



Meet Me At The Hub: Online Support for Social Worker Adjunct

Journal:	Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education
Article Title:	<i>Meet Me At The Hub: Online Support for Social Worker Adjunct Instructors</i>
Author(s):	<i>Kleinschmit and Cummings</i>
Volume and Issue Number:	<i>Vol.21 No.2</i>
Manuscript ID:	<i>212003</i>
Page Number:	<i>3</i>
Year:	<i>2018</i>

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is a refereed journal concerned with publishing scholarly and relevant articles on continuing education, professional development, and training in the field of social welfare. The aims of the journal are to advance the science of professional development and continuing social work education, to foster understanding among educators, practitioners, and researchers, and to promote discussion that represents a broad spectrum of interests in the field. The opinions expressed in this journal are solely those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the policy positions of The University of Texas at Austin's School of Social Work or its Center for Social and Behavioral Research.

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is published two times a year (Spring and Winter) by the Center for Social and Behavioral Research at 1923 San Jacinto, D3500 Austin, TX 78712. Our website at www.profdevjournal.org contains additional information regarding submission of publications and subscriptions.

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ISSN: 1097-4911

URL: www.profdevjournal.org

Email: www.profdevjournal.org/contact

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Kleinschmit and Cummings

Abstract

This article introduces The Adjunct Instructor Hub, an online Learning Management Site (LMS)-based approach to orient, educate, connect, and support adjunct instructors. This LMS resource was developed to address the needs of a school of social work with multiple and geographically far-flung MSW and BASW programs. This article describes the reasoning for the site's design, organization and contents, lessons learned, and plans for the future.

Introduction

As social work education increasingly employs adjunct instructors in face-to-face and online settings, it is even more important that adjunct instructors have consistent orientation and support services. The University of Iowa School of Social Work (the School) utilizes adjunct instructors to teach in eight programs spread across five distinct geographic learning centers. In the past, the School offered some adjunct instructor support, varying greatly depending on the learning center, and there was not a cross-School unified adjunct orientation process or curriculum. In 2015, the School's Distance Education Administrator and MSW Program Director developed a Learning Management Site (LMS) to provide adjunct instructors with orientation, training, support, and regularly updated information on the curriculum, the School, and the University, while linking them more closely to the School and each other. We designed the LMS, which we call The Adjunct Instructor Hub (the Hub), to demonstrate how we wanted adjunct instructors to design their course sites, encouraging a consistent course management system approach across our curriculum. We launched the Hub in spring 2015, enrolling all adjunct instructors in it. This

teaching note discusses literature on the role of adjunct instructors in higher education and social work education, what adjunct instructors tell us they need, and challenges in mentoring and supporting adjunct instructors. We describe the context, design, content, and use of the Hub, what we learned from our initial rollout, and plans for the future.

Review of the Literature

The reliance on contingent and adjunct faculty continues to increase. The challenge is to provide what support adjunct instructors want in a flexible, effective, and responsive way, utilizing resources available to social work education programs.

In 2015, nationally across disciplines, adjunct faculty (part-time contingent faculty) made up 40% of the academic labor force, up from 24% in 1975 (American Association of University Professors, 2017). Trends in social work education are no different (McMurtry & McClelland, 1997; Pearlman, 2013). The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) reports that since 2011, the number of part-time faculty has grown by nearly 20% (CSWE, 2016).

For decades, adjunct instructors have asked for education, support, and collegial treatment that reflects being team members instead of lone actors (Clark, Moore, Johnson & Openshaw, 2011; Durso, 2011; Fagan-Wilen, Springer, Ambrosino, & White, 2006; Rogers, McIntyre & Jazzar, 2010). Social work adjunct instructors want to understand CSWE standards, the overall curriculum design, and how their courses fit into it (Strom-Gottfried & Dunlap, 2004; Pearlman, 2013). Adjunct instructors increasingly teach required courses, making it imperative that across program sites and course sections, course delivery is consistent in quality, content, and instructional methods (Pearlman, 2013; Strom-Gottfried &

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Dunlap, 2004). Further, adjunct instructors are not always well-trained or supported in their roles in gatekeeping, or ensuring students are appropriate for the social work profession (Thompson, 2006). Instructors ask for education and mentoring on teaching mechanics including creating syllabi and assignments, grading, and selecting activities and readings (Durso, 2011; Weimer, 2016; Wilson, Valentine, & Pereira, 2014; Patterson Lorenzetti, 2012a). They express needing help with managing student situations and boundaries, including increasing student desire that instructors are available around the clock (Rogers, McIntyre & Jazzar, 2010; Smith, 2015; Patterson Lorenzetti, 2012b; Lyons, 2007; Fagan-Wilen et al., 2006; Hill, 2012a). Adding another layer of complication, adjunct instructors are now generally expected to know how to effectively use a Learning Management System (most commonly, a course website) to interact with their students and manage assignments, materials, testing, and grade reporting (Rogers, McIntyre & Jazzar, 2010; Smith, 2015).

Challenges in working with adjunct instructors include time, resources, and not realizing blind spots in adjunct instructors' orientation and preparedness. Existing models for mentoring adjuncts can result in uneven outcomes for adjuncts and inadequate pedagogical preparation (Clark et al., 2011; Weimer, 2016; Fagen-Wilen et al., 2006). Sole reliance on individual mentoring is time-consuming and often not practical, particularly when time and space limit real-time discussion, the adjunct instructor recognizes specific needs in a moment of teaching, or when they have questions at 3 a.m. (Smith, 2015; Hill, 2012b). Requiring adjunct instructors to search through college and university websites to find information they need, or to otherwise seek out assistance on their own, enhances feelings of isolation, increased adjunct turnover, and uneven teaching and learning outcomes for students (Lyons, 2007; Pearlman, 2013).

Context

The University of Iowa School of Social Work has five geographically distinct learning centers: four place-based, and one online. The mother campus in Iowa City offers full-time BASW, MSW, and PhD programs. Three other place-based learning centers are located between 60 to 315 miles away from Iowa City. One offers full and part-time BASW and MSW programs; the other two offer the part-time MSW in a hybrid or blended format. At these part-time centers, some course sessions are face-to-face, and others are online. In 2018, the School began an online part-time MSW program. The School has utilized adjunct instructors for decades, generally full-time practitioners who teach electives in their area of specialty. Over time, and more often in our distance learning centers, adjuncts began teaching required courses.

Some effective elements of adjunct instructor support were present in the School but varied greatly depending on learning center, and there was not a cross-School unified adjunct orientation process or curriculum. In two learning centers, full-time faculty or staff served as individual mentors and points of contact to adjunct instructors. In another, adjunct instructors met once per semester to hear about School and University developments and offer input. Especially as videoconferencing technology improved, adjunct instructors teaching required courses sometimes met with full-time faculty to review course objectives, content, and assessment using "signature assignments" to be sure that all students were getting CSWE-mandated content and assessed on it according to plan. Even with these efforts, things sometimes fell through the cracks. For example, several adjunct instructors who taught required courses did not know they needed to track and turn in student outcome data, leading to work that needed to be redone, burdening faculty and administrators and creating unnecessary frustration.

Adjunct instructors are crucial in supporting the School's five learning centers, and it is imperative that the School support them in a way that is both high-tech and high-touch. It was time,

The Hub

especially with the increase in online instruction, for the School to establish a centralized orientation, education, and support Hub.

Adjunct Instructor Hub Development

In 2015, the Hub's designers chose to use an LMS (first Desire to Learn, now Canvas) as the base platform for supporting adjuncts because it a) is easy for adjunct instructors to access, b) allows for instructor discussion and interaction without concern that students could access the conversation, and c) is the same platform that

adjunct instructors use to teach their courses. Adjunct instructors could see how they might set up their own course sites and experience a course site as "students," allowing them greater understanding of how their students interact with course sites.

All adjunct instructors currently contracted to teach for the School are enrolled in the Hub. After enrollment, an adjunct instructor receives an email indicating they have access to the Hub. The School contracts with adjunct instructors for a three-year period. New instructors and those up

Figure 1. Adjunct Instructor Hub Home Page

The screenshot shows the Canvas LMS interface for the 'School of Social Work Adjunct Instructor Hub'. The page title is 'School of Social Work Adjunct Instructor Hub'. On the left is a navigation menu with options like Home, Announcements, Assignments, Discussions, Quizzes, People, Modules, ShareStream - Pick-n-Play, ShareStream - MediaManager, Collaborations, Outcomes, Syllabus, Grades, Pages, Files, Conferences, and Settings. The main content area features a header with 'Ongoing' and 'Home' tabs, and a 'Course Status' section with 'Unpublish' and 'Published' buttons. Below this is a large banner image of The University of Iowa campus with the text 'SSW 8000 School of Social Work Adjunct Instructor Hub Julia Kleinschmit & Stephen Cummings'. Underneath the banner is an 'About the Instructor' section for Julia Kleinschmit & Stephen Cummings, followed by a course progress bar with seven modules: Module 1 (Basic Student User Support), Module 2 (Key Policies & Training), Module 3 (Social Work), Module 4 (My Roster), Module 5 (Training Tools), Module 6 (L1 Library), and Module 7 (Learner from Open Hub), leading to 'Further Interaction'. Below the progress bar is a welcome message from Director Sara Sanders and a video player showing her. At the bottom left of the video player is a 'Minimize embedded content' link.

for contract renewal are required per their contracts to complete all the Hub’s training modules. For returning instructors with contracts not yet up for renewal, this is optional but highly encouraged.

Site Design

The faculty designers titled the new site “The Adjunct Instructor Hub” to emphasize the online location as a go-to place for various resources related to the adjunct instructor role. Once the

Table 1. Summary of Adjunct Instructor Hub Modules

<i>Module Title</i>	<i>Summary</i>
1: “I’ve been hired, now what?”	Resources specific to getting the instructor’s course completed are found here, including syllabus templates, and an explanation of the course evaluation process. A discussion board for instructors is found here.
2: Key Policies and Training	All major required training of adjunct instructors to maintain employment at the University is located here, including sexual misconduct, and FERPA education. Important social work program policies are also found here.
3: How do I Use ICON?	The goals of an effectively implemented LMS are reviewed here; A training in using Canvas is included in this module.
4: How to Use My HawkID	Each adjunct instructor is given credentials to log into the University of Iowa’s network of applications and services, including the online research library, Office 365, SPSS and other applications. This module explains these features.
5: Teaching Tools	This module reviews expectations for syllabus design, rubrics, and classroom technology. In this module, a discussion board on working with students asks instructors to share their teaching successes and challenges is available.
6: University Libraries	General information about our library system is presented, including how to access resources and work with our School’s assigned library liaison.
7: What I’ve Learned from This Site	A short survey is provided here, allowing adjunct instructors to provide feedback on the site.
8: Further Information	This module provides information specific to each of the School’s four geographic and its online learning centers.

adjunct instructor logs into the site, they first see a welcome page. This page includes an aerial view of the main part of the University of Iowa mother campus and a brief welcome video message presented by the program director (Figure 1).

While an instructor accessing the site is able to select any module they wish, the site is designed specifically to follow through the modules in a stepwise fashion. The welcome page features a series of hyperlinked buttons, positioned from left to right, that list the steps numerically with a descriptor for each. The site features eight modules, detailed in Table 1.

The site educates adjunct faculty, encourages interaction between them and the School, and also gives them practice in being a “student” using an LMS. For example, we placed a discussion board in the first module to encourage interaction from the start. Its description reads “In this forum, you can post questions about teaching. They can be about mechanics of the School, who to go to for what, quirky or challenging situations with students. All is fair game. If when you visit this discussion, YOU know that answer to someone else's question, feel free to answer.” Throughout the site, instructors complete other “student” tasks such as downloading/uploading documents, completing assignments, and taking quizzes.

The module on “Key Policies and Training” expands adjunct instructor knowledge of and comfort with the School’s Student Advancement Policy, used to identify when students need assistance in being successful in the MSW program, or to determine the student’s appropriateness for the profession. Full-time faculty know the MSW Program Director and have been trained to inform her if they have concerns about students so she can intervene. When there are concerns, she follows up with regular and adjunct faculty involved with the student. As a further measure, once per semester in a faculty meeting, the MSW Program Director reviews all the names of current students to be sure there are no concerns before students are advanced in the program. Adjunct faculty do not attend faculty meetings and have not received consistent training and education about what

constitutes a concern in the classroom and how to seek consultation if there are issues. The module on policy includes a narrated PowerPoint, in which the MSW Program Director reviews the School’s Student Advancement Policy and tells adjunct faculty what to do if s/he is concerned about a student’s success in the program or appropriateness for the social work profession. The presentation also encourages adjunct instructors to see the MSW Program Director as an accessible and helpful resource for them.

Adjunct instructors are expected to complete all the modules in the Hub. At the end of each module as outlined above, the new adjunct instructor is required to complete a short, non-rigorous quiz to affirm each module has been completed, and to give them the experience of taking a quiz on ICON. For example, after Module 2 (Key Policies and Training), the instructor is presented with a multiple-choice item. The question stem is “FERPA stands for,” and the choices include the correct item (“Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act”) and distractors (“Faulty Entranceways Reroute People Accordingly”).

Initial Feedback

We got some limited but good feedback after the initial rollout of the Hub. Adjunct faculty uploaded their CVs and participated in discussions, offering suggestions to each other such as this one, “I have found that student self-assessment has been a great way to get students to engage fully in discussion posts. I have also started to require that students use references in their discussions.” They asked questions about how to get desk copies of new textbooks to review to update courses and how to use course reserves. One remarked, “. . . I appreciate the orientation via (the site). It is helpful for me to see what it’s like as a student . . . Thank you for creating it!” One of our takeaways was that adjunct faculty may benefit from a formal, direct orientation to the Hub, rather than expecting them to initiate exploration on their own. For example, the School can schedule webinars with adjunct faculty to introduce the

Hub, provide a tour, and answer questions, or, in the case of one learning center, feature the Hub at one of their every-semester face-to-face meetings.

Plans for the Future of the Hub

The Adjunct Instructor Hub is a good start. Further developed, the Hub will be a primary platform for organizing, housing, and disseminating information about educational opportunities, resources, information, and recognition of achievement not only for adjunct instructors but also for regular faculty and field instructors. Full-time tenured, tenure-track, and clinical faculty have requested to be enrolled in the Hub, feeling they could both benefit from interaction with adjunct faculty and offer something to adjunct faculty development. As one tenure-track faculty member said, "I could have used something like this when I joined the School! Can I still get in?"

Planned modules and additional supports include a module with a more detailed overview of the curriculum and how each instructor's course fits in the overall picture and builds on what students have already taken or prepares them for next steps. This module will contain information about CSWE 2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards, how the School assesses competency achievement, how signature assignments (assignments shared across course sections and learning center sites) work, how to turn in assessment data, and how to be involved in curriculum revision.

The School is planning additional continuing education opportunities for instructors including webinars with the University of Iowa's Office of Teaching and Learning to advance pedagogy and lunchtime meetings (on-site or via videoconference) with regular faculty to discuss maximizing student learning while managing boundaries so that faculty remain healthy. It makes sense for instructors to go to the Hub to access links to sign up for and join those webinars, and then to view recorded webinars.

In this manner, some elements of the Hub can be used as digital learning objects (Ballantyne,

2007) to cross-train field instructors. Providing information on curriculum design, working with students, and the Student Advancement Policy via the Hub will reduce recreation of existing resources and maximize message consistency through the School. It may also encourage field instructors to consider becoming adjunct instructors.

To recognize excellence in adjunct instruction, the School's Distance Education Coordinator is planning an every-semester e-newsletter with essential information for adjunct instructors, with each issue highlighting one of the School's instructors, his/her background, contributions, and a teaching tip from the instructor. Further, the School is exploring awarding an annual teaching award to an outstanding adjunct instructor and then publicizing the contribution via the Hub and the School's nationally distributed newsletter.

Evaluation Plans

In the future, we will study the Hub's impact in four areas:

1. Do adjunct instructors realize a knowledge gain by participating in the Hub?
2. Does the Hub help adjunct instructors identify more as members of the University of Iowa faculty team rather than as lone practitioners?
3. Does the Hub assist in reducing feelings of isolation for adjunct instructors?
4. Does the Hub increase adjunct instructor comfort level in working with students?

To answer these, we plan a mixed methods study. We've developed a Qualtrics pre- and post-test to measure gains in knowledge regarding fundamentally important information about the School and teaching process/policies that we think instructors may not be aware of, which are featured on the Hub. The pretest will include questions regarding feelings about being part of the team, isolation, and comfort in working with students. After completing all the Hub's required modules, instructors will take the posttest so we can see the degree of knowledge gain and changes

in feelings of belonging, isolation, and comfort in working with students. It's intended that adjunct faculty will engage with the Hub before they teach a course, or at the beginning of the term, so Hub designers will follow up with instructors at the end of the term, interviewing them about their experience with the Hub and as an adjunct instructor with the School. Their feedback will be useful in understanding if the Hub is meeting their needs and how it and other School processes could be revised to better support adjunct faculty.

Conclusion

Adjunct instructors play an increasingly vital role in social work education, so it is critical that they are appropriately oriented, educated, and connected to the colleges and universities that employ them. The University of Iowa's Adjunct Instructor Hub is a step toward putting instructors on the same page as full-time faculty and encourages their inclusion in the School of Social Work community. It continues to grow and evolve, just as social work education does, in this rapidly changing educational environment.

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