

IMPROVING THE LEGAL WRITING ADJUNCT EXPERIENCE: LESSONS FROM LAWYER-TO-LAWYER MENTORING LITERATURE

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At the 2019 ALWD Biennial Conference in Boston (my very first), I participated in an important roundtable discussion of adjunct-based legal writing programs.¹ The other panelists and I discussed the challenges and benefits of adjunct-based programs. During the discussion, more than one panelist emphasized the critical role that adjuncts play in their law school's legal writing programs.² The conversation among the panelists and audience members was productive, and I came back to Columbus with new professional connections and exciting ideas to implement.

Since Boston, I have found myself reflecting on how institutions and the broader legal writing community can better support the professional development of the adjuncts who provide a critical service in the education of our law students. To better understand how that support might develop, I delved into the literature on workplace lawyer-to-lawyer mentoring programs. Lawyer-to-lawyer mentoring literature is relevant to adjunct teaching given the role that adjunct professors can play in mentoring their students. Adjunct professors help their students develop professionally to achieve the students' professional goals just as any other mentor helps his/her/their mentee to achieve the mentee's professional goals.

The literature on workplace mentoring programs extols the possible benefits of mentoring, both for mentees (sometimes called "protégées") and for mentors and can be applied to adjuncts in their role as mentors. The benefits available to mentees are well established, and include increased job satisfaction, recognition,

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¹ A special thank you to Suzanne Rowe, organizer of the roundtable discussion, to Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff, moderator of the discussion, and to co-panelists Mary Ann Becker, Scott Fraley, Fiona McKenna, Wendy Shea, and Neil Sobol.

² As the leader of Ohio State's appellate advocacy program, I have the privilege of working with legal stars in the Columbus, Ohio legal community. Prior to my current role, I was an adjunct in the same program for nine years.

increased compensation, and promotions.³ Benefits available to mentors may be less immediately observable, but could include increased leadership capacity, professional and personal renewal, and refreshed perspective.⁴ Consultants who help law firms, bar associations, and other organizations with mentoring encourage workplace programs to maximize the mentor experience by:

- (1) ensuring mentors receive adequate *training*;
- (2) providing *ongoing support* to mentors; and above all
- (3) *valuing* mentors “and help[ing] them as much possible.”⁵

It strikes me that by employing each of these three suggestions in the legal writing context, institutions and the broader legal writing community can ensure a positive experience for adjunct professors in their role as mentors. Indeed, adjuncts could even experience the same benefits available to workplace mentors (e.g., increased leadership capacity, professional and personal renewal, and refreshed perspective).

Suggestion 1: Invest in adjunct training.

In her writing on mentoring programs, author, attorney, and consultant Ida Abbott has observed the critical nature of training mentors: “[o]ne of the most common reasons that mentoring programs fail is that many lawyers do not have the skills and behaviors required to make mentoring relationships productive.”⁶ Because they are “smart and successful, people assume that lawyers know how to be effective mentors[.]”⁷ But “cognitive ability is not enough for successful mentoring,”⁸ so mentoring programs must devote program resources to ensuring lawyers are trained in the skill set needed to be successful.⁹

Similarly, law schools should continue to invest in adjunct faculty training. Just as a workplace mentoring program should not assume that cognitive ability is enough for successful mentoring, an

³ IDA O. ABBOTT, *THE LAWYER’S GUIDE TO MENTORING* 32-33 (2000).

⁴ *Id.* at 26, 48-51.

⁵ Robert J. Derocher, *Mentoring Helps New and Experienced Lawyers Make the Connection*, AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION (Jul.-Aug. 2006), https://www.americanbar.org/groups/bar_services/publications/bar_leader/2005_06/3006/mentoring/.

⁶ ABBOTT, *supra* note 3, at 105.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.* at 105-09.

institution should not automatically equate an adjunct's cognitive ability and professional success with teaching ability.

Schools might, if not already doing so, invest in training by conducting in-person training sessions before the semester begins, preparing and distributing adjunct manuals; and/or creating a repository of other resources on the teaching of legal writing, like scholarly articles, and making that repository of resources accessible throughout the semester.

During adjunct training, program leaders could cover topics including the following:

- how to teach (e.g. how to prepare for a class session, how to begin and end class, and how to make class interactive);
- how to provide formative feedback, including introduction to the concept of “triage,”¹⁰ where and how to comment on student work, and how to use a final comment;
- how to respond to and manage student requests (e.g. student requests for deadline extensions and student requests for letters of recommendation);
- how to effectively schedule and conduct student conferences;
- how to grade;
- applicable institutional policies such as school standards for student conduct; and
- administrative matters (e.g. accessing the building and using classroom technology).

Opportunities also exist for outside groups to support adjunct training initiatives. For example, after its 2019 biennial conference, ALWD established the Adjunct Programs Committee. Under the leadership of co-chairs Chris Soper and Chelsi Hayden, the Committee has already begun initiatives to support adjunct program leaders and members. Those initiatives include establishing a listserv (ADJDIR) for legal writing instructors who are interested in issues facing adjunct programs and creating a shared materials bank. Program leaders will be able to review the listserv postings and consult the shared materials bank for ideas and resources they can incorporate into adjunct trainings at their own schools. Similarly, adjuncts (and aspiring adjuncts) will have access to the listserv and the shared materials bank so that they can independently build their knowledge and teaching materials.

¹⁰ See Daniel L. Barnett, *Triage in the Trenches of the Legal Writing Course: The Theory & Methodology of Analytical Critique*, 38 U. TOL. L. REV. 651 (2007).

Suggestion 2: Provide ongoing support and regular check-ins to adjuncts.

Abbott warns that support for mentors should not end after the initial mentor training, but must be ongoing.¹¹ She suggests offering in-person discussion groups to give mentors “a chance to share experiences, exchange ideas, and talk about what they are learning.”¹² The mentoring program should also check-in with individual mentors to gauge whether relationships are working and program objectives are met.¹³

Similarly, support for adjunct faculty should be ongoing and not end with an initial training session. Institutions should make individual and group check-ins available to adjunct faculty. For example, program directors can schedule monthly opportunities for the adjunct group to meet with each other and the program director (either virtually or in the law school) to share their experiences, exchange ideas, and ask questions. More informally, program directors can make themselves generally available to field adjunct questions during the semester. And, before students submit a major writing project, program directors can send an email recommending particular critiquing tips. Program directors can then review adjuncts’ written critiques and offer feedback. Program directors can also visit the adjunct’s classroom to observe the adjunct’s teaching. To provide further support, at the end of the semester, program directors can meet individually with each adjunct professor to review student evaluations.¹⁴

As noted above, the initiatives already taken by the ALWD Adjunct Programs Committee, including creation of the listserv and the shared materials bank, provide program directors with access to

¹¹ *Id.* at 109.

¹² *Id.* at 110.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ In our program, adjuncts participate in regular conference calls to share experiences, exchange ideas, and pose questions to others in the adjunct group and me. Before each draft of the students’ appellate brief and the students’ oral argument, I send a detailed email to the group with reminders and suggestions. Mary Beth Beazley, one of my legal writing mentors, introduced me to many tips for working with adjunct colleagues, including the idea of asking adjuncts to send critiques of “a top,” “a middle,” and “a bottom” student paper. I then review the critiques and offer feedback. In addition, our adjuncts can meet with me to review and discuss student evaluations. I’m also generally available to field adjunct questions throughout the semester.

training and/or resources on how to supervise and support adjuncts while they're teaching.

Suggestion 3: Value adjuncts.

Above all, Abbott encourages workplace programs to value and take seriously mentors: "If people are participating, it's because they want to. You're starting out with someone with motivation and commitment."¹⁵

Similarly, adjunct faculty must know that they are valued. Institutions might show appreciation by consulting adjunct faculty to determine their needs before creating and implementing training sessions.¹⁶ Institutions might also, if not already doing so, provide physical space within the building for adjunct professors to work as well as making office equipment like printers and scanners readily available to adjuncts. In addition, schools might invite adjunct professors to participate in school events like faculty workshops and law school graduation ceremonies.

Individual members of the broader legal writing community might, if not already doing so, introduce adjuncts (or aspiring adjuncts) to the many resources available to legal writing faculty. These introductions might encourage interested adjuncts to consider membership in legal writing organizations, participation in the LWI listserv and ADJDIR listserv (the listserv for legal writing instructors who are interested in issues facing adjunct programs), and/or attendance at legal writing conferences. Law schools in turn might further encourage adjuncts to participate in conferences by subsidizing the cost of attendance. And certainly, by dedicating time and space at the 2019 Biennial Conference to addressing the unique issues faced by adjunct programs, ALWD showed support both for the leaders and members of those programs.

Abbott's words about the motivation and commitment of mentoring participants ring equally true in the adjunct professor context. If we look to suggestions for encouraging positive workplace mentoring relationships, we might find that we can ensure an improved professional experience for those motivated and committed members of our faculties. In doing so, we could better support the

¹⁵ Derocher, *supra* note 5 (quoting Abbott).

¹⁶ In our program, we ask the most experienced adjuncts to assist in setting the agenda for the training. The agenda builds in time for those same adjuncts to share their experiences and recommendations and to field questions from the group.

professional development of legal writing adjuncts who provide a critical service in the education and mentorship of our law students.