Building Community for Teaching Faculty

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Abstract

At large, research-intensive universities, hiring specialized teaching faculty to teach their sizable populations of undergraduate students has become increasingly common. However, these instructors are often on the fray of the fabric of their departments, disconnected from conversations, committees, and decisions that have traditionally been in the realm of tenure-track faculty. In response to such lack of community, the College of Engineering at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign recently established a Teaching Professionals Program (TPro2) for its specialized teaching faculty. This paper reports on the inception of the program, its goals, and its outcomes to date. We also provide advice for others interested in developing such a program at their own institution.

Introduction

At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the College of Engineering has approximately 65 teaching faculty (roughly 16% of all faculty), and the numbers are growing. In 2014, we (the authors, a senior lecturer in computer science and the director of the college teaching center) began to recognize and discuss the challenges and opportunities facing our teaching faculty. In consultation with other teaching faculty and with the encouragement from our dean, we created a learning community for this group, where its share problems, ideas, and resources in order to increase competence and satisfaction in their work.[1]

An explanation of our use of the term "teaching faculty" may be helpful at the outset of this paper. The literature is inconsistent in its nomenclature for instructors who are hired primarily or exclusively to teach classes. The primary terms used ("adjunct," "contingent," and "non-tenure-track") convey a sense of marginalization and distance from the core operations of institutions of higher education. Our decision to use the term "teaching faculty" in this paper reflects our intent (both in this paper and in the program we describe) to elevate the academy's understanding of the value of teaching faculty, to promote inclusivity, and to provide encouragement to teaching faculty themselves.

Literature Review

The proportion of teaching faculty at U.S. universities has been increasing steadily since the 1970s.[2] In 2013, at doctoral universities, teaching faculty represented just over half (52.9%) of the faculty workforce, up nearly five percent from 2005.[3] Although in 2013 over half of those teaching faculty were part-time, more recent trends in 2015 indicate a shift toward hiring more full-time teaching faculty.[4]

Teaching faculty are not heterogeneous in type of job responsibilities or career aspirations. While teaching faculty are hired primarily to provide instruction, many of them have additional duties, including course coordination, teaching assistant supervision, student advising, etc. Their career goals also vary. Gappa and Leslie identify four categories of professionals in this realm: "aspiring academics," who teach part-time while preparing for an academic career; "freelancers,"

who choose to teach classes alongside other types of employment; "specialists-experts-professionals," who are committed to teaching as their careers, and "career enders," who are at or near retirement from non-university work and want to give back.[5]

The *Chronicle of Higher Education's Trends Report* identifies the working climate of teaching faculty as one of ten key issues in higher education in 2015.[6] Teaching faculty lack the prospects for tenure, voice in shared governance, and the same opportunities to engage in research that tenure-track faculty have. They often undertake the less desirable tasks in their departments, e.g., teaching large, introductory courses.[7]

A recent study by Haviland et al. captures these issues from the perspective of teaching faculty themselves.[8] The premise of their study is that academic departments comprise a collegium – a "complex network of assumptions, traditions, protocols, relations, and structures within the university which permit the professoriate to control and conduct the academic affairs of the institution, determining, among other things, who shall be admitted, who shall teach and research, what shall be taught and researched, and what standards shall be set for which rewards" (p. 75).[9] The authors interviewed 39 experienced, full-time teaching faculty to probe their experiences and sense of belonging to this collegium. The following themes emerged:
1. While teaching faculty are hired primarily for teaching, there are often written or unwritten expectations for other responsibilities (e.g., service and research). In many cases, though, these other activities are controlled or restricted by the departments, with the sense that the tenure-track faculty must sanction such work.
2. Many teaching faculty reported everyday interactions that led them to feel regarded as lower status, and marginalized from the tenure-track faculty circles. Examples included exclusion from departmental social events and skepticism from tenure-track faculty about their scholarly/research abilities.
3. Many teaching faculty reported a lack of formal voice and input into departmental affairs. Most typically, they were excluded from meetings and decision making processes. A common recourse was to find a tenure-track faculty advocate to carry their points of view forward.

Similar findings are reported in Hearn and Deupree,[10] in Ott and Cisneros,[11] and in Kezar and Maxey,[12] who state that, "the bifurcated system of tenure-track and non-tenure track or adjunct faculty, each with different working conditions, roles, and experiences as members of our academic communities, divides the professoriate into more and less privileged groups" (p. 7).

While issues related to teaching faculty are thorny, many who study them are quick to point out that these individuals provide value to their departments beyond "covering" instructional responsibilities—often bringing distinctive knowledge, skills, and attitudes to bear in their work. These assets include expertise in critical fields, teaching proficiency, real-world experience and perspectives, and a passion for their subject matter.[13]

Support for teaching faculty is central to their success. Lyons and Burnstad indicate that teaching faculty thrive in their positions when they have access to:
"1. A thorough orientation to the institution, its culture and practices;
2. Adequate training in fundamental teaching and classroom management skills;

3. A sense of belonging to the institution;
4. Both initial and ongoing professional development;
5. Recognition for quality work that is perceived as appropriate and adequate (p. 2)."[14]

Kezar and Maxey add further conditions that lead to success and satisfaction among teaching faculty: equity among academic appointments (eligibility for benefits, opportunity for promotion, etc.), protection of academic freedom, flexibility in appointments, and a greater sense of community.[15]

Some universities have attempted to provide mentoring and other professional development resources to their teaching faculty (see Lyons[16] for a variety of approaches). Sorcinelli and Aitken describe the roles that campus teaching centers can play in engaging faculty in activities that enhance their teaching experiences. One role is *creating community,* by organizing discussion groups, peer visits, and other formal and informal events. A related role is *fostering collegiality,* often achieved through inviting respected senior faculty to help develop, coordinate, and facilitate the gatherings. A third role is *building coalitions* to advocate for sound policies and best practices in such areas as "evaluation of teaching, both for promotion and improvement purposes; teaching assistant training; teaching and learning in the diverse classroom; and faculty roles and rewards" (p. 319).[17]

One particular way in which teaching centers could have such an impact is through facilitating faculty learning communities. Pulford et al. describe faculty learning communities as "ensemble-driven: The facilitator acts as a supporter, organizer or co-learner, and all faculty members take roles in providing or analyzing relevant content and steering group inquiry."[18] Faculty learning communities promote a sense of community[19][20][21], encourage the value and adoption of new ideas in teaching,[22][23] and foster shared vision and change among faculty.[24][25]

The Teaching Professionals Program

Beginnings. When we (the authors) began discussing the idea of supporting our teaching faculty, our circumstances in the college of engineering reflected many themes highlighted in the literature. We had a growing number of teaching faculty, several of whom had informally reported the sorts of challenges described in Haviland et al.[26] These conversations happened in the midst of campus initiatives to more clearly delineate the roles, titles, and promotion procedures for this growing population of instructors, so our teaching faculty had many questions about their future status. We also realized that, because our college is quite department-centric, the teaching faculty as a whole had little opportunity to connect with each other. Therefore, it was logical for the college-wide teaching center to centralize efforts to promote collegiality, create community, and build coalitions.[27] The college administration, acknowledging the importance of recruiting and retaining excellent teaching faculty, provided a small amount of funding for TPro2. We began our efforts in the fall term of 2014, and therefore we view our program as still in the nascent stage.

Goals and activities. TPro2 works to build community and formalize the career objectives of the participants by hosting meetings that provide professional development, facilitate sharing of ideas, and allow general discussion. Our intent is to provide an atmosphere of collegiality,

encouragement, and support. All specialized teaching faculty are invited to participate.

We reinforce this community of practice in four primary ways.

First, we provide luncheons for sharing of ideas and experiences. We meet approximately on a monthly basis during each academic term (and held one picnic dinner as social event during the summer break). We provide lunch in order to foster camaraderie, and participants both enjoy the fellowship and appreciate the gesture as a sign of support from the college administration. It is our intent to keep these sessions positive, friendly, informal, and open.

We (the authors) have planned, coordinated, and facilitated most of the sessions to date. While some of our meetings involve socializing and free discussion, we also draw on suggestions from the participants for discussion topics. Such topics have included survey results of participants' work situations, information-sharing about the college's administrative stance on teaching faculty, teaching assistant supervision, and ideas for professional development. A recurrent topic has been the newly established promotion practices, and those few who have navigated that process have been generous in sharing their experiences.

Second, we offer ideas and experiences that will help teaching faculty develop professionally. An engineering education expert provided a session on the basics of education research, and continues to meet separately with a subset of our participants to flesh out ideas for research projects. Newly emerging is an interest among participants in exploratory practice, a framework for professional development based on structured reflective practice.[28] Through this framework we have informally and collaboratively examined some of our challenging teaching experiences as "puzzles" to be worked out through reflection and inquiry.

Third, we are building centralized access to documents, communication, and planning. Example documents such as job descriptions, and departmental policies affecting teaching faculty will be gathered and stored in a jointly accessible location. We are also creating a teaching calendar to facilitate simple visits to our colleagues' classrooms, allowing for an organic flow of best practices among peers.

Fourth, we work with teaching faculty to spread the word about our group within their departments and to newcomers. Our college does not have a central database of its teaching faculty, so we rely on departments to continually update us. We have identified one or two teaching faculty per department as liaisons so that we can increase communication flow.

Outcomes and challenges. Approximately 40% of our specialized teaching faculty participate in TPro2. Anecdotally, we find the participants to be full of energy, interest, and enthusiasm at the meetings. Participants have developed new networks and joint teaching and research projects. In response to a query in May 2015, participants reported that TPro2 is valuable to their professional development:

"The Teaching Professionals Program has been a productive venue both for sharing good ideas about teaching and for thinking about my career."

"The meetings have been exciting and enjoyable, and it is great to learn how others function in the college and to hear about research opportunities."

"TPro2 is a great way to find out what others have tried successfully (and unsuccessfully) in the classroom. It has become part of my larger 'Community of Practice' in the realm of teaching and learning."

Another way to assess the impact of a program such as TPro2 is to consider the ways in which undergraduate students ultimately benefit. Although we have no comprehensive measures of such impact, an informal survey of our participants reveals a few noteworthy observations that point to a potentially positive influence:

- A sense that one is a part of a larger community that cares about each other's success promotes motivation – and, "if you're happier, you want to teach better."
- The opportunity for critical reflection on one's teaching can lead to better teaching practices.
- The opportunity to observe each other promotes curiosity and willingness to try new teaching strategies.
- Some participants who share common course content (e.g., computing) and/or course formats (e.g., senior design, large courses) have compared experiences and identified common areas for improvement and scholarly inquiry.
- Informal conversations about how students in participants' departments are faring in classes taken in other departments have led participants to identify and address areas of concern.
- Our teaching faculty who also have advising responsibilities are aided by having a network of like-minded colleagues. Knowing "friendly faces" in other departments enables them to send advisees to contacts who are knowledgeable and sympathetic.

In summary, TPro2 meetings serve as a marketplace for teaching ideas, for propagation of best practices (and pitfalls), and for group reflection. This group reflection prompts individual reflection, and that, in turn, improves classroom preparation and presence.

While we are excited about the support, progress, momentum, and potential for TPro2, we also face a few challenges:
- The organizational aspects (scheduling sessions, emailing participants, planning sessions, etc.) of the program are time-consuming for two facilitators with many other responsibilities.
- In our sessions, it is difficult to balance participants' need to share/vent their frustrations with the intent to maintain a positive atmosphere. While our intent is to be good listeners and a sounding board, our conversation management skills are regularly tested and sharpened.
- We are continually seeking effective ways to measure the impact of our program. As a start, it would be beneficial for us to begin tracking the professional successes of our participants: promotions, teaching awards, papers published, etc. We could also regularly solicit more structured feedback from participants on the format of the program as well as their perceived outcomes. Potential useful questions from the literature on evaluating communities of practice[29] include: What is the value of the activities and interactions? Does the community result in a creation of useful knowledge capital? How does involvement in TPro2 cause participants to reframe and reconsider their actions or work?
- The future directions for TPro2 are not obvious. While the program in its early stages has

been successful in our view, we struggle to identify clear direction moving forward, now that we have established some common ground and community. A particular concern is that participants vary greatly in their needs and interests for such a community, largely because of their diverse work responsibilities and expectations. For example, a potential direction for our group could involve in-depth exploration of teaching assistant training and supervision, however not all participants supervise TAs. One model may be to invite and empower participants to create their own sub-groups to pursue particular topics of interest. We remain open to exploring models for accommodating a variety of interests and pathways.

Conclusion

TPro2 has offered teaching faculty at our institution an opportunity for professional camaraderie. While the program is still relatively new, it has served to spark new conversations, relationships, and motivation to engage in professional development. As TPro2 matures, we hope to make it a draw for retaining and recruiting faculty.

We offer the following observations and suggestions for those considering establishing such a program at their institutions:
- We have found a bottom-up, organic grass roots approach to be effective. We suggest laying the groundwork with a small number of invested individuals, and listening carefully to their aspirations and concerns.
- Providing lunches reinforces the college's commitment to and appreciation of these instructors. It also promotes a social atmosphere, supporting the community-building aspect of the endeavor. If lunches aren't affordable, snacks could also serve the same purpose.
- Careful record-keeping (attendance, surveys, outcomes, etc.) will be useful in promoting the program and in making the case to sustain or enhance it.
- Frequent reporting to college administration helps the program gain visibility and traction.
- A welcoming spirit and encouraging attitude among facilitators is central to the open discussion of participants' ideas and experiences.

Finally, we welcome those who are interested in establishing such a program to contact us to share ideas and information.

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