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New Jersey community colleges to launch Web portal to hire, train adjuncts

Submitted by Carl Straumsheim on March 7, 2013 - 3:00am

New Jersey's community colleges will this year consolidate how they hire and train non-tenure-track instructors, but some adjuncts are concerned the program will make it more difficult to find teaching opportunities in the state.

The initiative, scheduled to launch this summer or fall, will go live as a Web portal that connects aspiring adjuncts with community colleges searching for qualified instructors. In addition to simply serving as a job board, the website will allow adjuncts to post their profiles, making their fields of study visible to New Jersey's 19 community colleges.

Steven M. Rose, president of Passaic County Community College, said such an initiative has never before been attempted by community colleges in other states. "If they did, we would have copied from them," Rose said.

The effort to simplify how institutions recruit adjuncts comes after New Jersey's community colleges have increasingly come to depend on adjunct faculty members to tackle explosive enrollment growth. At Passaic County Community College, the number of adjunct faculty members has more than doubled in the last decade. Today, the institution has 103 tenure-track faculty members and about 550 adjuncts, Rose said.

"One of the most important things that our colleges can do is to pay a lot of attention to our adjuncts, because they are doing a large portion of the instruction on our campuses," Rose said. "Managing a workforce of that size is a challenge."

With the new website, Rose said he hoped institutions will also be able to attract professionals who have never considered becoming adjuncts. To ensure the new recruits are up to the task, the website will feature information about a credential program -- a kind of crash course in teaching. Rose noted details about the credential process are still in the works. Should the website prove a success, it could be used for community colleges to gradually amass a catalog of best practices.

While administrators praise the initiative, some adjuncts would rather see it as scrapped altogether. William J. Lipkin, a full-time adjunct professor for the past 12 years who teaches at four different New Jersey institutions, said he was frustrated with how adjuncts have been excluded from the design process.

"They don't want to hear from us. They don't want input from us," said Lipkin, who serves as the treasurer of the national adjunct organization New Faculty Majority.

Lipkin said he feared a system where a department chair at one community college could post negative feedback on an adjunct's online profile -- in essence blackballing him or her from employment at other institutions. He also questioned why community colleges are courting instructors with no teaching experience instead of catering to the state's estimated 15,000 adjuncts.

"I don't see the benefit of this, at least for us," Lipkin said. "It's a benefit for the schools -- they can go in and pick and choose."

Lipkin said he saw no reason to change the more informal hiring system in place today, where adjuncts directly contact department chairs at individual schools.

Maria Maisto, New Faculty Majority's president, also expressed concerns about the initiative.

"[O]ur concern is always whether a proposed solution is going to exacerbate exploitation or not," Maisto said. "Systems and solutions that are exploitative never improve the quality of education being delivered."

For full-time adjuncts, Rose said the new system could help them land tenured teaching positions by making them aware of the teaching opportunities available in the state.

"The goal is to ensure that our students get the best possible instruction that they can in the classroom," Rose said. "If we can make sure that we get a great pool of adjuncts and give them some training, that can help."

Adjuncts [1]