

It Matters a Lot Who Teaches Introductory Courses. Here's Why.

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April 15, 2018



The first professor whom students encounter in a discipline is likely to play a big role in whether they continue in it.

Joshua Lott for The Chronicle

Introductory courses can open doors for students, helping them not only discover a love for a subject area that can blossom into their major but also feel more connected to their campus. But on many campuses, teaching introductory courses typically falls to less-experienced instructors. Sometimes the task is assigned to instructors whose very connection to the college is tenuous. A growing body of evidence suggests that this tension could have negative consequences for students.

Two papers presented at the American Educational Research Association's annual meeting in New York on Sunday support this idea.

The first finds that community-college students who take a remedial or introductory course with an adjunct instructor are less likely to take the next course in the sequence.

The second finds negative associations between the proportion of a four-year college's faculty members who are part-time or off the tenure track and outcomes for STEM majors.

The community-college paper, "Role of Adjunct Faculty in Realizing the Postsecondary Dreams of Historically Marginalized Student Populations," is not the first to examine the link between part-time instructors and student outcomes, said Florence Xiaotao Ran, its lead author. Several previous papers have found a negative relationship between contingent faculty members and student outcomes.

At least one study has found the opposite effect, although that research was conducted at Northwestern University, which, as its authors noted, is typical in neither its student population nor its working conditions for adjuncts.

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Because Ran's new paper combines administrative data from six community colleges with a detailed faculty survey, it is able to shed light on why students who take early courses with adjuncts (a term it uses interchangeably with part-time faculty) fare worse, said Ran, a senior research assistant in the Community College Research Center at Teachers College of Columbia University.

"We do find that in both remedial and college-level gatekeeper English and math, students who take those with part-time faculty are less likely to proceed to the next level of study," she said. That's a better outcome to measure than students' grades, she added, in part because there is some evidence that adjuncts grade more leniently. It's also an important outcome, she said, because reaching the next course may be a required step on the path to a degree.

The survey reveals that "the biggest difference between part-time and full-time faculty is that part-time faculty have less access to information about how to advise students," Ran said. That suggests that the issue may well be adjuncts' ability to help students navigate a particular college, and not their teaching ability, she said.

The study is part of a larger, continuing project that is exploring ways to include adjunct faculty members in the student-success efforts of the six community colleges. One college, for instance, is creating teaching collaborations in which full-time and part-time professors observe one another's classes and share ideas, Ran said. The research center at Teachers College will evaluate the impact of this and other efforts.

The second paper uses national data from three sources to investigate the association between the characteristics of four-year colleges' professoriates and the outcomes of students who initially majored in STEM fields. Titled "Early College Exposure to Non-Tenure Track and Part-Time Faculty — Examining Effects on Socialization and Student Success in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics," it, too, is part of a larger project, this one focused on the socialization of students in STEM.

It finds that for every 1-percent increase in the share of faculty members who work full time and off the tenure track, students' chances of graduation drop 1.75 percent. If a college's professors predominantly work off the tenure track, students are 1.5 percent more likely to change out of a STEM major.

The findings are not causal but suggest that "who's teaching matters, and tenure seems to matter as well," says Ray Franke, an assistant professor of higher education at the University of Massachusetts at Boston and the paper's lead author.

In STEM fields, especially, students benefit from interacting with professors who can provide career mentorship, perhaps supervising their undergraduate research, the study says. Such roles are often harder for part-time or non-tenure-track professors to fill.

Like Ran, Franke suspects that these findings have more to do with institutional conditions than with individuals' teaching ability. Professors off the tenure track tend to have higher teaching loads and fewer resources, he said. "Often non-tenure-track or adjunct faculty don't even have an office."

The new papers suggest that providing better support for nontraditional faculty members could make a difference for students — the very hypothesis Ran's future work will test.

Impressions for Life

Structural aspects of adjuncts' working conditions could play a role, too, said Daniel F. Chambliss, a professor of sociology at Hamilton College and co-author of the book *How College Works* (Harvard University Press, 2014).

"One problem with using adjuncts in, say, intro," he said, "is they may not be there next semester." If a student has a bad experience with that adjunct, the student has a bad experience. If the student has a good experience, that professor is not on hand to teach the next course, or to suggest a colleague the student might want to take it with.

That connection between introductory courses and what comes next matters a lot, he said. "The crucial thing is that students are the most open to new stuff when they walk into college."

To a student who has never encountered a discipline before, the professor teaching the introductory course is the discipline, Chambliss said. "If the physics professor is cool, then physics is cool." If the professor is dull, the student will think the same of the discipline. If the professor is so dull that the student never takes another physics course, well, that impression could hold for the rest of her life.

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That's one reason Chambliss advocates that colleges put their very best professors in front of as many students as possible, as early as possible. That doesn't mean every senior professor needs to teach introductory courses, he said — it's a matter of departments moving a few people around, and rewarding them for their efforts.

Professors and administrators often see a major as a coherent whole, he said. But to students, what matters is the particular course they're taking this term. If they have a bad first experience, they're unlikely to stick around for a second one.

The English department at the University of Kentucky followed a similar logic to increase enrollment in its courses. "The most crucial thing — and perhaps the hardest change to effect — is to have the department's best and most experienced professors teach introductory and general-education courses on a regular basis," wrote Peter J. Kalliney, the associate chair, in a recent essay in *The Chronicle*. "Gen-ed courses are where humanities departments fight for majors and should be used as recruiting opportunities."

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