



You're Hired! Now What? Helping New Faculty Adjust

It is the first day of class. What in the world did I sign up for? Why am I doing this? My palms are sweaty. I feel nauseous. It was a big decision to leave a comfortable career to begin teaching at a college. Right now, I only wonder, "What was I thinking?" As I walk into the classroom, I see 25 faces staring back with wide eyes and fear. I take a deep breath and walk toward the front row. There is no turning back now. After all, I am the instructor.

As a department chair at a technical college, I frequently observe new teachers in a similar state of panic on the first day of class. Some are still in the workforce and choose to teach part-time as adjunct instructors; others decide to make a career change and become full-time instructors in their area of expertise. Many are walking into the classroom as an instructor for the first time. Further, several of these new instructors may have been hired at the last minute as a result of needing a teacher for an additional course section, replacing a cancellation, or the promotion of the current teacher to another position.

Experts as Faculty

Faculty at community and technical colleges are content experts; however, many may lack college teaching experience. Therefore, faculty tend to rely on traditional instructional approaches such as lecturing and whole group discussion (Fletcher, Djajalaksana, and Eison, 2012), often teaching based on their own experience as students. Unlike K-12 educators, new college faculty members may not have participated in education courses or even engaged in conversation with other educators regarding common classroom practice on their path to teaching.

For those of us responsible for hiring faculty, what can we do to help new faculty adjust? As department chair, I feel a responsibility to make new faculty members' transition to teaching as smooth as possible, providing some of what I did (and did not) receive as a new and naïve instructor.

My Experience as New Faculty Member

I began teaching college in my mid-30s after a change in careers. Although I had experience providing employment training to small groups, I had never stood before a room of 25 strangers with the responsibility of educating and engaging them in one subject for a whole semester. At the time, two different colleges offered me a course to teach—both as a last-minute replacement. One position opened

because of a promotion, and the other because the former instructor quit three weeks into the semester.

The first college provided me with a textbook, a manual of teaching information with an outline of how each day was to be conducted, a complete syllabus, a calendar of topics and assignments with prepared instruction sheets for students, and grading rubrics. The second college provided me with a textbook I could choose to use or not, a sample syllabus, a warning that students in the class were not happy about the previous teacher who left, and an offer to sit in another instructor's class to help me learn more about teaching. I was so excited to be teaching, I enthusiastically embraced whatever help was offered to me for both courses.

Helpful Points for New Faculty

Now, as a department chair in charge of hiring new full-time and adjunct instructors, I try to remember how it felt walking into class the first day and each day thereafter my first year. Below are five of the most common pieces of advice for first-time faculty, based on my own experience and that of several skilled faculty members who share the advice they wish they had received prior to teaching.

1. **Be prepared for unprepared students.** New faculty members are often surprised by the attitudes, behaviors, and lack of preparation of students sitting in their classrooms. A former petroleum engineer and five-year instructor stated,

I wish someone had told me it was OK to have high expectations, but not so high that I beat myself up when students didn't achieve [them]. Because information about safety and dangers in the petroleum industry could save someone's life, I hate it when I ask a question in an upper-level class and no one can answer it because they forgot.

A former correctional facility employee and third-year criminal justice instructor added, "I wish someone told me I would have to be ready for students not equipped or prepared to do college-level work." Expecting more from students than they can give, or are willing to give, is frustrating and feels personal, but it is likely not a reflection of you as an instructor.

2. **Find a mentor.** Teaching at the college level can feel lonely. It is important to find someone from whom you can learn the ins and outs of your institution. At a small college, you may be the only person teaching

a specific subject or course. Sometimes colleagues may not be willing to share ideas or materials. A former staff accountant and current business and computer information systems instructor shared her experience:

Finding someone to mentor me was the largest challenge. I was given my courses and textbooks without any guidance or advice for instruction. Luckily, I had previous teaching experience, but unlike K-12 teaching, instructors didn't congregate and exchange teaching techniques. Everyone was practically on their own.

Some colleges have formal mentoring programs available for faculty. If not, find a fellow instructor at your college or in a regional, state, or nationwide organization related to your field. It is important to have support and an outlet for ideas, questions, and concerns, especially in the first year.

- 3. Make the class your own.** New faculty teaching in lower-division courses may be provided with a specific syllabus, including an outline of and assignments for the course. Additionally, new faculty may replace long-term, recently retired faculty, who are leaving behind a legacy of how the course “has always been taught.” It is important for new faculty to feel empowered to make the course their own with their own teaching style.

An 18-year instrumentation instructor shared that his greatest challenge was following a former military retiree who taught for 20 years, as well as another instructor who had worked for 30 years at his institution. He learned how both instructors taught their courses by attending their lectures, but he eventually found the structure that worked best for him.

Finding your own way of teaching may take more than one or two semesters; it occurs as you find more confidence in yourself as an instructor.

- 4. Remember, it's not about you.** New faculty members can get caught up in distracting concerns about their image. It's natural to want to be liked. An Air Force veteran, firefighter, and now instructor in the Fire Academy summed it up:

You run the gamut of emotions. You don't want to make a fool of yourself. Have you done enough to prepare? You want them to be interested. You want them to think you're funny. It's all quite self-absorbed in the beginning. As you get more comfortable, you realize it's not about you at all. It's about serving others.

Teaching is not for the self-absorbed. A three-year instructor in diagnostic medical and cardiac sonography added, “Students don't always care

what you know—they just want to know you care!” Of course students value the content you deliver, it is the reason they registered for the class. However, if you can also deliver the bonus of caring and showing personal interest in students, you can build relationships that enrich their learning.

- 5. Breathe.** It sounds like simple advice, but it is the most important thing I can offer to new faculty: “Just breathe.” There will be bad days. There will be overwhelming days. There will be days when you wonder why you decided to teach at all. Yet, if you have truly found your calling as a teacher, there will also be days when you know there is nothing else you'd rather do. At negative and positive times, simply breathe, evaluate, and make a plan for the next class or the next semester.

As an administrator, it is important to remember that those new to the field of education may need help learning the intricacies of college teaching in order to succeed in the classroom. Hopefully, the preceding five pieces of advice can help those of you who are new faculty, as well as those who are able to assist new faculty make a better transition into classroom teaching.

Lessons Learned

To this day, I am so glad that I did not turn back when I first walked into a college classroom. I still remember facing students 11 years ago, panicked, and thinking, “Why am I doing this?” By the time the semester was over, I knew why I was doing it. Teaching, for me, was the opportunity of a lifetime.

What advice do you have for new faculty, or administrators hiring new faculty? Tell us in the comment section or on Facebook!

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References

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