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ABSTRACT

Perceptions of Indiana University teachers of noncredit courses for adults and implications for faculty development programming were assessed. Of the 26 randomly selected instructors from the nine regional campuses, 73 percent identified their full-time occupation as being business-related, 19 percent were part- or full-time faculty, and 8 percent taught on the elementary or secondary level. Respondents provided information concerning: the names of the courses they were teaching; previous teaching experience; their selection as course instructors; perceived reasons students chose the courses; the general background of students (age, educational background, occupation); teaching methods employed; student roles/activities; perceived teaching strengths and weaknesses; and the effectiveness of the university in meeting their needs as noncredit teachers. It was found that the diverse backgrounds of adult learners provided the greatest challenge to the noncredit instructor. Recommendations include that: noncredit instructors should be provided information on the characteristics of adult learners; communication between teachers and administrators should be improved; and the university should better promote noncredit programs and recruit students. (SW)

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A Faculty Development Needs Assessment
of Noncredit Instruction

Mary Deane Sorcinelli and Barry Willis

In recent years, dramatic changes in higher education in the form of decreased funding, increased demands for accountability, and an older and more diverse student population have resulted in the rapid growth of two program areas: faculty development and noncredit continuing education programs.

The term "faculty development" has been defined by Gaff as the process of "enhancing the talents, expanding the interests, improving the competence, and otherwise facilitating the professional and personal growth of faculty, particularly in their role as instructor."¹ Indeed, faculty development programs assumed a new definition in the late 1970's, and shifted from traditional practices of professional renewal such as faculty exchanges, sabbatical leaves, research and travel grants, to a new focus on the individual faculty member and the issues that confront him as a teacher.

One result of the increased interest in the faculty member as instructor has been an upsurge of instructional improvement programs on campuses. Centra's² national survey of colleges and universities found that over one half of the post secondary institutions in the U.S. have developed an organized program

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or set of activities for improving instruction. At Indiana University the Audio-Visual Center's Division of Development and Special Projects is involved with the systemwide improvement of the teaching and learning process. The Division works with regional campuses on a collaborative basis to provide comprehensive instructional resources to individual faculty members, departments, and schools.

Among the campus groups ^{of Indiana University?} to request faculty development services in 1980 was the School of Continuing Studies, which offers credit and noncredit courses on all regional campuses. At present, noncredit programs are the most rapidly growing programs in all of higher education.³ In an effort to parallel growth with quality instruction, the School ^{what school?} decided to focus instructional improvement efforts specifically on their non-credit faculty.

Throughout the state, noncredit courses are taught primarily by part-time instructors, many of whom have full-time employment in business and professional fields. Although highly knowledgeable in their subject area, most have little specific training for college teaching or exposure to learning theories. In addition, these part-time instructors find themselves facing the needs of an increasingly more diverse group of adult learners.

The School of Continuing Studies wanted to know how it might best help noncredit instructors facilitate the learning of their adult student population. A significant step in this

process was to assess the need for, and scope of, possible faculty development efforts, as perceived by noncredit instructors. The following describes a needs assessment process which identified what instructors of adult students in a non-credit setting felt were the problems and issues facing them as teachers.

Sample

The instructors of all noncredit courses offered through the Indiana University School of Continuing Studies during the 1979-80 school year were included in the sample population. Noncredit course offerings were divided into three general course areas: professional development, the arts, and general interest. A stratified random sample was made in which three instructors were selected from each of the nine regional campuses ($N=27$). One instructor from each campus was selected to represent each of the three course areas.

Twenty-six of the 27 randomly selected instructors were included in the descriptive analysis, ~~with~~ ^{one} instructor no longer ~~teaching~~ ^{taught} in the noncredit program.

Out of the 14 men and 12 women respondents, 73% ($N=19$) identified their full-time occupation as being business related, 19% ($N=5$) were part/full time university faculty, and 8% ($N=2$) taught on the elementary or secondary school level.

Instrument

Due to the exploratory nature of the study, a semi-structured telephone survey format was used. This provided a "Free-Flowing" approach to data collection in which individual responses were categorized by dominant "themes".

The interview instrument consisted of seven open-ended questions and related probes, i.e., follow-up questions to enable the consultants to pose the same questions and pursue initial responses in a similar manner. The questionnaires sought information in four areas:

1. Instructor Information. Instructors were asked about the name of the course they were teaching, previous teaching experience, and occupation. In addition, they were asked to describe the process by which they were selected to teach the course.
2. Student Information. Instructors were asked why they thought students signed up for their course. Additionally, they were asked to describe the general backgrounds of those taking their course in terms of age, education background, and occupation.
3. Teaching Strategies/Constraints. Instructors were asked to describe their teaching methods, (e.g., lecture, discussion) as well as student related roles/activities. In addition, instructor perceived teaching strengths/weaknesses were probed.
4. University/Administrative Effectiveness. In this section, the instructors were probed about the effectiveness of the University in meeting their needs as noncredit instructors and asked how the administration could better support their instructional activities.

Procedure

One week prior to the anticipated interview date, the subjects were contacted by phone, at which time the interviewers identified themselves and their organizational affiliation, described the purpose of the survey, outlined the procedures to be used, and requested the participation of the instructor. Upon acceptance, an interview date/time was scheduled. Early in the design process it was decided that the depth of participant response would be greater if the instructors were given advanced notice of the topical areas to be covered in the interview. With this in mind, a brief, open-ended questionnaire covering the general topics to be probed in the telephone interview was distributed to respondents one week prior to the scheduled interview date. In addition to the questionnaire, a cover letter was enclosed reminding instructors of the scheduled interview time and asking that they write down their initial responses to each question prior to the telephone interview.

Results

Although all 26 respondents reported that they had previous teaching experience, 35% (N=9) stated that this was their first time teaching the course being offered. While 19% (N=5) originally contacted continuing studies about teaching a course, 50% (N=13) were initially approached by a continuing studies representative, and 31% (N=8) were contacted by other individuals.

In relation to the instructors' perceptions of why students signed up for their courses, 65% (N=17) reported that the majority wanted to improve job performance, while others wanted to pursue hobbies, improve job awareness, and explore career options.

According to the instructors, student backgrounds varied greatly. In relation to highest educational level attained, for example, the instructors reported that student enrollees included those with high school diplomas, undergraduate, and graduate degrees. The occupations of those enrolled in noncredit courses included homemakers, teachers, business/professionals, and laborers, with student ages ranging from under 20 to over 70 years of age.

The instructors reported that they enjoyed teaching for a number of reasons, including, the challenge it offers (27%, N=7); helping people, e.g., sharing knowledge, watching adults progress as learners, (58%, N=15); and meeting people (15%, N=4). All 26 respondents stated that background experience and personal knowledge were individual strengths. In addition, 38% (N=10) of the respondents reported that their ability as communicators was a strong point, and 35% (N=9) responded that personal enthusiasm was a teaching strength.

Problems encountered by instructors were divided into three categories: student related, university related, and materials/text related.

With regard to students, 58% (N=14) felt that the diversity of learner skills created problems while the failure of some students to practice/complete assignments was considered a problem by 15% (N=9). Other student related problems included fatigue, 12% (N=3) and a lack of interest (4%, N=1).

While 23% (N=6) stated that they were very pleased with the efforts of the University in relation to noncredit instruction, some problems did exist.

Inadequate course promotion and student recruitment was reported by 35% (N=9) to be the greatest university related problem. Other problems included inadequate salaries for noncredit instructors (15%, N=4). In addition, 23% (N=6) felt they received little recognition from the University for their teaching efforts, and 8% (N=2) felt there was a lack of communication and feedback between the administration and noncredit faculty.

Although 35% (N=9) reported that they needed no improvement as teachers, 53% (N=14) stated that they would like to improve their teaching skills through inservice training.

When asked what the University could do to help instructors teach or administer their courses 30% (N=8) said it would be helpful if they were provided more information on students, while 23% (N=6) said that the University was doing an excellent job in assisting the faculty in the delivery of noncredit instruction.

Summary

In terms of the sample population, the instructors of noncredit continuing studies courses had diversified interests and backgrounds including full-time occupations in a variety of disciplines such as business and industry, as well as elementary, secondary, and higher education. In most cases, the instructors felt competent in their roles as teachers, although many would like to improve their teaching skills through inservice training.

The diverse backgrounds of adult learners provided the greatest challenge to the noncredit instructor. This diversity included the various skill levels of adult learners as well as the assorted reasons they sign up for noncredit courses including, to improve job performance, pursue hobbies, complete personal improvement projects, and to explore career options.

Although generally pleased with university support, instructors felt that more effort is needed in promoting noncredit course offerings and in recruiting prospective students. In addition, some instructors felt that salaries of noncredit faculty are inadequate, recognition is low, program/facilities coordination is poor, and instructor/administration communication is in need of improvement.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this noncredit instructor needs assessment, it was suggested that:

1) Information dissemination options be explored concerning the characteristics of adult learners; the development of teaching skills for noncredit faculty; and the orientation of first time noncredit faculty.

2) Methods be explored to improve the process by which faculty are identified to teach noncredit courses.

3) Alternatives be explored to better promote noncredit programs and recruit prospective students.

4) Communication be improved between administrators and noncredit faculty.

5) Issues related to improvement of salaries, program/facilities coordination, and recognition of noncredit instructors be examined.

6) Noncredit instructors be provided with more background information concerning course enrollees.

Although it is difficult to draw sweeping generalizations from a relatively small sample size, this needs assessment process is one way continuing studies programs can begin to achieve greater awareness of the problems confronting their noncredit instructors. It can aid programs in making decisions about teaching improvement efforts that will be helpful to their noncredit instructors and, ultimately, to their adult learners.

Footnotes

- ¹ Jerry G. Gaff, Toward Faculty Renewal, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975, p. 8.
- ² John A. Centra, Faculty Development Practices in U.S. Colleges and Universities, Princeton: Education Testing Service, 1976, p. 7.
- ³ K. Patricia Cross, Adults as Learners, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1981, p. 37.