



Faculty Onboarding: Lessons Learned From Creating a Program From Scratch

When students begin college for the first time, many of them are unsure of where to go, what to do, and what's expected of them. New faculty members can feel the same way. Often, faculty members are hired close to the start of the semester. Though they are introduced around the department, shown where their office is located, handed a class schedule, and a colleague might say, "If you need anything, I'm down the hall," this is often the extent of orientation for new faculty members. Effective onboarding is one way to help new faculty members establish a solid foundation at your college.

Calhoun Community College recognized the need for new faculty support and created a three-year onboarding program for new, tenure-track faculty members. The goals of onboarding are to:

- Provide a positive first impression of the institution.
- Offer an overview of the way the institution "does business."
- Acclimate faculty to required technology, including classroom tools, our learning management system, and the student management system.
- Review the expectations and requirements of the position.
- Review the steps necessary to achieve tenure status.
- Provide a resource and "go-to" person for questions, concerns, or comments.

I was selected as Director of Faculty Development at Calhoun Community College in July 2016, and had less than six weeks to create a meaningful onboarding experience. I began by asking the following questions:

- What is important for a new faculty member to know right away and what can wait until future semesters?
- Do new faculty members have previous teaching experience?
- What types of professional development should be offered, and how will it support the mission of the institution?
- What is the best delivery method—face-to-face, online, or both?
- What resources do new faculty members need?

- What information do they need at their fingertips?
- What about mentoring?

After mapping out the answers to these questions, I created an onboarding schedule. Cohorts of new faculty members meet most frequently during the fall semester, approximately six to seven times. The first meeting is usually a "meet and greet" to get to know each other and to introduce the onboarding process. This meeting is held the Friday before classes begin and lasts approximately two hours. Topics include an overview of the tenure policy, requirements of the teaching portfolio, title of the book selected for the group's required book to read, the focus of the fall professional development series, and a panel discussion with faculty members hired the previous year. During the panel discussion, I ask the veteran faculty members to respond to the prompt, "What I wish I knew when I was hired..." This helps new faculty members meet colleagues who were in the same position the previous year, receive lessons learned shared by their peers, and provides a personal connection within the college community.

The next session is held about three weeks after classes start, which gives our new faculty members time to get their feet on the ground and get comfortable with their classes and students. At this point, we start meeting every two weeks until right before final exams. Each meeting begins with a general discussion about how things are going and problems or concerns any member of the cohort wants to introduce. These meetings are when the members of the cohort develop a strong connection with each other because listening to their colleagues share problems, frustrations, challenges, and successes creates space for true collaboration across disciplines and campuses. During sessions held later in the semester, the group either discusses the required reading assignment or they participate in professional development sessions. Meetings are held on Friday mornings and generally last two-and-a-half to three hours. The fall semester ends with a celebration and refreshments.

During the spring semester of a faculty cohort's first year, meetings are held four times. These meetings provide a variety of professional development topics based on the cohorts' particular needs. The Teaching Portfolio workshop is also a part of the spring series. Leading up to the tenure recommendation year (year three), groups begin to meet less often. During their second year, the cohort meets a total of four times and only twice in the third year. In the second and third years, I also hold voluntary, open-portfolio labs where faculty members can bring their portfolio materials for me to review, get questions

answered, or use the time to work on the portfolio project.

As with any new initiative or program, there are bound to be successes, challenges, and lessons learned. At Calhoun Community College, one of the biggest successes of the onboarding program has been the relationships that have developed. These relationships have helped to breakdown silos and get faculty members across disciplines and campuses engaged with one another. Each cohort becomes a very close-knit community where faculty members are comfortable sharing the difficulties they face and often draw on the experience and expertise of colleagues to solve challenges. Onboarding is also helping to build a more reflective faculty body. The portfolio process during onboarding is designed to encourage faculty members to “get real” with what is and is not working in their classrooms and adjust their practices accordingly to increase student success and retention. Onboarding also helps to identify challenges and difficulties early on. If a faculty member is struggling, there are multiple ways to help him or her get back on track and be successful. Onboarding is all about providing the tools needed for new faculty members to be successful.

The biggest challenge Calhoun Community College has faced is coming up with the right way to design mentorship for new faculty members. Although I have tried three different models, what works best for us is having a person from the same department mentor a new faculty member. Another important lesson I learned was not doing too much too fast. During the first year of the onboarding program, I was so excited to be able to support for new faculty members that I planned too many activities, something faculty members shared with me through a feedback survey. I have since modified the fall semester so faculty have a chance to get a firm footing before their cohort dives into professional development sessions. Another lesson learned is that onboarding cannot be a “one size fits all” program. Our faculty members come to us with an assortment of experiences and professional development needs. It’s important to be conscious of that variation and plan activities that benefit individuals at all levels of experience. Finally, ask each cohort what they want or need for the professional development sessions. Each cohort is different, so I listen to them and plan our activities to meet their specific needs. I am continually asking for feedback through surveys or conversation and I use that information to improve the program for future cohorts.

Onboarding at Calhoun Community College is making a difference for our new faculty members. It’s helping to quickly acclimate them to the college community, as well as help them understand expectations and responsibilities and build relationships across disciplines and campuses. Faculty need this support not only for their success, but for the success of their students.

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