

# Redeploying Faculty for Student Success

By Sue Henderson, Ph.D., *President, NJCU*

A recent survey of alumni of educational institutions confirmed what every university president knows: When asked who set them on a constructive path, at the top of the list are professors who made them excited about learning, professors who cared about them as persons, encouraged them, mentored them, and directed them in projects—what we call “high touch.”

Today’s students are quite different from yesterday’s. They have grown up with the internet, smartphones, and social media. The world they live in is much more diverse, divided, and daunting than was the case for alumni who graduated 20 or more years ago. Today’s employers are even more demanding than yesterday’s when it comes to the skills acquired through general education: critical thinking, effective writing and speaking, and working productively with others.

Our alumni of 20 years ago had to spend long

hours in the library to acquire information that is only a click or two away for today’s students. Yet today’s students are as human as yesterday’s. They, too, need to be motivated. They need to be challenged and inspired.

The need for “high touch” instruction is as great today as ever.

No matter how easily relevant information can be obtained, the gap between possessing information and understanding, between passively receiving information and creatively using it, remains. Understanding requires comprehending hidden relationships among disparate pieces of information available to us. Bridging the gap between possessing information and gaining understanding is what higher education is all about.

Understanding is best gained through active learning and interaction with faculty and other learners. Gaining understanding would be a daunting and discouraging task for a student on his or her own with only the web, social media, and instructional technologies designed to



supplant the instructor.

With so many of our students—especially students from the lower socioeconomic quartiles and first generation college students—dropping out in their first several semesters, success requires that students get the very best instruction we can offer at the outset. The first courses that incoming freshmen take must be ones that motivate them, engage them in real learning, keep them on track, and give them a sense of belonging and purpose. The “secret sauce” for such courses is instruction by exceptional faculty.

Because of the high cost and labor intensity of “high touch” education, it is tempting to embrace learning technologies designed to supplant the professor. In some cases, such as post-baccalaureate studies and job and professional development courses, the approach works well. The targeted students are motivated and ready

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for the rigors of the proposed course of study. But with the vast majority of first-year freshmen and sophomores, readiness and motivation are in short supply. They have yet to learn how to learn, to be able to follow and generate an argument, to witness the serendipity of discovery and the rigors of confirming a hypothesis. Few of us could acquire these skills without the expert guidance of an instructor or mentor.

We can think of no more challenging and rewarding teaching assignment than teaching in the general education program. The faculty

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To read President Henderson's 2016 report on the state of the school, check out the *NJCU Magazine* website at [www.njcu.edu/magazine](http://www.njcu.edu/magazine).

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## INSIGHT

must bring to the classroom passion, inspiration, love of learning, and a desire to engage with students and celebrate their success. Teaching today's students effectively requires that faculty members become connoisseurs of instructional technologies that supplement their efforts and enhance their students' learning via active learning, flipped classrooms, problem-based learning, and personalized instruction. That's a tall order. Those who do it well recognize that it is a noble and remarkably satisfying calling.

The great irony, however, is that in far too many of our institutions the conflicting demands on time and talent result in general education being shortchanged and assigned a lower priority than honors courses, graduate instruction, and faculty research. With all these competing demands, a common practice is to assign general education courses to overworked and underpaid contingent faculty, newly minted assistant professors, or other faculty low on the departmental pecking order. The fulltime tenured and tenure track faculty who are responsible for curriculum design and development are housed in academic departments. Their primary responsibilities and interests are discipline specific. For them, the general education curriculum is successful primarily if it delivers a sufficient number of students prepared to take courses in their majors or minors.

Until institutions restructure so that general education is on par with instruction for majors and graduate students as well as faculty research and professional service, it will be nearly impossible for the general education program to attract the highly skilled and dedicated faculty members needed for general education to achieve its transformative goal. Until graduate programs that produce the next generation of faculty include as

requirements in their programs courses on effective college-level teaching, we will not have the required pool of well-trained faculty to staff the freshmen and general education courses. Without highly professional centers for teaching and learning that include support for faculty to become skillful users of a wide range of instructional technologies, a high-level general education program will not be sustained.

Only with a radical shift in priorities and organization will we provide today's new undergraduates the educational experience they need in order to succeed. Large numbers of our most talented faculty must join the ranks of general education instructors. When we use contingent faculty to teach these students, we must be sure that they have sufficient time and support commensurate with their professional standing that will allow them to engage the students in active and personalized learning. They must also be invited to be first-class citizens and fully integrated into the life of the institution.

All of the above costs money. With budgets now stretched nearly to the breaking point, one more demand for additional resources may seem like one too many. However, the many institutions around the country that have made improving retention and graduation rates their top priority cannot afford not to reorder their priorities. Through reallocation, they must find the additional dollars required to build the pool of general education faculty that will be essential to improving their retention and graduation rates. Nothing is more important to the success of these efforts than having "high touch" faculty leading the way in our general education curriculum. **NJCU**

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