Best Practices for Supporting Adjunct Faculty

By Richard E. Lyons, Anker Publishing Co., Bolton, MA, 2007

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Best Practices for Supporting Adjunct Faculty is a compendium of over a dozen programs implemented at colleges across the United States and Canada that address the unique issues surrounding the growing presence of adjunct faculty on campuses. Each chapter acts as a mini-lesson in faculty development, and addresses an innovative initiative undertaken by a college or, in some cases, groups of colleges. All come complete with appendices consisting of supporting documentation that are easily adaptable to the reader's individual situation. While this kind of organization offers diverse viewpoints (written in very different voices), it is unlikely that every chapter will be applicable to every college. Indeed, this seeming disconnectedness of the chapters is mitigated by the editor, Richard E. Lyons, in the introduction, stating that, "One of the beauties—and sometimes challenges—of the North American system of higher education is that institutions are so diverse in mission, culture, student population, and other critical factors. There is no 'one size fits all' solution to increasing the effectiveness of your

institution's adjunct faculty." What this means to you, dear reader, is that you must read all of the chapters to find which "size" suits your institution.

This book offers insightful and varied glimpses into the issues that adjunct faculty present to an institution of higher education. While unarguably crucial to the day-to-day course offerings of a college, there is often the perception that these "gypsy scholars" are somehow "less" (in all aspects) than their full-time counterparts and receive little institutional support. This, in turn, establishes feelings of alienation and disengagement in these instructors. But a question persists as this population of educators constitutes an ever-increasing part of the faculty pool: how to hire, cultivate, and retain competent and engaging part-time (adjunct) faculty?

The first chapter sets the stage for this question, complete with a comprehensive explanation of the issue and the players, stating that there are currently 600,000 part-time instructors employed throughout North America. Lyons also clarifies verbiage issues, reciting a list of titles that these

instructors are known by: formally, they are called part-time faculty, adjunct faculty, adjunct instructor, contingent faculty, associate faculty, and community faculty; informally, however, they are referred to as “roads scholars,” “freeway flyers”, and the above-mentioned “gypsy scholars.” Lyons acknowledges common needs of all adjunct faculty members, such as thorough orientations, professional development, assistance with pedagogical matters, and recognition for quality work. Leslie and Gappa’s seminal 1993 publication *The Invisible Faculty*, which included a particularly useful typology of distinctions of part-time faculty along with their lifestyle and motivation, is the basis of much of this background material. Briefly, these are:

Specialists, experts, or professionals have full-time employment outside their part-time teaching responsibilities and teach to share their expertise, to network with community members, and/or repay a psychological debt to an educator from their past.

Freelancers are employed in two or more part-time jobs or even a regular full-time job at another college. This category often includes artists/musicians who supplement their income in this way.

Career enders are professionals who are near or at the end of their work lives but want to maintain contact with the professional world. Previously a small part of the adjunct population, retiring

baby boomers are contributing to the rapid growth of this group.

Aspiring academics are usually at the outset of their academic careers and are using part-time teaching assignments as a way to earn income while exploring full-time job opportunities.

The subsequent chapters run the gamut of simply offering adjunct faculty orientation at multiple times for their convenience to the incredibly ambitious and complex task of developing a statewide consortium of colleges dedicated to the development of adjunct faculty. While all were admirable, the most effective programs appear to have one common thread: a mentoring component. Long associated with elder and junior faculty members, but seldom utilized between full- and part-time faculty, mentoring has proven to effectively build community and collegiality among these groups who, under normal circumstances, would never see (or possibly even know) each other. MacEwan College in Alberta, Canada, developed its influential Faculty Development Program with a surprising twist: all faculty members (full-time and adjunct) participate on a strictly voluntary basis. Given the inherently slow (if not stagnant) nature of higher education, one would naturally question the possibility of a program’s widespread acceptance if left to voluntary participation. However, this has not been the case at all with two distinct “victories”: more applicants than available spaces and the mentors reporting regained feelings of professional pride and accomplishment.

While many of the programs outlined in this book appear to frame this issue of adjunct faculty development as solely a burden of the college, it is important to point out that the adjunct faculty is also responsible for any benefits they receive from their participation. Specifically, the University of Connecticut's Adjunct Faculty Associates Professional Development Program requires the following from its adjunct participants: travel time, teaching portfolio, instruction, development, and practice in the use of distance education, course creation, or instructional modules during audio/digitization software. Assuming that after these classes end, continuous education and development continues, proponents believe that there is sufficient fiscal incentive for adjunct faculty to thrive. Fortunately, this program has been so successful that there has been a commitment to

continue the program as long as there are personnel and funds available.

Best Practices for Supporting Adjunct Faculty contains useful material for any college, regardless of its size, and I recommend it for its comprehensive and complete coverage of the subject. While some projects obviously require deep pockets that would only be applicable in a large, well-funded college or university setting, there remain suggestions throughout that could be adapted to smaller institutions. Because adjunct faculty members continue to play such an integral role in higher education, professional development opportunities aimed at this population should be of key concern to college administrators everywhere.

Amy C. Gideon
*Middle Tennessee School of
Anesthesia, P.O. Box 417, Madison,
TN 37116, USA*