The Importance of Adjunct Growth and Care

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Abstract

This column discusses an academic library's efforts and commitment to helping adjunct librarians feel connected to their colleagues and institution as well as more engaged and effective in their work.

Introduction

Colleges and universities, facing budget crises since the recession, have undertaken many cost-savings measures including replacing full-time faculty positions with low-cost, adjunct positions. Following this pattern in greater higher education, academic libraries are becoming increasingly reliant on adjunct or temporary contracts and positions. How can you build community and encourage professional growth when these colleagues are on campus for a limited amount of time? This column discusses Pierce College Library's commitment to helping adjunct librarians feel connected to their colleagues and institution as well as more engaged and effective in their work. Strategies outlined include: onboarding, shared reference work, co-teaching & project work, and professional development activities such as annual in-service days, regular reading group meetings, and reflective practice. Please note this article uses the term adjunct to refer to part-time and contingent faculty positions.

Challenges of Adjunct Employment

Many of our adjuncts hold other part-time or full-time positions, juggle numerous responsibilities including care for children and other family members, and face long commutes. Our faculty coordinators are committed to equitable scheduling for our adjunct faculty from term to term, but it is an increasingly complex process. It must be underscored that while the efforts discussed in this column go a long way in addressing some of the challenging conditions of adjunct employment, the authors recognize that they do not confront the systemic issues of inequity associated with academic contingent labor.

Onboarding Strategies

Integrating new colleagues into the library and greater institution is an essential part of ensuring their success. Due to staffing changes and new projects on the horizon, Pierce College Library regularly faces the challenge of onboarding several new adjunct librarians in a short period of time. Pierce College is a community college district in Washington State with campuses in Lakewood, Puyallup, and Joint Base Lewis-McChord. Under the leadership of Deb Gilchrist, the library won an ACRL Excellence in Academic Libraries Award in 2005. Currently a little over half of our library faculty are adjunct, which is in line with statistics reported by American Association of University Professors (https://www.aaup.org/issues/contingency/background-facts). Over the last few years, our faculty coordinators -- with support from all full-time librarians -- refined an existing onboarding process, incorporating activities that got to the heart of the unique culture of the library and would allow new librarians to gain a foothold in essential duties. As part of this process, new librarians explore print and electronic collections using sample research assignments; observe an instruction session; co-teach an instruction session; are observed teaching on the reference desk or in the classroom; and write an annual self-reflection. Many of these activities are discussed more in depth in this article.

Shared Reference Work

In the first weeks of a new term, Pierce College Library reference desks, perhaps like your own, are abuzz with questions that require knowledge not only of the library but also college systems, policies, resources, and campus locations. To put new adjunct librarians at ease and help them begin to develop a strong base of institutional knowledge, they are scheduled alongside another librarian for the first hour of their shift for the first two weeks of the term. A checklist of accounts, physical spaces, policies, technology, and collection areas is used as a guide to ensure a broad introduction to the

library. At one campus library, double coverage during heavy-traffic morning hours continues for the duration of the term, most weekdays. Shared reference work allows for shadowing, meaningful conversation, and connection.

Co-Teaching and Project Work

Our adjunct librarians have varied classroom experience; some have never taught before while others have been teaching for years. Before taking on teaching responsibilities, adjuncts observe at least one instruction session. Those who are new to teaching may observe a variety of classes and then co-teach a session. Adjunct librarians typically observe and teach sessions for Pierce College's required College Success course, which has a scheduled library lesson. It is an ideal opportunity because it is a course-integrated session with a shared lesson plan. Once an adjunct feels prepared to teach, they design their own instruction with opportunities to brainstorm and share lesson plans when needed. Each new adjunct is observed teaching, and those adjuncts who carry a heavy load of teaching continue to be observed periodically either in the classroom or on the reference desk. Feedback is provided to the adjunct in an informal fashion, and the adjunct may choose to include their teaching experience in their end-of-year reflection document, discussed later in this column.

Librarians added the possibility of project work on top of reference and instruction duties a few years ago. We have found that when asking an adjunct librarian to take on a project, there are different challenges that must be taken into consideration such as who supervises the project, if you work in a flat-organizational structure like we do, and how to ensure the project outcome is realistic in the hours allotted. Depending on the scope of the project, anywhere between five and fifty hours may be dedicated to completing the work, usually within an academic quarter. Projects taken on by our team of adjunct librarians include: revising an online plagiarism tutorial; creating subject-specific LibGuides;

designing instructional videos; developing displays; and suggesting material for the collection. Our

adjunct librarians also have diverse skill sets that are a boon to the library. For example, they have

played significant roles in recent software migrations. In our experience, librarians self-identify or

demonstrate interest in bringing their skills to the library; drawing on these skill sets can be invaluable.

Professional Development

Our goal is to have both formal and informal opportunities for professional development

where we can also bond as a team. Formally, we strive to have an adjunct in-service meeting each year.

These meetings provide a stipend, occur outside normally scheduled hours, and typically include a

lunch. Because our adjuncts often have other jobs or families to care for, the scheduling of these

meetings is often tricky and attendance varies. All librarians give input on the focus of in-service

meetings; past topics have included: one-shot instruction, open educational resources, the ACRL

Framework, and technology changes.

Informally, we have a reading group that meets up a few times each year at a local grocery

store called Pal-Do World -- hence the deceptively official moniker of our Paldo World Conference.

Though we plan the discussion around a selection of readings, like any good book club, we always

stray off topic. Our readings have varied from Brené Brown and Ta-Nehisi Coates to academic articles

on scaffolding library instruction in English classes.

In addition to planned events, we also encourage adjuncts to reflect on their work. This fulfills,

in part, College requirements for faculty evaluation, but we also feel it is important to be intentional

about reflective practice through use of written reflection, as it may not happen naturally due to time

and scheduling. We provide a prompt that asks them to consider instruction and reference work,

accomplishments, goals, challenges, and potential future projects. Often we hear about what they

appreciate about their work at Pierce College, the struggles they may have, and the directions they see

their career taking. One of our library coordinators reviews and responds to individuals.

Conclusion

Our ultimate goal is to share experiences and be supportive of growth opportunities. However,

organizational communication is a skill we continue to work on in a library with multiple campuses

and varying shift work. From planning and scheduling to responding to needs as they arise, the

commitment to building community and encouraging professional growth involves a significant time

investment from the whole team. It is rewarding and mutually beneficial to share in this work, and

anecdotally, we hear that our adjunct faculty appreciate these efforts and value the opportunities.

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