

Part-Time Faculty Affiliation with the Virtual University

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INTRODUCTION

The recent, rapid growth of online higher education is well-documented. For example, Kiernan (August 8, 2003) mentions a U.S. Department of Education finding that there were 754,000 students enrolled in distance education for-credit courses in 1994; by 2000, that number had increased to 2,876,000. The National Center for Education reported that, as of 2002, 57% of U.S. undergraduates had taken an Internet-based course (Palloff and Pratt, 2003).

This dramatic increase in enrollment has created a corresponding growth in the demand for faculty members, a demand that is increasingly being met by part-time, adjunct instructors. Grieve (2000) stated at the time of writing that 40% of college instruction was being delivered by part-time faculty, and predicted an increase in that percentage based on the growth in distance learning.

As a result, higher education administrators need to know how to hire, train, and retain part-time faculty members. Feldman and Turnley (Fall, 2001) note a lack of research in this area. In response, the purpose of the study that is summarized in this article was to assist administrators by discovering and presenting reasons why prospective faculty members seek part-time, online instruction assignments and why faculty members choose to continue to be affiliated with schools once hired.

BACKGROUND

As previously stated, the changing composition of the online faculty has implications for recruitment, development and retention of teachers. The opportunity exists to create a new university faculty culture in which these strategies are an integral part of fostering

instructional effectiveness and faculty co-ownership of student learning results. Three themes emerge from the literature in regard to this new culture: (a) operational definitions of university community, (b) the emerging role of virtual university faculty members, and (c) ideas about faculty engagement. Each theme is briefly discussed below.

University Community

Neff (2002) defines learning community as “a group of people who take the time to reflect on what they are doing and improve on it so that the next time they do something, they incorporate the benefits of their learning” (p. 336). Palloff and Pratt (2001) promote the importance of building networks and learning community connections within the online courseroom experience. Palloff and Pratt (2003) address the importance of establishing community interaction among online instructors and between the online instructor and learners, as well as learners’ interaction with each other.

Emerging Faculty Roles

Howell, Williams and Lindsay (2003), in a review of distance-education journals, found that faculty development is essential given the emerging role of the virtual educator and potential isolation in teaching at a distance. Boettcher and Conrad (1999) further suggest that faculty members will increasingly specialize as instructors, instructional designers, or curriculum experts. Continuous, ongoing faculty development and training will be necessary to develop and maintain faculty skills in the fast-changing environment of the virtual university.

Several writers addressed the readiness of instructors to transition from traditional classrooms to the online environment. Boettcher and Conrad (2004) suggest that

this transition requires faculty “knowledge of technology tools and knowledge of the teaching and learning processes” (p. 61). According to Tomlinson (1995), many incoming faculty members have face-to-face teaching and research experience, but are not fully prepared to succeed in the online learning environment. Tomlinson recommends that faculty development and training provide ongoing support and skill development to increase faculty readiness. Mentors within the virtual university can provide support and guidance in transitioning new faculty members to the role of online instructor. In addition, a potential source of online instructors is the virtual university alumni themselves. Mentoring graduate students within the university for the role of faculty within the virtual university will assist in recruiting online faculty from the ranks of successful graduate learners.

Faculty Engagement

Ideas about faculty engagement included both the relationship of the instructors with the university, and characteristics of the instructors themselves. Greive (2000) suggests a “one faculty” approach to participation of part-time faculty and suggests several examples of prompting their participation such as participation in commencement, involvement in department meetings, support for professional travel, and involvement in faculty development opportunities. Hagner (2001) states that requirements for engaging online faculty include “universal student access, reliable networks, multiple opportunities for training and consulting”, and “[a faculty] ethos which values experimentation and toleration of falter” (p. 2-3).

Gappa and Lessie, as cited in Greive (2000), reported that part-time faculty reasons for teaching include “the pursuit of professional growth, the economic motive, personal development, social interaction, community and professional service” (p. 36). Feldman and Turnley (Fall, 2001) examined part-time faculty job satisfaction, perception of support from the administrator, support for teaching, job intentions, and background information. Their findings suggest a difference among age cohorts, in that adjuncts starting their academic careers were less satisfied with adjunct work if they had not been able to previously work fulltime. However, mid-career adjunct satisfaction varied according to the perceived burden of family responsibilities. Finally, late-career adjuncts who voluntarily assumed adjunct

roles were using these roles as a means of transition out of the workforce, and tended to be happy with their part-time roles.

PART-TIME FACULTY AFFILIATION WITH THE VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY

As previously stated, this article describes a study of part-time faculty members’ reasons for affiliating with a virtual university. The focus of the study was further narrowed to address the faculty members’ sense of community and work; economic and other potentially relevant factors were not specifically solicited.

Scope and Significance of the Study

The study included 15 part-time faculty members who had taught at least one full quarter after completing a faculty development course within a virtual university’s School of Education graduate program. Questions were asked regarding the participating faculty member preferences for community interaction, communication, and reasons for affiliating with the virtual university. The purpose was to learn about the perceptions of part-time faculty in the virtual university by asking the faculty members themselves. The study revealed that faculty value the community provided by the Internet-based university, the lifestyle options made possible through Internet-based interactions, and the opportunity to be a part of the emerging field of online teaching and learning. The findings provide information that can be used to improve recruitment and retention of faculty as well as best practices in the supervision and cultivation of faculty talent.

The study revealed themes of common interest; however, the findings will not necessarily be generalizable to a population of part-time faculty outside of the context of the university in which the study was performed.

For a more complete description and analysis of the data, see Snyder (2005). The following is a summary of the research questions, methodology, and findings.

Research Questions

The following research questions were explored in the study.

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