

Regional Campus Success: Strategies for Psychology Faculty

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Psychology professors on regional campuses play a vital role in higher education yet find themselves unrepresented in the vast literature on professional development. Regional campuses operate under unique parameters that set them apart from other academic environments, such as main campuses, liberal arts colleges, and 2-year institutions. Job success and satisfaction on a regional campus depend partly on the psychology faculty member's ability to adjust to a set of distinct challenges. We describe these challenges as they specifically relate to psychology faculty and outline several strategies for thriving on a regional campus.

Regional campuses are common in the landscape of higher education and are projected to grow as they serve expanding nontraditional student populations (Fonseca & Bird, 2007; National Center for Education Statistics, 2002; Nickerson & Schaefer, 2001). For example, in Ohio, 24 regional campuses serve more than 47,000 students (Ohio Board of Regents, 2007). Unfortunately, academic literature virtually ignores regional campuses—the quintessential guide for academicians (Darley, Zanna, & Roediger, 2004) does not mention them and searches for “branch campus” and “regional campus” in PsycINFO identified only one article concerning professional development.

Like psychology departments in small liberal arts colleges, psychologists on regional campuses are commonly part of a one- to three-person department, isolated and disconnected within an unrelated group of scholars. Psychology faculty members are obligated to teach multiple, varied courses and to invest extensive time in student activities, advising, and general service obligations (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990; McReynolds, 1986). Because regional campus psychologists can benefit by adopt-

ing teaching strategies that also work well in liberal arts settings, we rely on advice offered elsewhere, such as developing efficient course preparation strategies, staggering assignment due dates, and becoming active in teaching organizations (Dunn & Zaremba, 1997). However, previous works do not describe the unique nuances of regional campus life and therefore cannot provide comprehensive professional advice for regional psychology faculty.

Regional campuses are different from small liberal arts colleges and 2-year institutions in that they represent the only academic context in which faculty must serve two often disparate masters. Regional campus psychologists must reconcile the physical, social, and ideological separation between their home campus administration and their main campus psychology department. Although this separation increases autonomy, it also creates a divide between regional and main campus psychology colleagues, and it adds a layer of bureaucracy not encountered in other academic settings. For example, the main campus department typically plays a role in promotion and tenure decisions concerning regional campus faculty, but main campus psychologists do not always appreciate the teaching mission of regional campuses. Thus, psychology faculty must be savvy about working within the context of a regional campus while still earning positive evaluations from the main campus psychology department.

We describe the characteristics of regional campus positions and outline strategies that psychology faculty of any rank can adopt to find success in these settings. We developed these strategies through a combined 40 years of teaching undergraduate psychology at a regional campus in central Ohio.

Regional Campus Success Strategies

Understand Your Campus Mission

The viability of a regional campus requires meeting the needs of the local population and maintaining good community relations (Flaherty, 2004). Unlike institutions that recruit on a national or global scale, regional campuses attract students almost exclusively from the surrounding communities and these students will remain in these communities after graduation. The regional campus must project a reputation of accessible, quality higher education that meets the needs and desires of the local population. This community- and student-centered mission requires psychology faculty to reach out to the community through teaching and service. For example, we coordinate student volunteering with mental health agencies, offer community workshops on applied topics (e.g., stress reduction), serve on a hospital ethics board, participate on a school crisis team, and conduct court mediations. We oversee a student organization that provides service for community agencies and raises money for mental health organizations. Together, these activities support our campus mission, maintain town-to-gown equilibrium, market the psychology major, and demonstrate psychology in action.

Expect Nontraditional Students

Regional campus students are unlike their main campus counterparts in that they are rooted members of the local population, married and divorced working parents, and first-generation college students looking for conveniently scheduled course offerings that fulfill their personal and professional goals (Nickerson & Schaefer, 2001; Snell, 2008). To accommodate this student population, psychology professors should prepare for diversity in academic ability and consider offering courses during evenings and weekends. We are continually rewarded with mature students who enrich the subject matter with their wealth of life experience.

Moreover, we utilize the best and the brightest psychology majors to fulfill roles that are typically reserved for graduate students. As in liberal arts colleges, undergraduates can gain research experience by conducting independent research projects or serving as research assistants (Dunn & Zaremba, 1997). Several of our undergraduate psychology majors presented and published their work (e.g., LoSchiavo & Roberts, 2005; Mayercak, 2008), which provided firsthand re-

search experience and better prepared them for graduate school. Our most advanced psychology majors also serve as teaching assistants in lower level courses with responsibilities including fostering critical thinking in online discussion groups, creating study guides, leading discussions on readings, or giving minilectures in class. These students gain valuable experience that they often could not access in the large department on the main campus, and faculty members benefit from assistance typically provided by graduate students.

Enjoy Scholarly Freedoms

Although regional campus psychologists are not expected to publish as prolifically as their main campus colleagues, they are required to be productive scholars (Mooney, 1995). Because data collection is difficult without the graduate students, lab resources, or participant pool available on the main campus, we supplement our empirical research programs with pedagogical and nonempirical articles. For example, we demonstrated that pedagogical humor enhances online instruction (LoSchiavo & Shatz, 2005), and we recently published a paper outlining how experimental methods strengthen the scholarship of teaching and learning in psychology (LoSchiavo, Shatz, & Poling, 2008). Adapting research strategies provides regional psychology faculty the autonomy to explore areas of scholarly interest, such as pedagogy, that main campus psychologists do not have the freedom to incorporate into their programs of basic research.

Make Off-Campus Connections

Regional psychology faculty members are geographically isolated from other psychology colleagues, so it is critical to maintain collegial relationships with psychology faculty on other regional campuses and the main campus department. For example, we publish research with other regional campus psychology faculty (e.g., Poling & Hupp, 2008), and rely on other regional faculty to serve as outside reviewers for promotion and tenure dossiers because they can effectively communicate the situational differences between main and regional campuses to those who make promotion and tenure decisions. Unlike independent colleges, regional psychology faculty must maintain good relationships with their main campus psychology department to ensure that they will be kept abreast of curricular changes and other departmental issues.

Conclusions

Psychology faculty members who accommodate the unique challenges of regional campuses are rewarded in many ways (Wolfe & Strange, 2003). We are grateful for the autonomy and freedom to pursue varied interests because it helps maintain our motivation to continue studying psychology with dedication and excitement. Our mature and responsible students are a pleasant contrast to relatively apathetic 18-year-olds, and we enjoy both personal and professional relationships with colleagues from many disciplines. Finally, when we actively work toward the betterment of the community through educational outreach and service, we achieve a sense of personal fulfillment that goes beyond a class taught well or a manuscript written with eloquence.

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Note

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