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Professional Development for Non-Tenure-Track Faculty in STEM at the Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University

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✔ **Learning Community**   ✔ **Workshops**

✔ **New (and Returning) Faculty Orientation**

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University is a private four-year institution with three campuses in the United States; the institution's mission centers on aerospace and aviation instruction. There are two residential campuses, one in Daytona Beach, FL and the other in Prescott, AZ. Embry-Riddle also educates students around the world through their online Worldwide campus, where 90% of courses are offered asynchronously (i.e., students learn at their own pace rather than having scheduled class meetings). Each campus of Embry-Riddle has their own Center for Teaching and Learning.

The Worldwide campus employs around 1,300 faculty, nearly 1,000 of whom are adjuncts (part-time, non-tenure-track faculty); like students, faculty work remotely. The Worldwide campus operates on a different academic schedule than the two residential campuses: most courses are about nine weeks long, with new courses beginning nearly every month. In this case study, we focus on the Bruce A. Rothwell Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence (RCTLE), which provides professional development to the Worldwide campus' majority adjunct instructor population.

Professional Development Initiatives for NTTF

The RCTLE utilizes four professional development initiatives specifically geared towards adjuncts: required training for new hires and returning faculty, workshops and just-in-time microlearning, one-to-one consultations with instructional developers, and virtual faculty learning communities (FLC). These initiatives are intended to boost the quality of instruction in online courses, create an inclusive environment for adjuncts, and provide students with better support from faculty who are confident about teaching and use effective practices for learning.

New (and Returning) Faculty Orientation

The RCTLE designed an orientation and training course that new faculty are required to complete before they begin teaching. The course is primarily asynchronous and takes about 15 hours to complete; new faculty have about 2 months

to complete the course. The course includes in-depth training related to the learning management system (LMS) and university rules and regulations, as well as an overview of campus resources and benefits. Course deliverables provide evidence of faculty learning; for instance, they are required to demonstrate that they can write an appropriate course policy and that they can successfully use the speed grader in the LMS. Faculty are compensated for completing the course. The RCTLE is also implementing a refresher course that will be required of returning faculty, which includes reminders about regulations and provides an introduction to new features of the LMS, new resources, etc. and will take about an hour to complete.

Workshops

The RCTLE offers synchronous and self-paced workshops as part of its continuing education and support for faculty. Synchronous workshops are less than one hour, and recorded versions are available on the website so that faculty who are unable to attend asynchronously can still review the material. Asynchronous workshops are typically 2-4 hours long and include a topically-focused project, reflection, or similar deliverable. The center has also organized "tracks" where faculty can learn in-depth about topics such as active learning and diversity by participating in multiple workshops on related topics. In addition, the RCTLE has recently started using asynchronous micro-learning to help break up longer workshops; these shorter, self-paced options offer faculty more flexibility and motivation for engaging in instructional development, especially as adjuncts who teach for the Worldwide campus may be located across the world in a number of different time zones.

Learning Community

The globally dispersed nature of faculty teaching for the Worldwide campus also creates a challenge in terms of helping adjuncts feel connected to campus. The virtual faculty learning communities (V-FLC) were created to address this challenge while also providing a space for faculty to collaborate and share ideas related to effective instruction. This program is now in its fifth year and continues to be quite successful. Learning communities are six weeks long in order to fit within the nine-week term. They utilize the same LMS that faculty use to teach and are designed to be asynchronous. Cohorts include a mix of faculty across departments and career tracks. Each V-FLC is focused on a different topic; past topics have included effective online practices, providing effective feedback, and teaching philosophies.
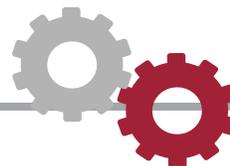
RCTLE staff act as organizers. In the first week of the V-FLC, the organizer provides an introduction to the topic and allows participants to get to know one another. At the beginning of the second week, the organizer shares short readings and resources, as well as creating a discussion launch post; the discussion is entirely peer led, and participants are encouraged to share stories, advice, or tips in the discussion. They are also encouraged to participate in the discussion using videos and audio as well as text. Then, at the beginning of the next week, the facilitator reads through the previous week's content in order to tailor additional resources and a new discussion question that builds on current knowledge and extends the conversation. Thus, participants largely drive the content. During the last week, participants can share and provide feedback on each other's culminating projects.

Lessons Learned

As As the V-FLCs are now in the fifth year, RCTLE staff have made some changes to the format that reflect ongoing assessment and adaptation to best meet the needs of their faculty. Here we highlight a few changes that may help leaders at other campuses consider how their own institutional contexts and professional development offerings can be better aligned.

→ V-FLCs V-FLCs initially included 8-12 participants, but now staff members are experimenting with larger groups (up to about 50 participants). Larger groups may facilitate more robust discussions given the asynchronous structure and the fact that participating on the discussion board is voluntary. This also allows the RCTLE to engage a greater number of adjuncts employed by the Worldwide campus at the same time.

→ While V-FLCs were originally eight weeks long, they are now six weeks long, in order to honor the intense work of teaching that is required at the beginning and end of the nine-week academic term.

→ RCTLE staff have revised their methods of assessment for V-FLC engagement. Some participants do not participate in weekly discussions and others do not complete the culminating project. However, several of these faculty members have reported that the V-FLC was a beneficial experience for them. Therefore, staff members are now also looking at page views and time spent in the LMS, with the view that faculty members can be learning and engaged even without participating in discussions or completing all of the V-FLC projects.

Best Practices for Inclusivity of NTTF

The RCTLE offer a multitude of resources and professional development which demonstrate some best practices in supporting adjuncts and helping them develop community on campus.

✔ Having a variety of professional development offerings online in an asynchronous format allows faculty to participate when it is convenient for them. In particular, the online, asynchronous format of V-FLCs supports the needs of faculty who work remotely and live all across the world, allowing them to participate in sustained learning and discussion when convenient for them.

✔ The use of microlearning to break up longer workshops gives adjuncts greater flexibility to engage in professional development without a significant investment of time.

✔ The V-FLCs are offered twice per year and faculty can participate in one or both sessions; aligning the schedule with the Worldwide academic terms allows faculty to engage in the V-FLCs during the same term that they are teaching, which increases inclusivity especially for adjuncts who also work elsewhere.

✔ The peer-led environment of FLCs helps faculty to develop relationships with their colleagues and to develop a sense of belonging in the institution while also helping faculty use more effective practices for teaching online.

✔ Hosting the FLCs within the LMS that faculty use to teach offers them experiential knowledge that may facilitate their use of the technology when teaching.

Learning Community Design Summary

In this section we provide a quick summary of the design of the faculty learning communities offered by the RCTLE at Embry-Riddle, as they provide effective support for adjuncts in particular who teach for the online Worldwide campus.

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES: To support faculty by giving them the opportunity to develop relationships, support one another in their teaching, and learn best practices for student learning in a community of practice.

PARTICIPANTS: Open to all faculty on the Worldwide campus, and participants represent a mix of disciplines. Participants are nearly all adjuncts. Several faculty members have participated in multiple sessions.

DELIVERY MODE: Asynchronous learning and discussions occur in the campus LMS.

STRUCTURE AND LENGTH: Six-week program that is held twice a year, aligned with the campus' nine-week academic term.

CONTENT: Each V-FLC focuses on one particular topic. Facilitators post short readings and practical tips to support faculty learning. The bulk of content is developed by faculty through discussion. As the conversation is peer-led, related topics are often engaged, including issues with dealing with students, working for the institution, and understanding the larger landscape of higher education that faculty commonly face.

FACILITATION: Facilitated by the RCTLE staff who post new content and discussion prompts each week of the program based on the previous week's discussion to encourage open dialogue between faculty. Facilitators do not participate in the discussion.

DELIVERABLES: Faculty complete a culminating project related to the topic of the V-FLC; projects have included reflection and tips for implementing student-centered practices in online courses and creating a teaching philosophy.

ASSESSMENT: The RCTLE assesses participants' satisfaction and learning through the use of a pre- and post-survey, as well as analyzing LMS data and providing feedback on the culminating project.

COMPENSATION AND RECOGNITION: Participation in professional development is entirely voluntary. Faculty who participate in discussions and complete the culminating project receive a certificate of completion. In addition, the RCTLE compiles a list of all professional development completed by each faculty member annually and sends recognition of this work to the faculty member and their department chair.

Additional Resources

Atwell, A., Cottom, C., Martino, L., & Ombres, S. (2017). Virtual Faculty Learning Community Implementation Framework. Scholarly Commons. Retrieved from https://commons.erau.edu/publication/1372 [offers a framework to guide development of virtual learning communities]

Cottom, C., Atwell, A., Martino, L., & Ombres, S. (2018). Virtual Community of Practice: Connecting Online Adjunct Faculty. Learning Communities Journal, 10(1). Retrieved from https://commons.erau.edu/publication/1159 [describes the creation of the V-FLCs]

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