and universities work steadily to get full-time faculty onboard with distance learning, virtual adjuncts have eagerly stepped up to fill the void, thereby enabling institutions to respond promptly to market demand. Online job boards are replete with postings for virtual adjunct positions, and it appears as if a new and lucrative career path is emerging.

John Sexton, President of NYU, refers to this new workforce as "cyber-faculty," and states that:

> "Cyber faculty will have quadruple-powered capacity: first, a level of technological

sophistication well beyond what we associate with all but a few of today's faculty and possibly even beyond what we will associate with many of tomorrow's faculty; second, an unusually creative appetite for deconstructing traditional teaching and research and reconceptualizing them; third, an advanced competence in a substantive and traditional academic discipline; fourth, and most important, an unusual talent to inspire collaboration among contributors with diverse expertise in innovation."

Virtual adjuncts, "cyber-faculty," are becoming a highly valued and precious resource for distance learning, and the stigma once endured, is diminishing.

Managing a large program with a high number of individual adjuncts, who live all over world can be challenging, from a management viewpoint. Geographical separation, in general, can work against involvement and engagement. The *Seven Principles of Good Practice* have been a guiding light for quality undergraduate education, and represent a philosophy of engagement, cooperation, learning community, interaction, quality, and efficiency.

1. Good Practice Encourages Contact.

Frequent faculty-institution contact is the most important factor in faculty motivation and involvement.

In the community college setting, the lack of full-time staffing is often an obstacle to program management and development. FCCJ's Virtual Adjunct Mentoring program was implemented to provide multiple points of contact for new adjuncts, without adding full-time program staff. The Virtual Mentoring Program consists of Virtual Mentors, paid a stipend for each semester of service. Virtual Mentors may be full- or part-time faculty whom have taught in the Virtual College program for at least one year of consecutive assignments. Each Virtual Mentor is assigned up to 10 new online adjuncts. The essential role of the Virtual Mentor is to act as a point of contact for questions/advice about teaching, pedagogy, and use of the learning management systems.

Adjuncts are professionals, and as professionals, they value timely and accessible support. Having familiar, collegial, and multiple points of contact helps them develop and maintain the confidence they need to be successful teachers. And, mentoring is a proven-effective strategy for support, improvement, and community building.

2. Good Practice Develops Reciprocity and Cooperation.

Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated.

As administrators, the goal is to increase accountability and promote retention among students and faculty alike. Creating a shared community, or team environment, helps to connect adjuncts to the institution, the administrators, and the students. The term "learning community" has become universal in education, and refers to a variety of arrangements where individuals continuously share resources and seek to apply what they have learned to their own practice. Astuto (1993) has identified the professional community of learners , who are professionals seeking to enhance their own effectiveness, and promote quality in teaching and learning.

Peer-based sharing is the most effective model for the professional learning community (Louis & Kruse, 1995). The Virtual Mentoring Program is the heart of the professional teaching and learning community at FCCJ. In addition to assigned mentoring relationships, virtual mentors also moderate an adjunct discussion board, focusing on topics related to online teaching and

learning; individuals are invited to share techniques, resources and reflections on teaching and learning. Each month, an online faculty member is invited to create a multimedia presentation to feature on the institutional website. Recent "Online Instructor Highlight" topics have been "Student Motivation in the Online Classroom," "Rehumanizing the Learning Space," and "Employing Hybrid Strategies."

3. Good Practice Encourages Active Learning.

Faculty must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences and apply it to their daily lives.

A good teacher will have a desire to learn new things, and enhance his or her repertoire of pedagogical skills. Professional development is an excellent motivator for adjuncts. FCCJ's Online Certified Professor program is offered onsite and online, and provides incentive for adjunct faculty to improve their teaching skills, earn a certification, receive a stipend upon completion, and network with both full time and other adjunct faculty. The program consists of a series of workshops, including basic and advanced learning management system, multimedia, and online pedagogy. An important part of the certificate program is peer mentoring, where participants must be mentored and provide mentoring for a specified number of hours.

New online adjunct faculty are *required* by the Virtual College to complete an orientation course (facilitated by the virtual mentors), and a course in pedagogy (CREOLE: Creating Online Learning Environments), both offered fully online. Optionally, they may pursue the entire Online Certified Professor program. These courses are taken within the first semester that the adjunct is teaching for FCCJ.

Although some adjuncts have many years of online teaching experience, Virtual College still requires the basic training. Many adjuncts have taught at a variety of institutions, and expectations, processes, policies and
instructional cultures differ widely among online programs. These required training opportunities allow new adjuncts to actively learn about FCCJ's instructional culture, and build community with other instructors. They actively discuss their teaching experiences, best practices, learn new strategies for teaching online, and apply those strategies to the courses they are currently teaching.

4. Good Practice Gives Prompt Feedback.

Knowing what you know and don't know focuses learning.

The importance of evaluation cannot be overemphasized. Evaluation is more than filling out a form with checkboxes and standardized comments. For example, a nod of approval and smile as you pass an adjunct's classroom on campus are both important forms of evaluation and feedback. Though it may seem impracticable in the virtual environment to provide this kind of formal and informal feedback, an organized timeline, the help of the virtual mentors, and technology make it possible.

In the online environment, Virtual Adjuncts need to know clearly what the institution's expectations are of them, and whether they are meeting those expectations. There is very little continuity among contemporary online programs, and each institution has its own instructional priorities, goals, constituencies, and definitions of excellence. Many adjuncts teach simultaneously at multiple institutions, and so it is important to define expectations clearly.

FCCJ's course evaluation and feedback system is frequent, ongoing, peer-based, and practical. All new adjuncts receive a copy of the evaluation instruments used for course evaluation and observation. Virtual mentors monitor the course(s) of the new adjuncts assigned to them, and offer informal, non-threatening, peer-based advice, assistance and support. Administrative observations are conducted at mid-term for every course, and immediate feedback provided via email. Student evaluations are conducted for every course at the end of each term. The results are promptly reviewed and returned to adjuncts with a personalized letter, providing feedback and practical suggestions for further professional development or other activities. In addition, Virtual College staff conducts withdrawal surveys, which serve as another source of information about course and instructor quality.

Evaluation data are useless, unless they are shared and used for program improvement. Thus, it is important to select a tracking tool to summarize, securely store and analyze data. Being organized is the key to success.

5. Good Practice Emphasizes Time on Task.

How an institution defines time expectations for students, faculty, administrators, and other professional staff can establish the basis of high performance for all .

In order to manage rapidly growing online programs, administrators must work efficiently to manage time, multiple priorities, and wisely select the best technologies, resources and methods to accomplish administrative tasks. Time itself presents the most frustrating problem in managing geographically dispersed adjuncts. Many administrative processes are designed to accommodate local instructors. For example, paper/pencil-based proctored testing involves a time lag in the mailing of exams, and some administrative processes (such as grade changes) still require signatures.

Clearly, many existing administrative processes are grossly inefficient for virtual faculty, and virtual students. But, policy change comes slowly, and it is important for distance learning leaders to collaborate with the broader institutional community to effect changes to better accommodate virtual teachers and learners. Many institutions are refining web-based employee and student portals, and provide automation for many of these processes. FCCJ has an institutional portal named "Artemis," which provides a variety of processes online, such as final grade assignment and grade change.

6. Good Practice Communicates High Expectations.

Expect more and you will get more.

Quality instructors will want to teach for institutions that demonstrate a commitment to quality, and to its employees' professional and personal development and overall satisfaction. First impressions from the timeliness of correspondence, congeniality and helpfulness of the staff, and the interview experience influence how the adjunct perceives his or her professional relationship with the institution. Adjuncts who know that they are working for a professional organization are more likely to feel a sense of pride in their affiliation, and feel accountable to the institution.

7. Good Practice Respects Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning.

There are many roads to learning. People bring different talents and styles of learning to college.

Adjunct faculty at FCCJ are provided a standard online "course shell," which they are required to adhere to. Adjuncts seem to have differing perspectives on this practice. Some view it as a timesaver; others view it as a limitation on their creative ability.

The standardized "course shell" phenomenon is a debatable practice in online education. Many institutions are moving toward this approach to maintain consistency and quality across numerous course sections. This is particularly practical, as the adjunct workforce may be so sizeable that it is a logistical challenge to monitor the quality of the curriculum and instruction. But, standardized course shells allow less opportunity for creativity, personal style, and innovation. As such, it is important to encourage diversity while maintaining consistency. Allowing some degree of flexibility with the content of the course shell gives adjuncts some professional autonomy, and allows them to go beyond the course shell and share their talents and experiences with students.

Summary

Adjuncts are a precious and invaluable resource. The virtual faculty workforce is the fabric of distance learning, particularly at the community college level. Quality education begins and ends with teachers. The Seven Principles of Good Practice are an excellent rubric to help us assess our practices, policies and overall effectiveness. Providing quality support to our instructors contributes directly to the quality of instruction students receive. The higher the quality of instruction, the better we can expect student outcomes and satisfaction to be.

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