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Table of Contents

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Understanding Faculty: A Step toward Improving Professional Development Programs. ERIC Digest.

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A study by Huber states that "community college faculty constitute 31% of all U.S. higher education faculty, teaching 39% of all higher education students and 46% of all first-year students" (as cited in Editors notes, 2002, p. 1). Given the strong presence of community college faculty in the academy, it is essential that colleges develop institutional programs and policies that enhance community college teaching and learning. To be effective, these programs need to take into account the differing backgrounds, perspectives, and goals of community college faculty.

This Digest, drawn from "Community College Faculty: Characteristics, Practices, and Challenges"(New Directions for Community Colleges, Summer 2002), summarizes research findings on the similarities and differences among community college faculty groups and concludes with a discussion of how this information can be used to increase the relevance and effectiveness of faculty development initiatives. The research findings of this NDCC are drawn from the Center for the Study of Community Colleges' 2000 National Faculty Survey and the 1993 and 1999 National Survey of Post-secondary Faculty.

A COMPARISON OF PART-TIME AND FULL-TIME FACULTY

According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, 65% of faculty at public two-year colleges were part-time in 1995 (as cited in Leslie and Gappa, 2002). Given the large size of this community college faculty sub-group, it is useful to determine if there are significant differences between full- and part-time faculty with respect to instructional practices, student relationships, and professional development needs. If differences exist, this information may assist community college administrators in designing orientation and professional development programs that meet the distinct needs of both full- and part-time faculty.

The Similarities

Analyses of data collected in two national studies of community college faculty reveal a number of shared characteristics between full- and part-time faculty. Leslie and Gappa (2002) and Schuetz (2002) summarize these findings. Schuetz notes that both faculty sub-groups indicate similar patterns of instructional activities (43% lectures, 15% class discussions, and 11% for quizzes and examinations) and both groups express a desire to participate in professional development opportunities within the next five years (83% of full-time faculty and 76% of part-time). On a related note, Leslie and Gappa report no statistical difference between full- and part-time faculty with respect to professional development reading. They also cite research results that indicate there is no difference

between part- and full-time faculty members' rating of their "working environment in general" and their relatively high levels of job satisfaction (85% of part-time and 84% of full-time faculty). These findings support Leslie and Gappa's assertion that "part-timers in community colleges look more like full-time faculty than is sometimes assumed." (p. 65). In addition, the research highlights both full- and part-time faculty interest in development programs that enhance their professional knowledge base and instructional effectiveness.

Differences

Schuetz (2002) and Leslie and Gappa (2002) did uncover several noteworthy distinctions between full- and part-time faculty. Both studies cite findings from a 2000 Center for the Study of Community Colleges faculty survey, which indicate that part-time faculty were less likely than their full-time counterparts to have engaged in the following instructional or professional development activities:

* Revised a course syllabus within last three years (88% vs. 97%)

* Prepared a multi-media presentation for class (42% vs. 53%)

* Co-taught a class with someone from outside their department (15% vs. 24%)

* Developed extracurricular activities for students related to their fields (60% vs. 74%)

* Attended a professional conference in the last three years (67% vs. 89%)

* Received an award for outstanding teaching (24% vs. 39%)

Schuetz (2002) identifies a few additional differences with respect to full- and part-time faculty participation in professional development activities. Full-time faculty are more

likely to have joined national or regional nondisciplinary organizations (46% vs. 26%), disciplinary organizations (52% vs.32%), and community-college specific organizations (22% vs. 13%). Full-time faculty were also more likely to have attended professional organization meetings (22% vs. 13%). One of the implications for these findings, according to Schuetz is that, "this relative lack of interaction with professional colleagues may put part-timers at a disadvantage with respect to enhancing their instructional practices over time" (p. 43).

While these findings do help to illustrate differences between part- and full-time community college faculty behaviors, Leslie and Gappa (2002) caution readers against the inclination to employ these findings as evidence that part-time faculty are less dedicated and competent than their full-time colleagues. They point out that many of these differences could be attributed to institutional policies that mitigate against part-time faculty participation (e.g., no institutional funds for professional association memberships or travel).

DISCIPLINARY VARIATIONS

An analysis of community college faculty practices by academic discipline also reveals a number of commonalities and differences. Palmer (2002) asserts that, given the disciplinary structure of higher education, "it is reasonable to expect that faculty work will vary across academic fields" (p. 9). Drawing upon data collected in the 1999 National Survey of Post-Secondary Faculty (NSOPF-99), Palmer identified disciplinary variation along four lines: 1) academic and employment histories; 2) approaches to instruction; 3) methods used to access student work; and 4) scholarship outside of teaching. This Digest summarizes Palmer's findings in two of the four dimensions, given their relevance to a subsequent discussion of professional development programs as a means of improving community college instruction.
In an examination of instructional strategies, 88% of all faculty report that their primary method of instruction is lecture/discussion. Disciplinary differences emerge when it comes to the use of distance learning technologies (nearly one-third of engineering and computer science faculty utilize this technology) and the use of labs, clinics, or problem sessions (humanities, mathematics, and the sciences report significantly lower use in comparison to vocational disciplines). Mathematics and science faculty demonstrate two important differences in their attitudes towards assessment of student work. Compared with their colleagues in the humanities, education, health sciences, business, and social sciences disciplines, faculty in the math and physical sciences are less likely to require term papers and less likely to utilize peer evaluations as a form of student assessment.

Palmer asserts that recognizing disciplinary variations among community college faculty "counters the tendency to discuss the community college enterprise as a homogenous culture, thus guarding against the naive application of faculty development programs that press the same instructional nostrums across disciplines" (p. 18). Given the documented existence of disciplinary differences with respect to instructional practices,

it appears appropriate and desirable to create faculty development programs that focus on disciplinary-specific strategies for improving community college teaching.

COMMUNITY COLLEGE FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

Both Outcalt (2002) and Murray (2002) emphasize the importance of faculty development initiatives as a means of fostering community, increasing the professionalism of faculty, and imparting the skills and knowledge necessary to address the growing diversity of student demographics, learning styles, and goals. According to Outcalt, "Administrators would do well to create professional development programs meant to bring faculty together in interaction with one another. These programs, particularly if they are oriented toward improving instructional abilities, would benefit not just the faculty but their students" (p. 113).
In an overview of community college faculty development programs, Murray cites three related themes that diminish program effectiveness: 1) few community colleges link faculty development programs to the community college mission; 2) few colleges have formalized evaluation plans and criteria; and 3) minimal faculty participation. Community college faculty are not eager to participate in development programs that they perceive to be irrelevant, inefficient, and unfocused.

One strategy for increasing participation in professional development initiatives is to recognize the heterogeneity of community college faculty and create individualized programs tailored to the unique needs and interests of distinct sub-groups. For example, an in-service opportunity on collaborative instructional strategies should be targeted toward part-time faculty who demonstrate a lower tendency to co-teach courses or utilize collaborative techniques in the classroom (Shuetz, 2002). A program on distance learning technology might be most effective if geared toward faculty in the humanities and social sciences, given that these two disciplines have been slow to incorporate distance learning in their curricula (Palmer, 2002).

CONCLUSION

An exploration of research data pertaining to community college faculty demographics, attitudes, curriculum and instruction practices, job satisfaction and professional development activities will assist in the creation of a more accurate portrait of the community college professorate and provide educators and administrators with the knowledge necessary to design programs that will facilitate the improvement of community college instruction and learning. One of the most damaging myths concerning community college faculty is the perception that they are a homogenous group of individuals with similar backgrounds, attitudes, and aspirations. A "one size-fits-all" approach to faculty development initiatives ignores the unique challenges, needs, and goals found among community college faculty. While the research

presented in this Digest does confirm the existence of several common faculty characteristics, of greater importance is the recognition of differences and unique qualities based on membership in distinct community college sub-cultures. Recognition of these similarities and differences, and the utilization of this information to inform faculty development programs, is a critical step in the process of maximizing the educational potential of community colleges.

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