

Preparing Future Faculty: Needs Assessment for Quality Instruction

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The Problem

Many post secondary institutions are carefully reconsidering their teaching missions as one approach to effecting retention and improving the quality of instruction for their undergraduates. This recognition of the importance of teaching reflects a national concern that “the future health of the institution depends upon how well it serves its undergraduate students—an increasingly diverse population” (Syracuse, 1996)—particularly during the first year when the rate of attrition is greatest. However, in many institutions entering students’ early experiences are with faculty having the least preparation or experience in teaching. Part-time faculties are responsible for 25 to 50 percent of undergraduate instruction (Nyquist, Abbott, Wulff & Sprague, 1991; Darling & Dewey, 1989). This employment practice will likely continue since it provides the significant benefits of flexible staffing at minimum costs.

Few would argue that adequate training and mentoring of graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) and part-time faculty (PTIs) are vital for quality instruction. Presently colleges and universities provide varied strategies for preparing GTAs and PTIs for the challenges of teaching at the

post secondary level. These strategies may include teacher manuals, orientation sessions lasting from one day to one week in length, varying forms of mentoring, tutoring experiences, supplemental instruction, team teaching with an experienced professor, and/or taking courses designed to prepare teachers of undergraduates.

Obviously, there are a number of options available to facilitate the maturation process of GTAs and PTIs into tomorrow’s professors. While it is highly appropriate to initiate a teacher development program for adjunct faculty, it may be highly inappropriate to assume the format that would best meet the needs of an institution or an individual department within an institution. While all institutions should seek to train GTAs and PTIs in ways that acknowledge teaching as scholarship and prepare this population for their current and future role as faculty, programs must be designed to meet unique needs.

The Project

In order to make recommendations for a teacher development program for the College of Arts and Science in our institution and at the same time avoid assumptions about the needs of the GTA and PTI faculty

that may not be accurate, three faculty at Georgia State University initiated the Needs Assessment For Quality Instruction Project (NAFQI). After an extensive review of the literature to learn about efforts at other institutions and after an investigation into existing programs across our university, this research team created a "Surveys of Perceptions" about teaching by PTIs and GTAs. In Fall, 1996, we first administered the survey to adjunct faculty, as the number of GTAs and PTIs is largest during this quarter. The full-time faculty and students received their surveys in the Winter and Spring Quarters of 1997 respectively. The surveys were designed to yield three kinds of data: demographic information, quantitative data pertaining to issues such as numbers of years taught and ranking of teacher skill, and qualitative data about views and perspectives of teaching, concerns, and needs. An effort was made to develop parallel items on the surveys to part-time faculty, full time faculty, and students so that results could be examined from three different perspectives.

Results

Initial analysis of the survey to GTAs and PTIs reveals interesting themes and contradictions. For example, on a four point scale (1=poor, 2=fair, 3=good, 4=excellent), part-time faculty report an average of 3.76 in content knowledge and 3.32 in teaching ability. However, in an open-ended question where faculty express concerns they would like to see addressed, pedagogical support and mentoring was the second most frequently mentioned issue (after more pay!). Part-time faculty rate themselves as good teachers but they see teacher development experiences as their greatest need.

When asked, "In what ways would you like to see your teaching improve?" examples of common re-

sponses are: greater understanding of adult learners, knowledge about students and their needs, ways to make explanations clearer, ways to get discussions going, communication skills, writing tests that teach as well as measure, and need for more teaching strategies.

As data analysis continues, we will look for consistent themes within and across the three groups surveyed (part-time faculty, full-time faculty, and students) for an accurate picture of perceptions regarding the quality of teaching by adjunct faculty. The project will culminate with recommendations to the Dean for a faculty development program unique to our college.

Conclusions

Preliminary conclusions indicate that the "needs" reported by GTAs and PTIs at Georgia State University are similar to those reported by adjunct faculty from other institutions around the country: teacher development, connection within the department and the university, and better compensation. Additional information from survey analysis and planned interviews will continue to inform our efforts. We are encouraged that this self-study will assist us in making sound recommendations regarding the nature of the program needed to support our adjunct faculty and improve the instructional climate of the undergraduate program.

References

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Questions or comments can be made to Nannette at
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Top Five Concerns Of Adjunct Faculty

1. *Compensation*
2. *Pedagogical support and mentoring*
3. *Communication/feeling part of the community*
4. *Job security*
5. *Respect from colleagues*