

# **Adjunct Faculty Professional Development: Small Investment, High Yield**

**David D. Bramhall**

San Juan College

**Al Buyok**

San Juan College

## **Introduction and Background**

Since 1966, the number of adjunct faculty teaching at community colleges has doubled to 67% of all instructors (Cataldi, Fahimi, & Bradburn, 2006). Adjunct faculty have become a reality in practically all colleges and universities, and particularly so in community colleges, yet questions remain about the quality of instruction they provide (Yantz & Bechtold, 1994). Sandford (2004) emphasized that questions about the training, credentialing, and pedagogical preparation of adjunct faculty are becoming more common.

Some studies claim that instruction by adjuncts is less effective than that of full-time faculty and have resulted in some community colleges addressing such concerns through professional development programs. At San Juan College, one professor recognized the importance of adjunct instructors. He thought that any college-wide effort to confront issues of student success and retention should focus on improving not only the quality of instruction offered by adjunct faculty, but also should help develop the sense of commitment of those instructors to the institution. Increasing the level of dedication to the college and its mission has obvious benefits for the college, the instructors, and, most of all, the students.

When provided the opportunity to address professional development opportunities for adjunct faculty, the faculty member mentioned above championed an initiative to facilitate student success by developing an initiative for part-time faculty. In 2005, when the faculty member was given the opportunity, he chose to pilot a program for professional development

for adjunct faculty as part of a Distinguished Teaching Chair (DTC) award. Following this first step, the college developed a multifaceted strategy for improving the quality of instruction offered by adjuncts. The success of the first effort was documented by a measurable improvement in in-course student retention. The underlying pedagogical insights of this program illustrate a philosophy of professional development, which can easily be adopted by any institution of higher learning.

### **The Initiative**

The professor received the DTC after being nominated for this award by students and competing with others in a process that not only weighed quality of instruction, but also considered the nominee's proposed project to improve the college's educational environment. Each year, the recipient received a stipend, which both recognized his selection and provided compensation for time spent on the project that, in this case, involved four seminar meetings during an academic semester.

These seminars were grounded around a couple of specific principles. The first was to create a dialogue about the craft of teaching—rather than focusing on any specific technique or skill set, this initiative was based on the belief that good teaching, regardless of discipline, is the direct result of an instructor's philosophy of education. Second, it was understood that adjunct instructors often feel marginalized—while you teach at an institution, you do not have the same status as a full-time professor, and, as a result, do not receive the same level of respect and appreciation. Consequently, these seminars sought to also improve how adjuncts saw themselves as part of the college community.

To accomplish the first objective—assisting adjunct participants in developing an educational philosophy consistent with the mission of a community college—the seminar focused on four core topics: “Developing a Student's Sense of Self,” “Alternative Teaching and Learning Styles,” “Critical Thinking,” and “Developing Relevance in Subject Matter.” A supplemental resource, a notebook containing 28 related articles from professional journals, tables of college demographic data, and commentaries by the DTC faculty member totaling 193 pages, was provided to each adjunct as both a starting point for discussions and a resource for future reflection. Each of the four seminar sessions was devoted to one of the core topics.

The session on “Developing a Student’s Sense of Self” begins with participants reviewing tables on the demographics of the student body. The ensuing discussion reveals that about 54% of the students are female, 26% are Native American, and 11% Hispanic; their average age is 34. The adjuncts are asked for some thoughts on these numbers, which ultimately produces the insights that for many students: a) it has been a while since they were in school; b) their last educational experience was probably not that successful; c) enrolling in college took quite a bit of personal courage; and d) their sense of self is potentially fragile, they can probably be easily intimidated, and consequently many are almost programmed for failure. The discussion then moves to a critique of a traditional approach to college freshmen (i.e., the professor tells the class on the first day, “Look to your right. Look to your left. Two of you won’t be here at the end of the semester.”) and its effect on community college students: large failure and/or withdrawal rates. Participants then consider learning strategies which do not lower academic standards, but build a student’s sense of self and minimize his/her potential for failure. Examples of such strategies include grading on improvement, increasing both the difficulty of assignments and the grading standards as the semester progresses, and the use of study guides, etc. The insights that adjuncts derive from a session such as this on instruction can be significant.

The “Learning and Teaching Styles” seminar addresses the reality that each instructor has his/her own optimal approach to teaching based on variables such as subject matter, past educational experiences, personality, etc. In each class, students have a wide range of learning styles. Through an investigation of the range of these alternatives and a recognition of the diversity of our student body, instructors learn to employ their own best teaching strategies and, most importantly, to recognize the diverse needs of their students

The third seminar focuses on the responsibility of educators to not simply download information to students but to cultivate their ability to critically, logically, and systematically confront their world, as the “facts” taught to them today may or may not be “true” tomorrow. Preparing students for the future requires going beyond the basics (the who, what, where, when, how, etc.) and not only teaching the “whys,” but also empowering students to ask difficult questions.

The “Developing Relevance in Subject Matter” seminar focuses on making connections between what instructors teach and why students should learn what they are taught. Presumably, if students can connect the topics covered in class to their lives, they will be more motivated and be better learners.

To accomplish the second objective, making adjuncts feel appreciated by the college, participants were compensated \$150 for completing the four 75 minute meetings. In addition, at the final meeting, each participant was presented with a framed certificate by the vice president for learning. The impact of this recognition is evidenced by the number of adjunct participants who now display the certificates in their office areas.

The underlying goal of both objectives was to improve the quality of instruction by adjuncts and thereby positively impact retention. To assess the impact of the seminars, information was gathered on the courses taught by 29 adjuncts who participated in the professional development seminars in 2005 and 2006 and taught at the institution in the prior semester (Buyok, 2008). For these individuals, the mean in-course retention rate for the prior semester was 81%, with the rates increasing to 88% during the semester they participated in the seminars, a 7% increase. While the study group was a small sample, the findings suggest that student retention rates may increase for adjuncts who are engaged in professional development seminars that focus on teaching philosophy. Comments drawn from a focus group of eight adjuncts participating in the seminars also illustrate the impact of the program, as the participants “demonstrated extreme levels of gratitude toward the institution . . . [for] the professional development opportunities, stipends paid for participation, and the efforts to make a better work environment.”

## **Attributes and Challenges**

Perhaps the greatest challenge to successfully implementing a professional development program for adjuncts centers on creating a culture in which part-time instructors buy into the value of this undertaking and on improving their perception of the college’s commitment to them as valued educational partners. At SJC, recent indicators seem positive. During the spring semester of 2009, more adjuncts (37) enrolled in these seminars than in any previous semester. These participants came from a wide range of disciplines: from cosmetology

and woodworking to math and philosophy. However, those 37 represent only 9.45% of all SJC adjuncts, leaving the long-term success of this initiative unanswered. More specifically, as long as participation in this program is voluntary—a practical reality based on the nature of adjunct employment—will an institutional culture develop which will attract the vast majority of adjuncts to this program?

A secondary issue also remains unanswered: the long term effect of participation in one seminar on an adjunct's teaching. For instance, Buyok (2008) found that student retention rates for adjunct faculty who participated in the seminars decreased in the semester following participation in the seminar series. More research is necessary to determine the reason for such a decrease. A related issue was the study's failure to find measurable changes in student evaluations for participating faculty in either the semesters prior, during, or following participation in the seminars.

However, there seems to be no question that these efforts represent a positive undertaking. In addition, these seminars represent a critical element, if only one piece, of an effort to bring adjuncts “into the community college community”—to express recognition of their critical role in the education of students. As a result of an Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) Action Project for 2006–2008, an adjunct advisory committee was instituted. One of their first recommendations, to change the adjunct tuition credit policy to provide flexibility for their use of this credit, was adopted.

Another major issue centers on the pedagogical underpinnings of these seminars—the belief that good teaching is not a product of technique, but rather of attitude. While the empirical data on retention from the first seminars was encouraging, our faith in this presumption is grounded less in numbers and represents a philosophic presumption confirmed by anecdotal information and the work of people like Ken Bain and Parker Palmer. For example, at a recent committee meeting, one adjunct, a seminar participant during her first semester of teaching, volunteered that she would not have continued to teach if it were not for the seminar.

## Applicability

Initiating a professional development program for adjuncts represents a relatively simple and inexpensive investment, even in today's economic climate, for any institution, especially when weighed against the potential return from an improvement in the quality of instruction and retention. Today, the issues which drove San Juan College to implement this program are well recognized, and other community colleges such as Valencia and Johnson County have successfully instituted professional development opportunities for adjuncts (<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/05/28/nisod> and <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/community-college/integrating-adjuncts-into-the-community-college-through-professional-development-support/>). With alternative models available, a college can easily develop its own program that corresponds to its own situation. However, the virtue of the SJC program, which is easily transferable, is the focus on improving adjuncts' perceptions of their status in the college community. The first step was relatively simple: paying adjuncts stipends for participating in a professional development opportunity. Some rather small, inexpensive efforts at these seminars only helped reinforce this perception: providing snacks (a supermarket vegetable tray is a minimal expense), awarding framed certificates to each participant (less than \$5.00 per adjunct), and having the certificates awarded by a senior administrator. Other initiatives (adjunct advisory committee, flexible tuition credits, etc.) also carry minimal costs, but make significant statements to adjunct faculty.

In addition, developing a seminar series that creates a dialogue about the art of teaching neither requires a significant investment of time by adjuncts (the SJC seminars meet four times a semester for 75 minutes), nor a major financial commitment by the institution. Such an initiative should start instructors thinking about their teaching and recognizing that nearly all the issues they face in class are confronted by all faculty members.

Most importantly, these seminars and the other SJC initiatives are recognized as first steps, part of an ongoing, evolutionary process to improve the quality of adjunct instruction. Perhaps the greatest issue with regard to applicability to other colleges centers on an institutional commitment to move forward with a serious effort in this area.

## Current Status

In the fall of 2007, an advanced seminar was introduced using Ken Bain's *What The Best College Teachers Do*, and in the spring of 2008, a third seminar was offered using Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach*. Since 2005, nearly 30% of SJC adjuncts have participated in nine different seminars. These seminars shared a common pedagogical belief: that good teaching is not a product of a specific technique or method of instruction, but rather is a direct result of an instructor's attitude—his/her commitment to student success.

As a result of feedback from adjunct faculty on the professional development seminars and other quantitative and qualitative data that emerged from the study of the pilot project, the college sought to develop a comprehensive support program for adjuncts that became an AQIP Project. These efforts included designating one college administrator with responsibility for developing a comprehensive support system and developing and implementing: 1) an adjunct faculty advisory committee that reports directly the associate vice president for learning; 2) an orientation for new adjunct faculty; 3) an ongoing program of support and integration into the college community; 4) a mentoring program; 5) updated semester orientations for adjuncts to make them more meaningful; and 6) a benchmarking of adjunct faculty salaries and rank and promotion programs in comparison with other institutions for review by the executive leadership team. In addition, each semester begins with an adjunct faculty reception hosted by the college president. Another initiative from the seminar series, following participants' positive input, was the distribution of *A Guide to Classroom Instruction for Adjunct Faculty* (Reed, 2005) to all adjuncts. This publication considers both practical issues and educational philosophy facing part-time faculty.

To expand the professional development opportunities for adjuncts, a learning symposium was initiated each semester. One Saturday each semester, adjuncts are invited to attend a series of workshops, presentations, and discussion groups on a variety of topics. Topics recently offered include: "Impact of Personality Type on Classroom Interactions;" "Using ANGEL: Introduction to the Tools, Grade Book, and Discussions;" "Everything I Needed to Know About Teaching I Learned in a Hospice;" "How to Turn a Lecture Into an Activity;" "What's a CSLO and Why am I Assessing it?" and "But I'm Not a Writing Instructor!"

Improving Your Students' Writing Within Your Curriculum.” Both the presenters and adjunct participants receive a \$75 stipend.

By the fall 2008 semester, 103 adjuncts had completed one of the semester-long seminars. An additional 199 participated in four learning symposia. The four-year cost of this undertaking (including the purchase of *A Guide to Classroom Instruction*) was \$38,260, or \$9,565 per year. With a potential improvement in retention in their classes and the prospect of enhancing the quality of instruction, the return on such an investment is obvious.

This initiative, which began as a pilot program, gained support from the college administration and continues to evolve as new elements of a support system are implemented. Enrollments in the seminar and the one-day symposium continue to grow. The foresight to pilot such a program, combined with the vision to move beyond professional development and demonstrate the commitment of the institution to adjunct faculty, we believe will improve the quality of instruction and students' education.

## **Lessons Learned**

This initiative began with a specific SJC award, a Distinguished Teaching Chair, and was not part of an institutional plan for improving the quality of instruction provided by adjuncts, even though such an undertaking was in the planning stages. While this program quickly evolved, other colleges wishing to adopt a similar program could initiate their program in a bit more systematic manner based on certain SJC insights. First, in our case, the majority of the responsibility for these seminars fell to one faculty member who was compensated with a stipend. Forming a committee made up of faculty and an administrator would obviously spread the responsibility and bring a variety of insights into this process and the seminars themselves. Second, in the SJC example, one faculty member conducted all of the seminars; this represents another opportunity to include others in the actual conduct of the seminars. As we learned, such an undertaking places an additional demand on the full-time faculty member or members responsible for such a program. As a result, a college must be prepared to compensate those faculty members with either stipends or release time. Finally, as we recognized from the beginning, this initiative represented only a starting point in providing professional

development opportunities for adjuncts. Obviously, many other elements, some of which were discussed, could be and should be added to improve the quality and range of the adjunct professional development opportunity. These elements include bringing in presenters from outside the college and formulating other delivery modes, such as a Web-based format for online faculty. While we are certain that the SJC program will continue to evolve, the necessary step for other colleges who wish to undertake a similar program is simply to begin.

**ABOUT THE AUTHORS:** David D. Bramhall is professor of history and philosophy at San Juan College.

Al Buyok is the associate vice president for learning at San Juan College.

Address correspondence to: David D. Bramhall, Professor of History and Philosophy, San Juan College, 4601 College Blvd., Farmington, NM 87401, [bramhalld@sanjuancollege.edu](mailto:bramhalld@sanjuancollege.edu)

## References

- Bain, K. (2004). *What the best college teachers do*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Buyok, A. A. (2008). *Assessment of the influences of an adjunct faculty professional development program on instructional effectiveness*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, New Mexico State University.
- Cataldi, E. F., Mansour, F., & Bradburn, E. M. (2006). 2004 national study of postsecondary faculty (NSOPF:04) report on faculty and instructional staff in fall 2003. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved February 26, 2006, from [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/quarterly/vol\\_7/1\\_2/5\\_11.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/quarterly/vol_7/1_2/5_11.asp)
- Palmer, P. J. (1998). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Reed, J. H. (2005). *A guide to classroom instruction for adjunct faculty*. Washington, DC: American Chemical Society.
- Sandford, B. A., (2004). *Assessment of professional development activities, instructional needs, and delivery methods of part-time technical and occupational faculty in U.S. community colleges*. St. Paul, MN: National Research Center for Career and Technical Education.
- Yantz, P. M., & Bechtold, C. (1994). *Part-time faculty: Here today, not gone tomorrow, or professional development of part-time faculty and the changing role of division chairpersons*. Phoenix, AZ: International Conference for Community College Chairs, Deans, and Other Instructional Leaders. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED369428)