

Framingham State University: Faculty and Program Development

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INTRODUCTION

In spring 2010, institution-wide budget cuts resulted in several layoffs at Framingham State University (FSU), including the position of Associate Dean of the Division of Graduate and Continuing Education (DGCE). In my position as the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of DGCE, I asked our Vice President for Academic Affairs for permission to hire three faculty fellows from among our tenured faculty with experience teaching and advising adult students to assist with the responsibilities that had been performed by the Associate Dean. The experience has also given the faculty fellows the opportunity to better understand the administrative functions of DGCE and how the unit differs from a state supported entity. Two of the fellows share their perspectives and experiences in this article.

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INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND

Framingham State University is a public institution whose Division of Continuing and Graduate Education serves over 10,000 students annually through a comprehensive range of graduate, undergraduate, certificate, professional development, and noncredit programs. All evening, weekend, summer, and online courses are under the purview of DGCE. Funding for DGCE's staff, faculty and programs is entirely self-generated through tuition and fees. As such, the organizational structure is decentralized and DGCE is a separate unit from the day division. Unless a full-time faculty member teaches a course in DGCE, there is little collaboration among the full-time and adjunct DGCE faculty teaching in the same department. The division employs program coordinators who oversee each graduate, undergraduate, and certificate programs.

My sole objective in hiring faculty fellows was to cover some of the responsibilities of the former associate dean until such time we would have funding to reinstate this position. These responsibilities included reviewing applications for graduate degrees and certificate programs; planning professional development workshops for DGCE faculty; reviewing DGCE course syllabi; resolving graduate student issues; and monitoring and evaluating noncredit courses. Prior to the start of the 2010 fall semester, I met with the faculty fellows to review the DGCE operations and to divide up these tasks. I also asked if there were any special projects they would like to be involved in during the academic year.

The fellows were selected from tenured faculty who had experience teaching and advising adult students. In exchange for working 10-hours/week in an administrative capacity for DGCE, fellows received a one-course reduction from their day load during the fall and spring semesters. Approximately \$30,000 was transferred by DGCE to college operations to cover the cost for adjunct faculty to teach the day courses.

FACULTY FELLOW PERSPECTIVES

Jon Huibregtse, Professor and Chair of the History Department

When I first became a faculty fellow, I had five years of experience as a department chair. One of the things that always interested me was adult education, and as a fellow I was able to develop this interest. My first major undertaking was a one-day workshop on teaching adults. DGCE, along with FSU's Center for Excellence in Learning, Teaching, Scholarship, and Service (CELTSS), hosted the workshop. About 70 faculty members at-

tended, mostly adjuncts, even though the entire faculty was invited. The goals of this conference were to:

- Introduce educators to the different needs of adult learners.
- Provide educators with classroom strategies geared towards non-traditional students.
- Begin a campus dialog concerning adult education which will help faculty become more effective in reaching this vital group of students.

Overall, the attendees were satisfied with the conference. Most adjuncts are semester-to-semester employees whose jobs are very insecure, and they often feel little or no connection to the university. As a faculty fellow, I was in a position to help bridge this gap. Many of the participants felt they benefited from the conference and that their professional growth was important to the university. Several told me how happy they were that DGCE held the conference and that it was the first time they had participated in a professional growth activity at the university.

A few months later, I followed up this conference with a smaller round-table discussion with three adult students and about 20 adjunct and full-time faculty members. While these activities helped us to become better educators of adults, they also grew faculty capacity by helping us understand the differences between adults and traditional students, and by integrating DGCE faculty more into the life of the university. The activities were also beneficial because they helped improve morale.

My second undertaking at DGCE was an online newsletter, *Interactive*, which comes out a couple of times each academic year. It has a very low impact on the budget and is easy to replicate. I search databases for articles on best practices of teaching adult learners in face-to-face, hybrid, and online courses. I write a brief introduction to each article and include links to the full text. The newsletter is sent to all adjunct and full-time faculty members via email and is available on the DGCE web page. One of my goals is to have the newsletter become a forum for the discussion of best practices for teaching adult students. With the increasing numbers of adults taking day division courses, it's important that our full-time day faculty join in this discussion. As this project evolves, I hope that *Interactive* draws our adjunct faculty into a university-wide dialogue about best teaching practices in both traditional and virtual settings.

Along with my colleagues on the Graduate Education Council, I or-

ganized the university's first Graduate Research Symposium. About 50 graduate students submitted abstracts and made poster presentations. We decided to use the poster format exclusively and distributed a template for students. For many it was their first professional presentation. Because many of the students are also working professionals, we held the conference late in the afternoon at the end of the semester, which unfortunately limited its exposure to the larger community.

I was also able to help DGCE with other projects, such as establishing satellite campuses and exchange student connections with India.

As a faculty member I have gained significantly from my experiences. The faculty fellows' model is a good one to explore, especially if your institution has limited resources and a similar divide between its day and evening divisions. As a department chair, I was aware of some of the strategic challenges that the university faces. But as a fellow I learned about the larger challenges. For example, several colleagues told me that when they saw DGCE sponsored the one-day workshop on teaching adults, they immediately dismissed it. I have come to a better understanding of how the university functions (or least tries to) as an integrated unit and how an initiative in one division affects others.

Lorretta M. Holloway

Associate Professor of English

One of my major tasks as a faculty fellow was to review all syllabi submitted for courses taught in DGCE to ensure that all faculty follow the syllabi guidelines established by the division. A preliminary review led to the immediate realization that DGCE did not have an academic-honesty policy or a policy for students with disabilities, something generally expected of day division courses, so we made those changes. However, even though there has been a tradition of having guidelines and the early changes adhered to already established university policy, there was some concern about the "Big Brother" feeling of having a syllabus reviewed rather than simply submitted to have on file. Using a faculty member to review the syllabi helped smooth the way for this new policy by making it easier to convince instructors and program reviewers that I was looking at syllabi from a purely academic and faculty governance perspective. Many faculty assume that administrators are only interested in seeing a syllabus to check up on an employee rather than looking at the syllabus as a step to program building and assessment for improvement.

There were some unforeseen results from the review process that

helped everyone, including faculty (both full-time and part-time) and DGCE program coordinators. The review process produced the following improvements:

Syllabi review can help connect adjunct faculty to the institution

While some of the faculty who teach in DGCE also teach during the day, a substantial portion of instructors in the evening division are not full-time faculty in the day division. Many of these faculty members are part-time, teaching at other institutions as well as ours, or working in various fields in their other professional lives. Not surprisingly, they can feel disconnected to the institution. Often, they are not part of the course- or program-development discussion, so they teach courses out of context. Syllabi review can be used to begin the discussion between DGCE program coordinators and faculty about the function of a particular course in relation to other courses in a program. Discussion about course content function with faculty members makes everyone feel like they are working together on a unit rather than individual pieces, allowing for more increasingly cohesive messages being sent to students not just about content but about standards and requirements. Discussing the relationship between courses and program goals allows for individual faculty members to understand how to better integrate their own content and teaching style with the expectations of the program and institution.

Syllabi review can help to identify performance gaps

By developing a syllabi checklist, I was able to more quickly review over 150 syllabi from DGCE courses offered in any given semester. If I discovered a gap (items missing from a syllabus that the guidelines required), I notified the program coordinator to address it with the faculty member. For example, in one semester the syllabi clearly revealed a difference in definition of what constituted classroom observation hours and the workload for a dual-level course (one offered for undergraduate and graduate credit). These were not really staffing issues but department/program issues. We sometimes assume that everyone is doing the same things and defining tasks or agendas in the same way; however, establishing the guidelines and applying them to the syllabi can reveal where the definitions differ. As a result, some departments revised descriptions or spelled out hours needed for tasks while others set up guidelines for dual-level courses, something which many programs had never really discussed.

One of the items on the checklist was to make sure that the course description in the syllabi mirrored the course description in the catalog.

Admittedly, some faculty members chafed at the idea that the division would insist upon fidelity to the catalog. However, when faculty members discussed it at one of our group meetings, the focus shifted from questions about academic freedom to respect for colleagues who had worked on such descriptions and had them approved through governance.

Syllabi review can build collegiality

On our campus, there can be a great divide between day division faculty and faculty who teach in DGCE. Tension between full-time and part-time faculty can be a problem, especially if the full-time faculty do not believe that the courses part-time faculty teaches are consistent in content and quality with those taught by full-time faculty. Having everyone follow the same guidelines and giving people information about these guidelines are important to help eliminate this perception. Informing part-time faculty about the importance of sticking to the course description agreed to by governance makes them understand the important part they play in creating a consistent message to students as well as respecting their colleagues. The checklists can also show program coordinators what they are not (and should be) telling their part-time faculty members, especially since adjunct faculty are usually not on campus for department meetings where curriculum changes get discussed. For example, one of the departments agreed upon new guidelines for dual-level courses, but it was not until the syllabi were reviewed that it became clear that new adjuncts were not made aware of these changes.

All instructors should be told that syllabi review is also for their benefit. The more clear and consistent the message about course requirements and policies, the less likely a student will have grounds for complaint. If a student complains about an instructor or course, or desires to appeal a grade, the department chair or program coordinator reviews the syllabus first, since our grade-appeal process is based on the idea that the student believes the course delivered is/was different (in requirements and/or student evaluation) than what was presented in the syllabus.

ESL PROGRAM

Another major task was to review and evaluate the curriculum, learning objectives, and instructors of the noncredit ESL program when its director resigned. Enrollment had been going down and the dean expressed concern about what was causing it. After meeting with the ESL instructors, I was surprised to find that formal learning outcomes and course descriptions

had not been identified for each of the five ESL levels and that some instructors routinely passed students to the next level without using any formal means of assessment. There had not been a consistent instructor-review or course-evaluation process that worked with all students. While most of the ESL instructors were enthusiastic about working together to tighten the curriculum, a few were openly resistant to establishing formal learning outcomes for a community education course.

By the time the new director was hired, our team had developed a list of learning objectives and assessment measures for each level. I had also done classroom observations of all ESL instructors, written an evaluation of each, and met with them individually to discuss my observations. Based on this, I also made recommendations for the renewal of contracts to the new director. Working through some of our problems not only helped us make the case for hiring a full-time director, it also put the new hire in a better position to make changes and grow the program, since we had already established a break from the past. Having a faculty fellow work on this review process emphasized the fact that we wanted to increase the academic profile of this program and make it consistent with other academic programs on campus. This also allowed us to better integrate the ESL students into our campus community.

Since then the ESL program has grown. Several of the ESL faculty thanked me for treating them as the professionals they are. They feel a greater sense of pride in the program and have an understanding of the university's assessment process.

CONCLUSION

While the original purpose in hiring faculty fellows was to help cover the responsibilities of the Associate Dean's position, their involvement has exceeded all expectations. They have used their individual expertise on projects that have enhanced DGCE operations: a new electronic newsletter on adult teaching and learning, a standardized approach to writing the course syllabus, a poster research conference for graduate students, and a comprehensive reorganization of our noncredit ESL curriculum. In addition to these tangible outcomes, the presence of the fellows has also helped to bridge communication between full-time faculty in the day and adjunct faculty teaching in DGCE. As a result, there is more sharing of professional development opportunities for both day and DGCE faculty, and greater collaboration in sponsoring events.

Most importantly, an unanticipated benefit has been their interest in integrating part-time continuing education faculty into the life of the institution. The fellows have served as de facto ambassadors for continuing education by promoting the division among their full-time peers in such venues as meetings of department chairs, where Jon Huibregtse has shared his work in DGCE. Since full-time faculty often dismiss CE units as academically inferior, the involvement and support of faculty fellows has brought greater respect to the division.

It is worth repeating that faculty fellows cannot replace the work of a full-time associate dean, but they have been instrumental in assisting with administrative tasks and sharing their individual interests and expertise in carrying out new initiatives. My hope is that when funding improves and we are able to reinstate the position of associate dean, we will also continue our faculty fellows program. 🙏