

# Academic Leadership Forum on Faculty Workload, Engagement, and Development

Hosted by the American Public University System  
In Partnership with WCET

## Executive Summary

### Introduction

A select group of academic officers and deans from institutions (all sectors) whose programs are primarily online and whose teaching faculty differ considerably from traditional faculty participated in the Academic Leadership Forum, October 26, 2011, held in conjunction with WCET's Annual Meeting. Twenty-four participants from 19 institutions were represented. Karan Powell, Executive Vice President and Provost, American Public University System, and Ellen Wagner, Executive Director, WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies, co-chaired this inaugural Academic Leadership Forum.

The objectives of the forum were to:

- provide academic leaders with a peer-to-peer opportunity to network and share information related to online, nontraditional faculty,
- identify promising practices and/or policies related to online, nontraditional faculty,
- identify concerns and topics for possible follow-up action by this group, and
- determine interest in formalizing this group for ongoing dialogue through WCET.

### Faculty Workload, Engagement, and Development

#### Factors to Consider for Faculty Workload Expectations and Policies

**Ranking System.** Some schools have faculty ranks for full-time and adjunct nontraditional faculty whereas others do not have a faculty ranking system.

**Dual Employment.** Participants agreed that adjuncts typically teach at more than one college or university. This dynamic often brings something to the table which can be helpful to students (e.g., practitioner experience). Some schools value this fact while others have policies to discourage the practice. The extent to which the workload of faculty who teach at multiple institutions can be monitored raised some challenges. Some participants stated that the ability to teach at multiple institutions should be based on faculty performance as monitored in each institution and where performance is impacted, addressed by that institution. All of the participants agreed that the quality of teaching at a particular institution is the most important issue in managing nontraditional faculty.

**Faculty Workload Limits.** Among the institutions, there were many approaches on how schools determine and define appropriate teaching loads. The factors that contribute to the diverse set of definitions included:

- a. number of concurrent course sections

- b. program/subject area
- c. teaching preparation—standard online course vs. faculty developed course materials
- d. time specified limits defined by policy
- e. class size
- f. number of gross/net simultaneous student registrations
- g. number of simultaneous and annual course preparation
- h. if faculty member is new or teaching the course for the first time or whether faculty has experience teaching the course assigned.

Schools differed in their philosophies on how many students a faculty member can teach per year. The average class sizes ranged from 14-35, some schools paid faculty per student whereas the majority of schools paid by class or section. Some institutions examine overall interactions and activities required of faculty within a course and outside of classes to determine workload (e.g., professional development activities, community service, mentoring, committee work, etc.). Institutions that have an expectation of “scholarship, research, and service” or institutions with doctoral programs tend to have lower teaching limits for faculty (either number of course sections or number of registrations). One school designates courses as “writing intensive” to help balance teaching loads so that faculty receive more credit for teaching those courses given the increased amount of writing required for grading by the faculty member.

As reasonable and sound practices were discussed for nontraditional faculty, it was recognized that it can appear exploitive if adjunct nontraditional faculty are assigned to several courses. It was acknowledged that some nontraditional online faculty and adjuncts successfully teach for multiple universities and express interest in large teaching loads for the opportunity to increase his/her salary.

***Role of Technology.*** Participants agreed that technology plays a big part in the number of students that faculty are allowed to teach. If effective and sound instructional technology has been included in the course development, faculty will have better tools to teach more students. Tools such as adaptive testing, artificial intelligence, and computer-generated feedback are all practices that help students achieve student learning outcomes and support faculty teaching larger courses and/or registrations loads. It was agreed that as additional modalities and tools emerge, future discussions must accommodate these innovations as they may, or may not, relate to affect faculty workload.

***Role of State and Federal Regulations.*** Participants agreed that many adjunct workload issues are driven by state regulations on healthcare and other institutional benefit offerings. For example, one school stated that their adjunct part-time faculty cannot teach more than 12 credits annually because if they offer more, the institution is required to provide benefits to the adjunct per state and institutional definitions of full-time equivalent work. One participant suggested that they create nine-month positions for adjuncts not requiring benefits.

### **Promising Practices Related to Workload Issues**

Emerging from the discussions were shared considerations for developing best practices for expectations and policies regarding online nontraditional faculty workload including:

1. Faculty workload policies and procedures are typically driven by the mission and characteristics of each institution.

2. Nontraditional faculty includes the fact that the faculty teach in a “nontraditional” online environment. This includes full-time faculty fully dedicated to the online environment and adjuncts who teach in this nontraditional environment.
3. It is a fact that nontraditional adjunct faculty typically teach at more than one college or university. This dynamic brings something to the table which can be helpful students (e.g., practitioner experience). Some schools value this fact while others have policies to discourage the practice.
4. Nontraditional faculty and adjuncts are important and vital to effective teaching student learning.
5. Students will not benefit if faculty are overloaded as this leads to non-accessibility of faculty and performance issues. Ability to manage part-time faculty overload focuses on faculty performance at any given institution. Management and decisions about working at other institutions is not regulated nor should it be for adjunct faculty.
6. Faculty workload definitions can drive and/or be driven by employee/faculty benefits. Some schools have the ability to change their own policies while others are bound by state regulations on benefits. Attention to human resources, state law and policies are essential considerations in defining workload.
7. Schools should examine learning outcomes when determining faculty workload to implement workload solutions that support student learning and ensure students have optimal learning environments, experiences, and outcomes.

### **Faculty Engagement**

Development, teaching, mentoring, and assessing were all key terms identified as important when defining faculty engagement. There was consensus that the following best practices are important to ensure that faculty members have a high level of engagement.

1. Faculty members should have a high level of satisfaction. This should be evaluated on a regular basis and improvements should be made based on feedback.
2. Expectations and commitments should differ from full-time vs. part time faculty. Even though they may have different commitment levels, both are critical to success.
3. Establish clear expectations for adjunct faculty. One institution revised their adjunct faculty handbook from a lengthy, 14-page document and trimmed down to the five specific expectations of the faculty.
4. Treat adjunct faculty as professional employees, not contractors, and take measures to demonstrate appreciation.
5. Institutions must establish an infrastructure to ensure that their faculty feel engaged as part of an overall faculty community. It is especially important when bringing in folks from a face-to-face to online environment to ensure they have a shared community as a resource. Face-to-face

business and social interactions are also important in community building.

6. A holistic approach to faculty performance measurement should be implemented to ensure that completion is not the only measure. A solid set of metrics should be developed that has been agreed upon by stakeholders.

### **Faculty Attraction, Retention, and Development**

Participants believed the following factors determined faculty, attraction, retention, and development:

1. Recognizing that every school has a unique mission, institutions should communicate the unique characteristics, and culture with faculty as they are being recruited to increase the likelihood that the institution will be a good fit.
2. It is important for institutions to understand the motivation of their faculty to teach.
3. Institutions can build loyalty by treating faculty with respect. Faculty members are the eyes and ears on the ground. When folks see things as wrong, they will voice their opinions which will reduce issues like plagiarism and fraud.
4. Provide training and professional development opportunities for faculty. These resources and support to faculty are vital. Even if they don't always utilize the available resources, the outreach to them is important.

### **Next Steps**

WCET proposes the establishment of a new special interest group for academic officers whose institutions offer wholly or a significant number of online degree programs and whose faculty teach principally in an online environment. The October 2011 Forum demonstrated the shared interest among academic officers in having the opportunity for informal conversation and a venue for dialogue among their peers.

Dr. Karan Powell has agreed to chair WCET's Academic Leadership Forum and will reach out to the original Forum members for their individual involvement and suggestion as to how to continue a useful dialogue about faculty policies and practices for online educational programs. WCET will assist with communications, for example by establishing a closed listserv for Forum-members only, and will provide an opportunity for a face-to-face meeting in conjunction with the WCET Annual Meeting.