

Spring 3-2-2018

New Adjunct Faculty Outreach: Making a Connection

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Scholarly Commons Citation

Cottom, C., Atwell, A., & Ombres, S. (2018). New Adjunct Faculty Outreach: Making a Connection. *Journal on Centers for Teaching and Learning*, 9(). Retrieved from <https://commons.erau.edu/publication/771>

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Cottom, C., Atwell, A., & Ombres, S. (2017). New adjunct faculty outreach: Making a connection. *Journal on Centers for Teaching and Learning*, 9, 34-46.

New Adjunct Faculty Outreach: Making a Connection

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All areas of education, faculty development included, are required to demonstrate their impact on learning. The Rothwell Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence-Worldwide (CTLE-W) provides resources to support new faculty; however, participation and utilization of these resources varies. This causal-comparative study sought to determine if targeted communication from CTLE-W to adjunct faculty during their first term teaching would increase utilization of CTLE-W resources. Results from this study showed that new adjunct faculty are more likely to continue seeking assistance from CTLE-W to ensure they are providing the best learning experience possible if they are contacted during their first term.

Introduction

Currently, it is common practice in higher education to utilize a significant adjunct faculty pool. The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (2015) states there are approximately 1.5 million faculty at degree-granting institutions, of which 49 percent are part-time (adjunct). Adjunct faculty play an imperative role in the growth and sustainability of online education; however, there are inherent challenges with providing professional development to adjunct faculty who are often geographically dispersed and never actually visit the campus for which they teach. Our institution, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University's Worldwide (ERAU-W) campus, for instance, offers rolling enrollment with nine-week

terms beginning every month and employs over 2,000 active faculty. Approximately 1,700 of these faculty members are adjuncts, located around the world. Some of these adjunct faculty members teach at one of the approximately 140 satellite campuses; however, most teach online. The majority of ERAU-W adjuncts are subject-matter experts, who are currently working in their field. While some of these instructors have online teaching experience, many do not.

Like most schools, ERAU-W recognizes that faculty development is an essential part of institutional effectiveness. The benefits of faculty development are numerous and varied, including fostering the learning of new skills and knowledge, enhancing the skill set of faculty, allowing opportunities for faculty collaboration, and supporting innovation in teaching methods (Reilly, Vandenhouten, Gallagher-Lepak, & Ralston-Berg, 2012). All ERAU-W faculty must complete a series of online, facilitator-led faculty development courses to be eligible to teach. The Rothwell Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence Worldwide (CTLE-W) manages these professional development experiences. This team includes a Director, two Faculty Development Instructors, and a Research Specialist. In addition, CTLE-W offers monthly newsletters, optional monthly webinars, self-paced workshops, office hours, one-on-one consultations, and a robust internal resource site that serves as a repository for CTLE-W content and includes asynchronous discussions. Despite the varied professional development opportunities offered, new adjunct faculty participation and utilization of these resources fluctuates. Also, there can be a gap of several months between the required CTLE-W professional development course completion and the adjunct faculty member's first term teaching. Likewise, there has not been data collected on how many first-time adjunct faculty members use the optional CTLE-W resources or contact the CTLE-W team during their first teaching term.

The purpose of this causal-comparative study was to test if an increase in communication through emails and phone calls from the CTLE-W team to first-time adjunct faculty during their first term teaching would increase utilization of the optional CTLE-W resources. The specific optional resources included in this study were attendance at EV-Anars (20-minute monthly webinars that cover a variety of topics related to teaching and technology), visits to the CTLE-W Resource Site, participation in the asynchronous monthly discussion topics located on the CTLE-W Resource Site, outreach to the CTLE-W team (email and/or phone), and attendance at CTLE-W office hours.

While the entire CTLE-W team was involved in the collection of data for this project, the Research Specialist, Cristina Cottom, analyzed the results. She compared the communication from adjunct faculty in the experimental group to the control group. The experimental (Increased Communication) group, included first-time adjunct faculty members who received increased communication from the CTLE-W team and continued to receive monthly newsletters and various invitations to attend events, as well as additional offering announcements. The control (Regular Communication) group, consisted of first-time adjunct faculty members who did not receive increased communication from the CTLE-W team, but continued to receive monthly newsletters, various invitations to attend events, and additional offering announcements. Cristina, along with Sara Ombres, Director, and Angela Atwell, Faculty Development Instructor, collaborated to disseminate our findings.

Background

Research shows that although adjuncts are usually only contracted on a semester-by-semester basis, their employment in higher education continues for numerous years (Townsend & Twombly, 2007). This unofficial commitment benefits higher education institutions in that adjuncts become familiar with university culture and policies, thus creating a stable pool of trained part-time faculty. Studies also state that adjunct faculty are beneficial to higher education because of the expertise they bring to the classroom. For example, adjunct faculty members are usually working in the field in which they teach, providing a level of practical knowledge that enhances student learning (Shobe, Murphy-Erby, & Sparks, 2014). According to Hoyt (2012), adjunct faculty are mostly happy with their teaching positions, but can often feel disconnected from campuses and left out of professional development opportunities. It is easy for departments to focus on the availability of their adjunct faculty rather than their teaching experience, which implies the need for adjunct faculty development (Clark, Moore, Johnston, & Openshaw, 2011). Adjunct faculty play an imperative role in higher education and institutions are charged with the task of creating opportunities that will help them feel valued and part of the academic culture (Diegel, 2013). Professional development opportunities are needed that will connect the adjunct faculty members to the institution as well as their colleges and departments (Dailey-Hebert, Norris, Mandernach, & Donnelli-Sallee, 2014).

In 2016, at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University-Worldwide, approximately 82% of the courses were taught by adjuncts, making adjunct ongoing professional development crucial to maintaining course quality. In this university setting, the initial faculty development experiences are designed for adjunct faculty only. In fact, full-time faculty are not included in the onboarding faculty development experiences for adjuncts. With this design, adjuncts are free to discuss concerns and challenges specific to part-time instructors as well as make connections with their peers who may be having the same experiences.

Methodology

Hypothesis

The research question for this study has been derived from the literature pertaining to the fact that there may be a lack of effective professional development for adjunct faculty members, which could result in a compromised quality of education for students (Benton & Li, 2015). This research study addressed one overarching research question: Did an increase in communication through emails and phone calls from the CTLE-W team to first-time adjunct faculty during their first term teaching increase their utilization of optional CTLE-W resources (EV-Anars, Discussions, CTLE-W Resource Site Visits) and outreach to the CTLE-W team (Office Hours, Individual Consultations) compared to first-time adjunct faculty who did not receive an increase in communication from the CTLE-W team? The above research question was formulated based on the following hypothesis for this study: **H₁**: There will be a significant statistical increase in the amount of participation in CTLE-W resources and/or outreach to the CTLE-W team from the Increased Communication Group compared to the Regular Communication Group. The following is the null hypothesis that was tested by the data: **H₀₁**: There will be no significant statistical increase in the amount of participation in CTLE-W resources and/or outreach to the CTLE-W team from the Increased Communication Group compared to the Regular Communication Group.

Design and Data Analysis

Quantitative research in the field of education tends to be non-experimental because the variables, which could be crucial to the study, cannot be

manipulated (Johnson, 2016). A causal-comparative design was implemented for this study to assist us in determining if the targeted phone calls and emails significantly impacted participation and communication from first-time adjunct faculty. In a causal-comparative research design randomization is not possible; however, we used a convenient sample of first-time adjunct faculty members at the university to ensure as much equality in the groups as possible (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007).

The statistical test or tests used in a causal-comparative study can vary depending on the characteristics of the research data (Gall et al., 2007). A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to analyze the data. An ANOVA is a statistical test that is used to compare the amount of between-groups variance in individual scores with the amount of within-groups variance (Gall et al., 2007). Researchers will often use an ANOVA in place of doing many *t* tests because the number of *t* tests can increase depending on the number of groups and variables that need to be analyzed. A one-way ANOVA was used to analyze the difference between the two adjunct groups, if any, at a .05 level of significance. The level of significance is often set at $p < .05$ in research studies to determine if there will be any significant statistical difference to reject the null hypotheses (Gall et al., 2007). Assumptions tested and specific statistical procedures used in the analyses are described in the Results section.

Sample

The sample for this study consisted of 58 adjunct faculty members teaching for the university for the first time with representation from all three colleges. Of the participants, 18 were from the College of Aeronautics (31%), 25 from the College of Business (43%), and 15 from College of Arts and Science (26%). All adjuncts completed the required faculty development courses and were cleared to teach courses during the March, April, May, or August 2016 terms. The June and July terms were excluded from this study because there were no new adjuncts scheduled to teach. Of the faculty involved in this study, 66% ($n=38$) were male and 34% ($n=20$) female. Online was the primary teaching modality at 90% ($n=52$); followed by teaching at a campus location with 8% ($n=5$), and web-conferencing classroom being 2% ($n=1$). Participants were placed into the Increased Communication ($n=30$) or the Regular Communication group ($n=28$). This study was approved by the university IRB committee as an exempt study because the intent of the project was to improve the CTLE-W current practice of adjunct faculty communication. We

did not inform participants in either group about the study in order to prevent any participation or outreach that would not have otherwise occurred.

Data Collection, Processing, and Analysis

CTLE-W staff made initial contact with the Increased Communication Group via phone call one week prior to their first teaching term. In this phone call, the CTLE-W staff recognized that it may have been some time since the onboarding faculty development courses were completed, acknowledged that the faculty member was preparing their first course, and offered to assist with any tasks and answer any questions. This contact was followed by an email outlining CTLE-W resources for the month (Newsletter, EV-Anar, and Resource Site) including links. The CTLE-W team then sent a follow-up email a third of the way through the term offering support and provided an opportunity for the new adjuncts to ask any questions. In addition, all attendance in EV-Anars, asynchronous discussions via the Resource Site, online office hours, outreach to the CTLE-W team (email and/or phone), and visits to the CTLE-W resource site were documented for both the Increased Communication and Regular Communication Groups. Documentation of participation in and utilization of the optional CTLE-W resources continued throughout the duration of the study to determine if new adjuncts would continue utilizing CTLE-W resources. Upon completion of the August 2016 term, we analyzed the number of times each new adjunct faculty member participated in or visited the CTLE-W Resource Site, attended EV-Anars, participated in the asynchronous discussions on the Resource Site, attended office hours, emailed and/or called the CTLE-W staff.

Results

Characteristically, data in causal-comparative studies is reported as a mean or frequency for each group. Inferential statistics are then used to determine whether the means “for the groups are significantly different from each other” (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2006, p. 214). We performed statistical analyses to determine the meanings behind the data. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to draw conclusions about the impact of targeted communication with new adjunct faculty members.

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to determine if there were differences in participation in the optional CTLE-W resources between the two groups of adjuncts. The one-way ANOVA was calculated and

showed the analysis was not significant, $F(1, 56) = 1.21, p = .276$, for EV-Anar attendance. However, the analysis was significant for the CTLE Resource Site visits, $F(1,56)=24, p=.000$, the phone calls from adjuncts, $F(1,56)=7, p=.012$, and the emails from adjuncts, $F(1,56)=228, p=.000$. Adjuncts from the Increased Communication group contacted CTLE-W via email 47 times ($M= 1.57, SD= .50$). This group contacted CTLE-W via phone calls 6 times ($M= .20, SD= .41$) and visited the CTLE-W Resource Site 34 times ($M=1.10, SD= .31$), showing a significant difference from the Regular Communication group. The Regular Communication group contacted CTLE-W via email only once ($M=.04, SD=.19$), did not contact via phone call, and visited the CTLE-W Resource Site 16 times ($M=.57, SD=.50$). These results indicate that although there was not a statistically significant increase in all categories there was a significant increase in the amount of personal communication via phone calls and emails received and the number of visits to the CTLE-W Resource site from the adjuncts who received the targeted communication. For further descriptive statistics, please refer to Table 1.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Utilization of CTLE Resources between New Adjunct Faculty Groups

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
EV-Anar Attendance	Regular	28	.11	.31	.06
	Increased	30	.03	.18	.03
	Total	58	.07	.26	.03
Discussion Participation	Regular	28	.00	.00	.00
	Increased	30	.00	.00	.00
	Total	58	.00	.00	.00
Office Hour Attendance	Regular	28	.00	.00	.00
	Increased	30	.00	.00	.00
	Total	58	.00	.00	.00
CTLE Resource Site Visits	Regular	28	.57	.50	.10
	Increased	30	1.10	.31	.06

	Total	58	.84	.49	.06
Phone Call from Adjuncts	Regular	28	.00	.00	.00
	Increased	30	.20	.41	.07
	Total	58	.10	.31	.04
Emails from Adjuncts	Regular	28	.04	.19	.04
	Increased	30	1.57	.50	.09
	Total	58	.83	.86	.11

Both first-time adjunct groups had access to all CTLE-W resources, but the adjuncts in the Increased Communication group had significantly increased contact to the CTLE-W team. For the period of the study, we made 30 initial phone calls and sent 30 follow-up emails to those identified in the Increased Communication Group. As seen in Table 2, the adjuncts in the Increased Communication group emailed CTLE-W back 47 times and called six times. These results revealed that all but one adjunct in the Increased Communication group responded to the initial targeted email from CTLE-W. In contrast, the adjuncts in the Regular Communication group did not call CTLE-W at all, and there was only one email to the CTLE-W team.

In addition, the results from this study also exposed that our targeted communications did not impact the attendance in office hours, despite offering them at various times to accommodate globally dispersed faculty. Furthermore, participation in the asynchronous discussions on the Resource Site, was not effected as the data showed adjuncts from both groups did not utilize of these resources. The lack of participation in the office hours and/or asynchronous discussions could be due to new adjuncts feeling overwhelmed with teaching responsibilities and time management concerns that come with teaching at a new university for the first time. Moreover, only four adjuncts, three from the Regular communication group and one from the Increased Communication group, attended an EV-Anar. These results indicate that despite targeted communication via emails and phone calls, participation in CTLE-W events such as the EV-Anar and office hours as well as the asynchronous discussions were not utilized by the first time adjunct instructors.

Lastly, as seen in Table 2, the CTLE-W Resource site was visited by adjuncts in both groups, which reinforces the need for a virtual center for adjuncts who are globally dispersed. However, the adjuncts in the Increased

Communication groups visited the CTLE-W Resource site 72% more than the Regular Communication group.

Table 2

New Adjunct Faculty Participation in CTLE Resources

	EV-Anar	Discussion	Office Hours	Emails from Adjunct Faculty	Phone Calls from Adjunct Faculty	CTLE Resource Site Visits
Increased Communication Group	1	0	0	47	6	34
Regular Communication Group	3	0	0	1	0	16

Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions

All research studies have their limitations and there have been several identified for this study. First, causal-comparative studies lack randomization, which can be a weakness. In addition, this study is limited because the results may only be applicable to universities that have a large adjunct population. Also, there were faculty members in each group who had classes cancelled, which may have led to their lack of participation and utilization of CTLE-W resources. Furthermore, during one month of the study a faculty member, who was assigned to the Regular Communication group, was completing required faculty development courses, where faculty are encouraged to utilize the CTLE-W resources and visit the CTLE-W Resource site. This may have resulted in more utilization of CTLE-W resources for the Regular Communication group. Moreover, we did not track if more than one CTLE-W team member spoke with an adjunct on the phone in either group during this study. This could possibly skew the data because there may have been communication from adjuncts in the Regular Communication group that was not recorded.

Additionally, the CTLE-W team is located at the Worldwide headquarters' office suite, which makes it difficult for faculty to engage in face-to-face consultations. Some adjunct faculty can be affiliated with one of our campus

locations, where they do have the opportunity to connect face-to-face with staff. As such, adjuncts may feel more comfortable discussing classroom concerns with these individuals even though they may not be knowledgeable about best practices in teaching and learning. Access to resources outside of CTLE-W may have limited the participation from both groups in the Center's offerings. Furthermore, most of the adjunct instructors work full-time jobs and are located in various time zones, which can hinder their availability to attend live educational development sessions, collaborate with their peers, and engage in individual consultations. While the online context can be very productive, it can also be restrictive.

Despite the above limitations, the results from this study reveal that first-time adjunct faculty appreciated communication from the university and were more comfortable reaching out to ask questions after they had been contacted. The adjuncts in the Increased Communication group asked questions regarding pay, grading, course policies, and Learning Management System navigation. This reflects the importance of the relationship-building aspect of the faculty development process/experience. The hope is if adjunct instructors feel comfortable, they will continue to reach out when they have questions or concerns.

Based on the initial results from this study, we recommend faculty developers create a communication plan to reach out to adjunct faculty members prior to and during their first term teaching. Although adjunct instructors may not have the opportunity to engage in live professional development experiences, phone calls and emails can help forge a personal connection with the university. These personalized conversations provide the faculty an opportunity to reflect upon successes and challenges they have encountered in their courses. The follow-up communication, reminds the faculty that CTLE-W is available at all stages of the teaching cycle (development, implementation, and wrap-up). We are not always the most appropriate point of contact, so directing faculty to the proper personnel, strengthens their connection with the university. A personal connection with the university can impact course quality.

Through other research, CTLE-W found that more experienced adjunct faculty, who had been teaching for two or more terms, overwhelmingly attended their optional webinars and other synchronous offerings. Possible reasons for this include a perceived lack of need for additional professional development by new adjunct faculty and/or a sense of not having additional time to devote to professional development due to managing the demands

of teaching a course for the first time. Additional future research on this topic could provide valuable information for faculty developers.

In conclusion, we have determined there is value in this increased communication and have continued to contact all new adjunct faculty prior to and during their first term teaching to create a welcoming environment and experience. Adjuncts from the Increased Communication group have continued to contact the CTLE-W team with questions and concerns after they completed their first course. This study validates the value of frequent, timely, targeted communication by faculty developers to adjunct instructors to encourage them to continue utilizing the professional development opportunities offered.

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