

Chapter 111

Examining the Evolution of Key Characteristics in Faculty Mentoring Programs for Online Adjunct Faculty: Bridging the Distance

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ABSTRACT

Geo-separated adjunct faculty often experience isolation as a result of minimal contact with their institutions. This can have a negative impact on their success and that of their students. Leadership at Park University recognized these challenges and has been providing peer mentoring to online undergraduate faculty for two decades. The pioneer program paired new online faculty with experienced faculty who were paid a small stipend to provide technical assistance and guidance. The Online Instructor Evaluation System (OIES) was developed soon after. In 2007, the mentoring component expanded with the Online Instructor Mentoring Program (OIMP). This chapter explores the rich history of mentoring online faculty at Park and compares characteristics from the developmental stage of the OIMP and the current version of the OIMP as models for program design. Factors include discipline-specific mentoring, compensation, workload, access, ratios, professional development, a resource center, oversight, and a transformative mentoring community. Motivational incentives are also examined.

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CONTEXT

Geographically separated adjunct faculty who teach for online programs often experience isolation as a result of having minimal contact with their institution (Dolan, 2011; Fouche, 2006; Maier, 2012; Ng, 2006). While contingent faculty who teach in traditional classrooms can interact with fellow faculty members and academic department leadership on a daily basis and even attend department meetings, interaction between the home campus and online adjunct faculty is usually limited to email messages from program chairs inquiring about their availability to teach particular courses. The conversation most often ends once contracts are signed, and, as noted by Terosky and Heasley (2015), thereafter help from the institution is limited to how to solve technical support issues. Furthermore, contingent faculty who teach exclusively online are not introduced to department colleagues or other faculty, and they have few opportunities to make peer allies (Haber & Mills, 2008; Muilenberg & Berge, 2001). In short, they have few (or no) friends or mentors among the home campus faculty. In addition, it can be a challenge for new online adjunct faculty to know where to go to for assistance, which can have a negative impact on their success at the institution and the success of their students (Lloyd, Byrne, & McCoy, 2012).

Distance learning leadership at Park University, a private, nonprofit institution of higher learning in the Midwest, recognized these challenges and has been providing peer mentoring to geo-separated online undergraduate faculty for two decades. The mentoring program began twenty years ago when experienced online faculty and course developers were paired with new faculty teaching their courses. The faculty mentors were paid a small stipend for helping with technical issues related to the learning management system (LMS) and providing guidance on professional practices in online teaching (Park University, 2003a). This approach proved inadequate and was replaced by the robust Online Instructor Evaluation System (OIES), which was developed to evaluate new faculty teaching online (Mandernach, Donnelly, Dailey, & Schulte, 2005). The focus was on mentoring to improve teaching rather than technical issues. By 2007, the mentoring component was expanded into a separate program for new faculty, known as the Online Instructor Mentoring Program (OIMP), (Eskey & Roehrich, 2013). While the OIES was discontinued shortly thereafter (Schulte, Dennis, Eskey, Taylor, & Zeng, 2012), the OIMP is still going and has weathered multiple directors and periods of high growth with limited to no funding available to pay mentors.

Key characteristics from two versions of the OIMP at Park, the 2007–2009 OIMP and the current 2015–2019 OIMP, will be offered as models for program design and compared on the basis of core factors that include:

- Availability of discipline-specific mentoring,
- Payment to mentors,
- Workload required/mentor-to-mentee ratios,
- Access to courses of new faculty,
- Type of mentoring relationship,
- Numbers of mentors in the program,
- Recruitment of new mentors,
- Training/professional development for new faculty and mentors,
- Availability of an online mentoring resource center and open forum,
- Lead mentor oversight, and
- Creation of a transformative mentoring community.

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