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Adjunct Faculty & Institutional Identity: Toward a Model for Acculturation

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Cover Page Footnote

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In an effort to avoid the devolution into secularism as articulated in Burtchaeff's (1998) *The Dying of the Light*, Christian institutions are tasked with deeply questioning and considering their institutional identities. Concordia University Irvine (CUI) is an institution of higher education (IHE) in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS) that has made a commitment to this consideration. CUI's mission statement is “Concordia University Irvine, a comprehensive Lutheran Christian university guided by Christ's Great Commission, develops wise, honorable, and cultivated citizens to serve society and the church” (Concordia, 2023, para. 1). The re-commitment to Lutheran identity started in 2010 with the question, “How could Concordia strengthen the entire academic experience and create a shared intellectual foundation, rooted in its Lutheran heritage, for the entire campus community?” (Concordia University Irvine, 2023b, para. 1). The answer led to the transformation of CUI's undergraduate curriculum into a core curriculum called Enduring Questions & Ideas (Q&I). Q&I trains students to “make meaningful connections between academic disciplines, life and Christian faith” (CUI Magazine, 2013, p. 2). This commitment blossomed into an academic pursuit leading to a volume of essays published in 2015 focusing on a Lutheran approach to the idea and practice of a Christian university, focusing on the dual lenses of the doctrine of vocation and Luther's two-kingdom paradigm (Ashmon, 2015). Recently, realizing no such Q&I curriculum existed at the graduate level, the institution launched a grant-funded Graduate Identity Initiative in which theology faculty and graduate program directors will work together to develop vocation-based online modules to drop into online graduate courses as a way to inject that missional identity throughout all programs.

While the aforementioned initiatives are curriculum-based, the commitment to maintaining a Christian identity has been ongoing amongst faculty-based initiatives since at least

2007, when CUI launched its “Faithfulness and Excellence” program to hire, train, and advance faculty who were from non-Lutheran Christian faith traditions (Rank and Advancement in Rank, 2015). The program was later redeveloped into the “Vision-Mission-Vocation” (VMV) courses, aimed to help faculty “understand and articulate their vocations at [the university] in light of the University’s mission and vision” (Vision-Mission-Vocation, 2020, p. 1). Presently, all full-time faculty are required to complete VMV, but there is no such training available for adjunct faculty. A recent study on adjunct acculturation in this context found that use of such a training model “enhances understanding and support of the faculty role in the mission/vision of the institution” and that wider use – specifically among adjuncts – is recommended for promoting institutional ethos and identity (Rodrigues & Swisher, 2022, p. 478). In order for adjunct faculty to know, understand, and gauge compatibility with institutional realities, those realities must first be clearly communicated (Longman et al., 2018). The following will provide the historical context for the importance of the commitment to institutional/missional identity and explore opportunities to inculcate these values among adjunct faculty.

Historical Context

Concordia University Irvine is not alone in utilizing a large number of adjunct faculty as instructors. Higher education institutions across the country began the transition from hiring mostly tenured track, full-time faculty to part-time or adjunct faculty nearly fifty years ago in a plight to reduce budget costs. According to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in 1969 approximately 97% of faculty positions were held by tenured faculty; however by 1998 this number had declined to nearly 72% (2014). The National Center for Educational Statistics (2021) recognized the faculty makeup for post-secondary, degree awarding, higher education organizations, as 56% full-time faculty and 44% part-time faculty. The popularity and

reliance on part-time adjunct faculty, as a model, has gained traction and is therefore worthy of consideration as institutions grapple with how best to impart institutional identity among contingent faculty. This is especially true for private Christian institutions wanting to maintain an identity, anchored in biblical truths, while competing in an ever growing secular society.

The steadfast commitment to an operationalized Lutheran identity sets Concordia University Irvine apart from other private Christian organizations and has been the cornerstone of success for the institution. When higher education institutions who are affiliated with a religion lose focus on the foundational underpinning of the religion, and overall purpose for the institution, the results can be devastating. Burtchaell (1998) showcased the destructive and often catastrophic outcomes for organizations who departed from and sacrificed their identity in an effort to conform. As these institutions, little-by-little, became disoriented and went astray, their moorings were no longer grounded in their church relationships and their identities became eroded (Burtchaell, 1998).

Many lessons can be learned in examining the collapse of other private Christian organizations. For the purpose of this paper the authors will share one recent example demonstrating the dissolution of another LCMS institution, Concordia University Portland (CUP), to glean insight on the pitfalls of untethering institutional identity for employees.

Lesson 1: Cultivate Identity

The identity of an institution is grounded, not in the administration or board of directors who oversee the organization, but rather in the faculty and staff that carry out the day-to-day work of the university. The “promulgation of identity” is critical to the success of an organization and must be embraced by all in order to flourish (Thomas, 2023, p. 3). For this reason, it is imperative that CUI hire Christians who live out their vocations while fostering a

culture that emulates the identity of the university. As a religious organization, CUI is exempt from the legal parameters of Title VII and therefore is afforded the opportunity to intentionally and knowingly hire only those employees who are Christian (U.S. Equal Opportunity Employment Commission, 2023). Once a religious organization strays from this hiring commitment they are no longer exempt from Title VII and therefore must adhere to that law. In an effort to attend to the challenges associated with rapid growth, CUP curbed their traditional hiring practices and began the subtle hiring of non-Christians in one specialized program, which then set a precedent for other programs, eventually resulting in legal compliance issues of Title VII (Thomas, 2023). The consequence of straying from traditional LCMS hiring practices added to the loss of culture at CUP while leading to unintended legal consequences that played a profound role in the collapse of the institution.

Lesson 2: Intentional Acculturation

The creation of a fortuitous institutional identity is not accidental. Staff and faculty must be intentionally and systematically trained and oriented towards such an identity. To assist in developing a Lutheran distinctiveness CUI has adopted the VMV courses which are a requirement for all full-time faculty. Participation in the VMV courses informs faculty on best practices in fulfilling the mission of the university and more specifically living out vocations according to LCMS principles. It is imperative that training and orientation toward foundational expectations be nurtured if the mission of the institution is to remain at the forefront of operations. In part, the disintegration of CUP was a direct result of the deterioration of institutional identity that transpired due to failure to prioritize efforts and support systems surrounding developing the distinct LCMS identity of the university (Thomas, 2023). An unwavering commitment concerning enculturating all faculty according to the purpose of the

university is necessary for institutional sustainability and prosperity. It is imperative that CUI be cognizant and deliberate in their endeavor to hire, train, and orient adjunct faculty in the identity and mission of the university in an attempt to avoid similar outcomes to those experienced by CUP.

Conceptual Framework

A social science approach is most commonly used when studying research in education. Social science is the lens through which people are studied in relation to their behaviors and connections. In the most basic sense, social science studies how people interact with one another (Doyle et al., 2023). Remembering this and drawing on organizational socialization theory, the authors consider whether an acculturation program for adjuncts is a necessary and feasible endeavor. According to Wenberg (2012) “organizational socialization is defined as the process through which individuals acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors required to adapt to a new work role” (p.17). Bauer and Erdogan (2011) used the terms organizational socialization and onboarding interchangeably. According to the authors, the two are inherently interconnected whereby a new hire, or in this case, a new adjunct instructor, transitions from being an organizational outsider to being accepted as an insider. A desire to hire, train, and orient adjunct faculty has been identified as a gap or problem space and a scholarly approach was used to identify best practices and rationale, as supported by the literature, for addressing this concern.

This paper will serve as a conceptual framework encompassing the conventions of organizational socialization theory coupled with a prescribed curriculum designed to foster institutional identity among part-time faculty. It is the authors’ hope that this paper will serve as a guide for implementing learning modules, or the like, designed to encourage and promote enhanced institutional identity among adjunct faculty.

Organizational Socialization

Currently, CUI does not offer the aforementioned VMV course to adjuncts. Adjuncts are typically contracted for one term at a time and therefore cannot participate in the multiyear long VMV training program without great expense to the institution. However, there is an asynchronous onboarding module within the Learning Management System (LMS) that includes several videos (5-8 minutes each) covering the institution's beliefs and heritage that mimic the content covered in the more extensive VMV course (Rodrigues & Swisher, 2022). Whether or not this is sufficient has not been studied by the institution. Yet, adjuncts comprise the majority of faculty populations (Shulman et al., 2017), especially in graduate programs, and seek to be included within the culture of the organization. In a study of information technology organizations, researchers found that employer branding, or identity, is positively related to organizational identification and employee retention, and even to job satisfaction (Bharadwaj et al., 2022). Rooted in Klein and Weaver's (2000) findings that employees who received an orientation were substantially more socialized than newcomers who did not, Chung et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of developing formal organizational policies and providing incentives that support a learning culture as it relates to institutional training. The learning does not necessarily need to be centralized. Wiseman et al. (2022) discovered that salespeople who underwent a decentralized (individualized) onboarding program achieved approximately 23.5% higher performance than those who completed a centralized onboarding program. That is, organizations should think about how to orient new employees in relation to each person's background. One such model for individualized onboarding is a faculty mentoring program (FMP), which is a faculty-directed model that helps "facilitate the incoming faculty member's acculturation" to the institution (Eisner, 2015, p. 8). Indeed, Rodrigues et al. (2022)

recommended that all adjunct faculty be assigned a mentor, whether it is a veteran adjunct or full-time faculty member, who can meet with the newcomer at least four times per year to intentionally discuss mission and vision.

Areas of Opportunity and Implementation

The authors of the present paper propose an opportunity to close the gap on adjunct acculturation. This opportunity is outlined as a five-step plan with the following components: an individual experience, a structured experience, a collaborative mentoring experience, a reflective experience, and an ongoing assessment experience.

Phase One: Individual Experience

Phase one consists of pre-contract asynchronous learning modules completed by the individual applicant that are prerequisites for employment as a contracted adjunct instructor. This step comes after they have been interviewed and have completed all hiring paperwork, but before they are contracted for a course.

The first portion of phase one broaches institutional identity by explaining institutional history, context, mission, and vision. Akpamah et al. (2021) confirmed that organizational strategy should begin with an overview of the organization's beliefs, values, and mission, as organizational culture and strategy are intertwined. This can be introduced and reintroduced in various formats such as virtual synchronous sessions, online asynchronous videos, modules within LMS training, handbooks, and more.

The second portion of phase one is for adjuncts to complete legally required trainings through human resources, such as sexual harassment and FERPA. Additionally, adjuncts complete online training for the Learning Management System (LMS) and internal systems such as their institutional email account or the Student Information System (SIS).

“Competence in engaging the complexity of diversity” is important for higher education excellence (Smith, 2020 p. 21). The enrollment at CUI reflects the diversity of the state of California which is evidenced, in part, by its status as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), and in many programs is required to teach diversity standards as outlined by California’s Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC). Diversity can even “serve as a powerful facilitator of institutional mission” (Smith, 2020, p. 3). Therefore, the third portion of phase one should include a diversity module addressing various topics such as inclusion, race and ethnicity, the multigenerational graduate student body, gender, ability, bias, identity, cultural awareness, or other relevant topics.

Phase Two: Structured Experience

In a metaanalysis of the effectiveness of organizational socialization, structured on-the-job training was shown to be the strongest onboarding strategy (Frögéli et al., 2023). Indeed, structured onboarding has been used successfully among adjuncts at New York University, utilizing workshops, events, and timely communication to increase engagement and preparation for course design and instruction (Farakish et al., 2022). In CUI’s school of education, adjuncts meet one-on-one with the director of onboarding to review the aforementioned trainings, as well as to supply an orientation handbook, which has been identified as an essential component of newcomer socialization (Godinho et al., 2023). This is also a time to go over teaching expectations, internal resource documents, and to provide points of contact for future needs. The onboarding director furthermore encourages adjuncts to follow CUI social media accounts as added points of connection and communication. This one-on-one time provides a space to ask questions and receive individualized support for areas of concern.

Phase Three: Collaborative Mentoring Experience

While the definition of mentoring is complex and changing (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2019), research confirms the importance of establishing mentoring programs in newcomer socialization as it fosters their integration into the organization (Cai et al., 2021). Indeed, the knowledge sharing and role clarity that is afforded through the mentoring process contributes to organizational citizenship behaviors (Adil et al., 2021). In CUI's School of Education, adjunct faculty report to a program director who serves also as their mentor. The program director works alongside the adjunct for the duration of their employment and is available on-demand to answer any questions, provide support, and encourage professional development.

Phase Four: Reflective Experience

Phase four of the acculturation process embodies a reflective element. Several indicators have been identified as necessary components for strengthening instructor performance including student voice, collegial review, and self-reflection (Feder, 2020). Student voice and collegial review will be addressed in phase five. Reflection is an essential ingredient for an individual's continued growth and learning. When adjunct instructors are bestowed the opportunity to critically reflect on their practice and content-knowledge they experience transformative learning and improved pedagogical practices (Farakish et al., 2022). In accordance with full-time faculty VMV curriculum, adjunct faculty would benefit from participation in prescribed occasions for reflection. Reflective practices could be implemented at multiple levels during the extended orientation process to include consideration of LCMS doctrine and vocation.

Phase Five: Assessment

The purpose of the final phase, the assessment phase, is to improve adjunct instructor performance and ultimately increase the student experience which is understood as a missional

goal. CUI's School of Education will be highlighted to illustrate best practices adopted by one department using adjunct instructor evaluation and assessment protocols. It is recommended that the exemplar be adopted and implemented within other departments as a common practice for escalating program success and instructor experience (Doyle & Tarbutton, 2022). According to the authors it is essential that adjunct instructors encounter the same onboarding training, expectations, opportunities and support to ensure consistent care and development for students and instructors. Part-time instructors should be introduced to the assessment process, well-versed on the performance expectations, and transparently evaluated to aid in optimal growth and development. Rowbotham (2015) recognized instructors' confidence and overall effectiveness improved with individualized and explicit feedback related to expectations. Such feedback could be shared via program directors, other full-time faculty, mentors, and students. According to Feder (2020), collegial, as well as student critiques, play an intimate role in improving instructor performance and expectations. In considering this, adjunct faculty could mature in their efforts to espouse institutional identity, if an ongoing, consistent culture of assessment was integrated.

Proposed Benefits

The benefits of immersing contingent or adjunct faculty in the Lutheran identity are far reaching for the individual as well as the organization. Through their participation in the VMV course or similar learning modules, all employees will understand the true identity of the institution and its mission. The adoption and implementation of curriculum, like the VMV course or the aforementioned five-phase model, as a universal practice and expectation for part-time faculty will assure the identity of the organization is embodied for all to witness. The extent to which an adjunct instructor is assimilated and welcomed within an organization is determined, in some measure, by the efforts of the organization (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). Conversely, if an

organization fails to extend opportunities for acculturation, contingent employees may not experience the benefits of belonging to the organization.

According to the American Association of University Professors (2014) part-time employees, such as adjunct instructors, should be involved in all aspects of the institution just as full-time faculty are and should be expected to adhere to the same professional responsibilities. One example of this ought to be participation in professional development ventures such as vision-mission-based initiatives. The AAUP (2014) recognized that when part-time faculty were included and engaged similarly to full-time faculty some of the benefits included increased student achievement, improved learning climate, and enhanced organizational governance. CUI would be wise to focus concerted efforts towards this endeavor as the rate of part-time employees continues to rise among higher education organizations (Danaei, 2019; Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; & AAUP, 2014). Historically, part-time employment positions have held an increased rate of turnover resulting in financial implications for the employer. Advanced turnover rates can be curbed when organizational socialization is appropriately understood and managed for adjunct faculty (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011).

Conclusions

Operationally, it is critical that Christian institutions of higher education place at the center of its mission the importance of all employees being fully educated and immersed in the institution's identity. The adoption and implementation of a prescribed acculturation program as a necessary element for new employees could prove advantageous for all stakeholders. Designing a sophisticated onboarding protocol for adjunct instructors would strengthen individual belonging and magnify institutional identity. To this end, higher education organizations should invest in the development and implementation of a multilevel system of

support to increase adjunct instructor's sense of belonging and inspire increased understanding of institutional identity.

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