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Adjunct Faculty in Community Colleges: Issues & Implications

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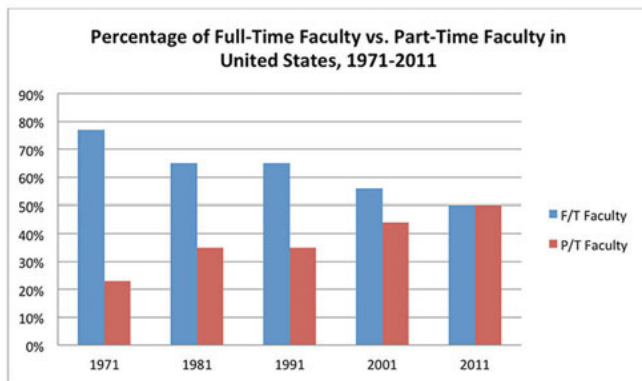
There can be little doubt that the reliance of community colleges on adjunct faculty has grown significantly over the past several decades, especially with the cuts in budgets that institutions are being forced to make. In fact, new research suggests that “adjunct faculty” is the fastest growing job title in America (“Social Media,” 2012). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2012), the use of adjunct faculty in U.S. higher education institutions has increased from 23% in 1971 to 50% in 2011. The American Federation of Teachers (2009) estimates that 68% of all community college faculty members are employed as part-time. On a state level, the Illinois Community College Board (2011) reported that adjunct faculty comprised approximately 60% of Illinois community college faculty in the fall semester of 2011. Additionally, the California Community Colleges’ Chancellor’s Office (2013) reported 45% of the community college faculty in California as adjunct.

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Many blame the initial surge in the adjunct population on the effects of budget cuts to education in government subsidies. In higher education, as elsewhere, employment costs, whether for faculty, staff, or administrators, have also increased steadily over this same time period. Additionally, rising health care costs and retirement contributions have all led employers to cut staff levels and expect more from fewer individuals. However, the causes for an increased adjunct population are clearly much more complicated than economics alone.

Historically, community colleges relied on adjunct faculty to provide a broader, more comprehensive schedule to serve the community's needs, and also to provide a high level of professional experience and expertise in a wide range of workforce development areas. However, the adjunct picture appears to be changing. In a survey conducted in 2010 by the Coalition on the Academic Workforce (2012), results from the nearly 21,000 responses returned from adjunct faculty and institutions showed the discipline with the highest reliance on adjunct faculty was humanities (44.0%), with a large portion focused on instructing English and literature (16.4%), followed by professional fields (20.5%).

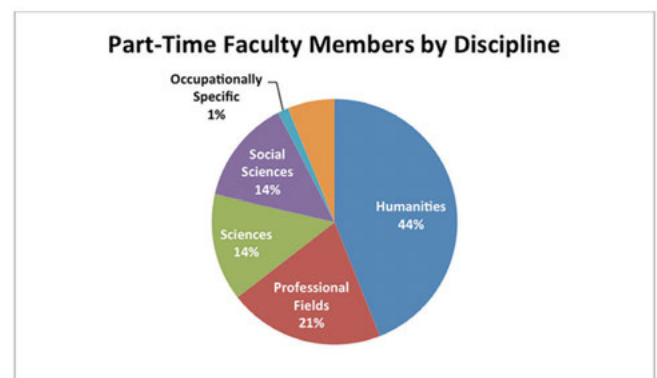
Clearly, the role and function of adjunct faculty members within today's community college are undergoing significant transformations.

What are the Issues?

As the presence of adjunct faculty members in institutions of higher education continues to increase, similarly issues of effectiveness, integration, and equality follow. Though the list of key issues illustrated here is not exhaustive, following are several important issues currently being researched and considered regarding this demographic of higher education faculty.

Faculty Governance

The increased use of adjunct faculty within community colleges has drawn attention to new workplace conditions and governance issues. Many adjunct faculty feel that they teach under poor working conditions with a lack of resources, while some also feel they are mistreated or treated as the "invisible faculty" that are unseen or recognized (Meixner, Kruck, & Madden, 2010). Others feel disconnected and not a part of any concept of "shared governance," including being unable to



SOURCE: Coalition on the Academic Workforce (2012)

Coalition on the Academic Workforce. (2012). A portrait of part-time faculty members: A summary of findings on part-time faculty respondents to the Coalition on the academic workforce survey of contingent faculty members and instructors. Retrieved from http://www.academicworkforce.org/CAW_portrait_2012.pdf



In the past...adjunct faculty members ... were hired for their real-world experience. They were the practitioners, the experts in their field...[they] worked full-time in a field directly related to a topic they were teaching ...and brought their expertise to the community college classroom.

serve on college committees or have input into other college initiatives.

Student Success

Research does not agree on the topic of adjunct faculty effectiveness when compared to that of their full-time faculty counterpart. Research conducted by Ronco and Cahill (2004) showed little evidence that instructor type had any impact on student success, while similar research conducted by Eagan and Jaeger (2009) showed that students taught by adjunct faculty members were less likely to return after their freshman year. Similar research conducted by Bettinger and Long (2005) found that at Ohio four-year institutions, first-year students taking a large percentage of classes taught by adjunct instructors or graduate assistants were more likely to drop out than their counterparts. Also based on findings related to four-year institutions, Ehrenberg and Zhang (2005) found that for each 10% increase in part-time/adjunct faculty, graduation rates fell by 2.65% (Jacoby, 2006). Building upon their research, Jacoby further found that “increases in the ratio of part-time faculty at community colleges have a significant and negative impact on graduation rates” (p. 1092).

While these studies seem to indicate that students are not only affected by the status of their instructors, they are acutely aware of their status. However, according to Rees (2012), a professor at Colorado State University and contributing writer to the *Denver Post*, “Despite their near-universal presence in American higher education, most students and their parents don’t know anything about adjunct faculty members, nor do they understand the difference between adjunct faculty, lecturers, and tenure-track faculty” (para. 4).

Curricular Consistency and Quality

Another identified issue surrounding the larger number of adjunct faculty on campus is curricular consistency and quality of instruction. One argument is that some adjunct faculty, who might present with lower academic qualifications when compared with full-time faculty, may

not fully understand the learning objectives for the courses or how certain courses meet specific outcomes within a program, and may reduce the quality of a student’s education (Evans, 2009). In addition, many new adjunct faculty members have no previous teaching experience (Pearch & Marutz, 2005; Green, 2007, p. 35). As a result, teaching styles and classroom management techniques may be ineffective due to a lack of experience.

Adjunct faculty, too, identify these same issues as affecting their ability to succeed. Many adjunct faculty cite the short amount of time to prepare for a course as one main barrier to their effectiveness in the classroom (Street, Maisto, Merves, & Rhodes, 2012). And, in most institutions, many adjunct faculty members receive very little notice if they will be teaching a course, since the addition of a course is reliant on last-minute changes in enrollments.

Effect on Developmental Education

In the past, a majority of the adjunct faculty members within community colleges were hired for their real-world experience. They were the practitioners, the experts in their field, and they were in high demand by the colleges and the students who learned workplace skills directly from them. These adjunct instructors worked full-time in a field related to a topic they were teaching (Pearch & Marutz, 2005) and brought their expertise to the community college classroom.

The growth of adjunct faculty has occurred concurrent with what is accepted as an increasing need for developmental, or remedial, education by college students, especially those who attend community colleges. Bettinger and Long (2003) posit that over 40% of community college students take such courses. Other estimates conclude that 61% of students at community colleges take at least one remedial course while in college (Goldrick-Rah, 2010). Research regarding the effect of how the increase in the adjunct population has influenced developmental education is difficult to locate. What research does show, however, is that many students enrolled in developmental education require assistance with their academics outside of the mandatory class time (Gerlaugh, Thompson, Boylan,

[Adjunct faculty] listed difficulties keeping students engaged, dealing with unprepared and unmotivated students, and ongoing efforts to [meet] with students outside of the classroom without physical resources such as an office, telephone, or computer.



& Davis, 2007). With many institutions not providing adjunct faculty with a permanent office space or requiring set office hours, this can make obtaining additional assistance by the student difficult.

Institutional Support for Adjunct Faculty

All of the issues surrounding community college adjunct faculty members are not the result of professional weaknesses or conditions of their creation. In research conducted by Meixner et al. (2010), adjunct faculty members were asked about the conditions they face as temporary and often invisible faculty. These respondents discussed the lack of institutional support for their courses, and they listed difficulties keeping students engaged, dealing with unprepared and unmotivated students, and ongoing efforts to dedicate needed time with students outside of the classroom without physical resources such as an office, telephone, or computer. In addition, the integration of adjunct faculty varies among institutions. The majority of new adjunct faculty members do not even receive an orientation to the institution or discipline beyond a meeting with the immediate supervisor (Street et al., 2012).

Compensation for Adjunct Faculty

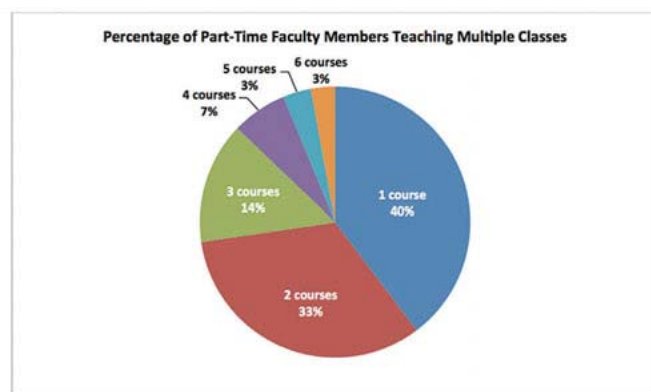
In addition to less-than-adequate work environments, compensation for adjunct faculty is typically significantly less than for full-time faculty (Charlier & Williams, 2011). And the pay-per-class can vary dramatically across institutions. In a newly launched website hosted by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "The Adjunct Project" allows anyone to view wages from higher learning institutions that participate. A quick comparison indicates that, for three institutions within 50 miles of each other in Illinois, adjunct faculty wages start at \$1,500 at one community college for a three-credit hour course; \$2,500 at a neighboring community college; and \$4,000 at a nearby state university (The Adjunct Project, 2013). The benefit to the institutions is obvious: offering lower pay to adjunct faculty can allow institutions to continue to offer a variety of courses without the expense of employing full-time faculty to facilitate the courses.

In contrast, by offering lower wages to adjunct faculty, these faculty may be less inclined to sustain employment with the institution, migrating to a different institution for increased wages (June & Newman, 2013).

Workload

Workload, too, varies across institutions, with adjunct faculty teaching loads usually between one and three courses per semester (Green, 2007). In addition, many adjunct instructors teach for multiple institutions, both online and in the classroom. Some have years of experience, while others are hired at the "11th hour." A survey conducted by Meixner et al. (2010) revealed that approximately 22% of surveyed adjunct faculty members had between zero and one year of experience. Additionally, the survey showed that approximately 12.4% taught at a second institution in an adjunct capacity as well.

With new legislation on the horizon regarding health insurance for part-time employees, institutions of higher education are facing a new dilemma – being required to provide health benefits to adjunct instructors working 30 or more hours per week. According to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), this includes taking



SOURCE: Coalition on the Academic Workforce (2012)

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into consideration the amount of “out of classroom” preparation each adjunct faculty member spends (June, 2013). Though rules and procedures regarding the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act were still being developed at the time of this publication, it is sure to play a role in the number of classes adjunct faculty will be allowed to teach and how higher education administrators see this once cost-effective solution.

What are the Implications?

Current research on adjunct faculty members not only brings current issues regarding this demographic to the forefront, but also provides guidance for how to address these important issues, striving to increase student success and faculty satisfaction. The presence of adjunct faculty members in higher education will continue to be prevalent into the foreseeable future; therefore, it is important to utilize this resource, enhance its benefits, and help secure the future of the community college and the success of its students.

Increasing Involvement and Inclusion

Faced with criticism about adjuncts’ lack of recognition, participation, and inclusion on the community college campus, some colleges are adopting the “faculty as one” model, in which all instructors engage equally and are given a strong voice across the campus. At Johnson County Community College, located in Overland Park, Kansas, adjunct faculty are given access to office space with email, voicemail, computers, and listservs, much like full-time faculty members. The adjunct instructors can also serve as members of the vice president’s adjunct advisory council and become adjunct liaisons to departments, who assist with hiring and orientation (Kelly, 2008). “We try to be seamless. Most students don’t know if their instructors are adjuncts or full-time faculty,” states Joseph Burnstad, Assistant Dean of Sciences at Johnson County (as cited in Kelly, 2008). Burnstad also sees this as a retention strategy for keeping quality adjunct faculty members on staff (2008). Johnson County’s model reinforces the need to keep adjunct faculty involved and integrated with the campus.

Developing the Faculty

Concerns about curricular quality and consistency have inspired many institutions to focus their efforts on increasing professional development activities for adjunct faculty. Research in the area of adjunct faculty professional development recommends orientation into the institution and program, including policies, the relevance of course outcomes, pace of instruction, evaluation methods, and also operational/technical aspects that are relevant to employment, including how to check email and submit final grades (Green, 2007).

...some colleges are adopting the ‘faculty as one’ model, in which all instructors engage equally and are given a strong voice across the campus.

Other recommendations include a mentoring program where a new adjunct faculty member is mentored by a full-time, experienced faculty member (Pearch & Marutz, 2005). Also, as most adjunct faculty are not directly involved in day-to-day activities of the institution, continuous professional development opportunities should also be available to adjunct faculty in order to keep them current with the direction of the institution (Green, 2007). All research indicates that providing adjunct faculty with an introduction to the institution is imperative to their understanding organizational culture, maintaining course objectives, and improving adjunct faculty satisfaction (Pearch & Marutz, 2005).

Professional development continues to be an area that adjunct faculty are eager for and may be strongly lacking at some institutions. Many are receiving it

The 'Adjunct Project' [...provides] information about comparative salary and benefit compensation packages, ...job openings and where hiring needs are emerging. [... Adjuncts can] communicate with others via blogs, advice columns, and forums.



through on-campus workshops and conferences, but some colleges are expanding their offerings to an online setting. Johnson County Community College (KS) offers Adjunct Certification Training (ACT), which is an online-based program that not only orients adjunct faculty to the campus, but it also serves as a strong means of integration and professional development. Instructors who complete the training receive a cash stipend (Kelly, 2008). Programs such as this can provide professional development opportunities to adjunct faculty, while still being flexible with their schedules, and providing an incentive for participation.

Addressing Curricular Weaknesses

There is no doubt that adjunct instructors in professional and technical fields can provide insight about professional experiences that can add to the learning experience, plus provide institutions with flexibility when scheduling classes (Langen, 2011). However, when instructing developmental and other core courses that require more specialized teaching methods, utilizing more experienced faculty members can be beneficial. In research conducted by Umbach (2006), it was illustrated that adjunct faculty members typically structure their courses differently than their full-time counterparts and spend less time with course preparation. Additionally, adjunct faculty are less likely to challenge students during class and interact with students less than full-time faculty members. Research shows the more engaged a student is while in higher education, the greater likelihood he or she will persist (Chaves, 2006).

Defining Appropriate Workload

A maximum workload for adjunct faculty members has not been standardized. According to the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (2009), there should be an "adequate core of faculty and other qualified professionals" supporting programs offered and providing support to adjunct faculty. The Commission adds that the greater dependence on adjunct faculty, the greater the obligation to provide adequate orientation, oversight, evaluation, professional development, and

opportunities for integration into the college's culture. Additionally, in a recent publication by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), the IRS mandates a reasonable method must be applied when calculating an adjunct faculty member's workload, including class preparation time (June, 2013).

Maximum workload assignments for adjunct faculty vary by institution. For example, McHenry County College, a community college in Illinois, caps an adjunct faculty member's workload at 24 credit hours per academic year (McHenry County College, 2011), whereas the Lone Star College System, a community college system in Texas, restricts the maximum adjunct faculty member's workload at 50% of a full-time faculty's workload (Lone Star College System, 2013). Though a standard workload for adjunct faculty is yet to be established, an excessive workload can affect teaching effectiveness (McClerken, 2009).

Increasing Awareness of Inequities

In the early weeks of 2013, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* revealed an initiative to provide adjunct faculty from across the country a means by which they could become better informed about the adjunct teaching environment. This initiative, called the "Adjunct Project" (introduced earlier in the discussion of adjunct compensation), would provide this teaching community with information about comparative salary and benefit compensation packages. Adjunct faculty could find out about job openings and where hiring needs were emerging. Eventually, they would be able to communicate with others via blogs, advice columns, and forums. Many of these functions are now covered through the new adjunct.chronicle.com website.

Because this website has just recently launched, it is too soon to evaluate how well it will be received and how extensively it will be used. However, there is reason to believe that it will receive great support and frequent use. In addition to the actual benefit it will provide to individual faculty, the website is expected to provide a forum to advocate for consistent and fair treatment toward adjunct faculty on a national basis. Through



various communication vehicles built into the website, there are ample opportunities for faculty to share ideas and information regarding matters like effective models to integrate adjunct faculty more into the life of their campus communities, to exchange meaningful orientation program information, and review professional development activity. In time, it is likely a vehicle like this might well serve as a force to inform and shape national attitudes about adjunct faculty and allow for this body of professionals to have a common voice.

Conclusion

While most would agree that there are both advantages and disadvantages to the increasing numbers of adjunct

faculty in higher education, we all must recognize that adjunct faculty will continue to have a place in colleges and universities for the foreseeable future. Therefore, institutions of higher education must learn how to use and develop this valuable resource in a way that maximizes student success and the continuing success of our institutions. In the past, it may have been easy to ignore or overlook the issues and concerns surrounding our adjunct faculty members; by their numbers alone, this is no longer possible. By providing fair wages, professional development, and opportunities to be immersed in the college's culture, the institution can, in turn, create stability within the adjunct faculty ranks and make an invisible faculty visible.

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