

Part-time faculty job satisfaction in higher education: A literature review

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More and more institutions of higher learning are turning to part-time faculty to teach their courses. Every year the percentage of part-time faculty increases, while that of the tenure-track faculty decreases. The most recent report from the Department of Education reveals a steady decline in the percentage of full-time faculty and a steady increase in part-time faculty. In 1970, full-time faculty comprised 77.9 percent of all faculty; in 1980, the percentage dropped to 65.6 percent; in 1991 it dropped yet again to 64.8 percent; and in 2003 to 53.8 percent (National Study, 2005, Table 226). In just 33 years (1970 to 2003), higher education has experienced a 24.1 percent shift away from using full-time faculty toward using more part-time faculty.

“There are now 1.2 million faculty at degree-granting institutions and about 600,000 are full-time and the other 500,000 part-time” (National Study, 2005, Table 223); from all accounts, the shift to more part-time faculty is only expected to continue. Not only will decreasing subsidies from state and federal governments contribute to this ongoing trend of hiring more part-time and fewer full-time faculty, but so will the planned growth among the population in general, and with more college-age students enrolling in higher education. The Southern Regional Educational Board predicts that by 2014, “the nation will need 32 percent more college faculty positions (both full and part time) . . . than in 2004”—the U.S. job growth rate for the same period is predicted to be 13 percent, less than half of that for faculty positions (Umbach, 2007, p. 93).

How can academe adopt to this growing trend toward more part-time faculty? As a beginning, those part-time faculty already working—and those yet to work—for institutions of higher education must be sufficiently satisfied with their work to stay, and hence this review of the literature to inventory those studies that have sought to identify predictive factors of job satisfaction for the part-time professoriate.

## Literature Review

This brief literature review focuses primarily on job satisfaction of part-time faculty in higher education but also includes some relevant information about a recent study about employee satisfaction in the workplace. The reason this review is brief is because of the paucity of research on job satisfaction for part-time faculty

The review quickly identified inconsistent use of terminology from institution to institution and study to study to describe part-time faculty. Some of the terminology used included: “adjunct faculty,” “contingent faculty,” “instructor,” “part-time teachers,” and “part-time non-tenured faculty,” etc. An example of inconsistent usage from one institution to others exists at the author’s own university where “adjunct faculty” means part-time faculty who teach without pay whereas it more commonly suggests elsewhere those part-time faculty who teach part time with remuneration.

### *Seminal Work*

No review of the literature on part-time faculty job satisfaction is complete without reference to the seminal work by Judith Gappa (Princeton University) and David Leslie (Florida State University) in the early 1990s. Their study of a cross section of 18 universities, including personal interviews with 240 part-time faculty and a number of university administrators, is still the most complete analysis of part-time faculty. The authors reported that which still prevails: “There is little basic scholarship on part-time faculty” and “. . . [there is a] lack of research and the absence of hard data about part-timers between the mid-1970s and 1988 . . . “ (pp. 4, 7).

Gappa and Leslie’s book (1993) *The Invisible Faculty* is divided into two parts: part one and its seven chapters are devoted to the “current environment for part-time faculty”; part two and its five chapters to “enhancing education through the use of part-time faculty.” In part two, the authors offer 42 suggestions to university presidents, administrators, and full-time faculty for

improving the part-time faculty job situation. These 42 suggestions are offered to all continuing educators for review, consideration, and discussion. Baldwin and Chronister (2001) also suggest 13 policy areas for institutions to consider implementing for full-time non-tenure-track faculty that would also generally apply to the part-time non-tenure-track faculty as well (pp. 169–170).

### *Satisfaction*

This author and his colleagues have recently completed their own study on the job satisfaction of its workforce of 700 part-time faculty in the Division of Continuing Education (see Hoyt, Howell, et. al, 2008). This work was informed by one of the most influential motivation theorists in the workplace, Frederick Herzberg, a psychologist who was contemporary with Abraham Maslow, a behavioral scientist. Most are familiar with Maslow's hierarchy of five human needs, i.e., physiological, safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization, first published in 1943 (Maslow, 1943, p. 394); not as many are familiar with Herzberg's "two factor theory," first published in 1959. Herzberg identified "motivator factors" that intrinsically motivate and satisfy workers and "hygiene factors" that extrinsically bring dissatisfaction to employees. The motivator factors he identified are "achievement, recognition for achievement, the work itself, responsibility, and growth or advancement"; the "hygiene factors include company policy and administration, supervision, interpersonal relationships, working conditions, salary, status, and security" (Herzberg, 1968, p. 57).

### *Other Studies*

Just as this study was undertaken, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) released a report entitled, "A Survey Report by the Society for Human Resource Management June 2007." The stated objective of the report

is to identify and understand factors important to overall employee job satisfaction from the perspectives of both employees and human resource (HR) professionals. This knowledge helps HR professionals better understand employee preferences when developing programs and policies designated to influence employee satisfaction (p. 1).

The society conducted their first job satisfaction report in 2002 and has updated it each year since. It reports that the 2007 survey is “nearly identical, except for a few additions” to the 2002 report (p. 1), which now considers 22 aspects of satisfaction. The four primary constructs and number of related subconstructs (22 aspects) distributed across these four major constructs follows: career development (7); relationship with management (4); compensation and benefits (3); and work environment (8). Most of these aspects appear to be relevant to the part-time faculty member working in continuing higher education, e.g., autonomy, recognition, relationships with supervisor and coworker, compensation, benefits, job security, and professional development (SHRM, 2007, p. 10).

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has also conducted a study known as the National Study of Postsecondary Faculty (NSOPF) every five or six years since 1987–88. In May 2005, the most recent results of this study were released for the 2003–4 academic school year. Its authors report that “the 2004 National Study of Postsecondary Faculty consisted of a sample of about 35,000 faculty and instructional staff across a sample of 1,080 institutions in the 50 states and the District of Columbia” (Forrest, Fahimi, & Bradburn, 2005, p. 23). They also note that “among faculty and instructional staff at all institution types, 56 percent were employed full time and 44 percent were employed part time in fall 2003” (Forrest, Fahimi, & Bradburn, 2005, p. 3).

The question set that focuses on the satisfaction of faculty, including part-time faculty, has changed somewhat over its four administrations the past 20 years. The most significant change has been in the number and specificity of questions. The 1988, 1993, 1999, and 2004 instruments asked 29, 28, 21, and 9 questions respectively about faculty job satisfaction (see Baldwin and Chronister, 2001, for an interpretation of satisfaction questions in the 1993 NSOPF study, pp. 91–95). Of the nine questions in the 2004 instrument, six of them were previously represented in earlier studies though with more number and specificity in the earlier versions. One other question, “opinion about choosing an academic career again,” was reintroduced in the 2004 instrument after last being included in the 1999 version. The two new satisfaction questions in the 2004 study were: (1) “satisfaction with instructional support for teaching improvement” and (2) “satisfaction with technology-based activities” (Forrest, Fahimi, & Bradburn 2005, p. 23).

Another recent book of some value to researcher and practitioner alike is Schuster and Finkelstein’s *The American faculty: The restructuring of academic work and careers* published in 2006. These authors have compiled, to date, the most exhaustive annotated list of surveys and studies about the professoriate, including parttime, beginning in the 1950s. This book is invaluable for not only its meta-analysis of the vast amount of extant data since the 1950s, but also for its 128 tables and 78 figures. They write that “following the eleven chapters is a series of ten appendixes whose value to the research community, we think, will be significant. . . . To a large extent, the information presented in the appendixes has never before been available so accessibly and in such detail” (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006, p. xix). While their work does not include specific information about “satisfaction,” it does provide supporting information about the characteristics of faculty, changes occurring among their ranks, and so forth which help

inform any study on job satisfaction. They end their section on part-time faculty with this conclusion: “The part-time professoriate has at once grown explosively and continued to represent a wide diversity of motivations, commitments, and qualifications” (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006, p. 411).

In fall 2003, Volume 123 of the *New Directions for Higher Education* series entitled “Exploring the Role of Contingent Instructional Staff in Undergraduate Learning” became available; it was edited by Ernst Benjamin, former director of research for the American Association of University Professors. While the editor and many of its authors have clear and sometimes stated bias against the increasing use of part-time faculty (they refer to them as “contingent faculty”), and any effort to undermine tenure or promote a dual faculty track, this literature review would be incomplete without its mention. The editor himself concludes the book with some discussion about part-time faculty satisfaction levels using the now dated (1999) *National Study of Postsecondary Faculty*. The author reports on the very high overall satisfaction levels (somewhat satisfied to very satisfied) of contingent faculty at doctoral (80.5%), nondoctoral four-year (80.8%), and two-year (80.3%) institutions which is about 2 percent higher than the full-time tenure-track faculty for all institutions except two-year. Benjamin (2003) then launches into a discussion about what he considers the “worrisome” and “failing” implications of such a high level of satisfaction with part-time faculty when other data is considered (pp. 99, 101).

In a new book published just prior to this study, its author, who works as a consultant about part-time faculty issues to educational institutions, shared some best practices she has identified for academic departments to better connect with their part-time faculty (Baron-Nixon, 2007, pp. 50–51). Also of interest is the author’s reference to the original 42 suggestions

prepared in 1993 by Gappa and Leslie on how institutions can better support their part-time faculty.

## **Conclusion**

As the need for and number of part-time faculty increase there will be reason for more research on what aspects or factors most contribute to their job satisfaction. While a few studies have been conducted many more are needed to really understand the needs and expectations of part-faculty, and their levels of satisfaction in the academic workplace. It is expected that the next generation of research on job satisfaction for part-time faculty will draw from the theoretical work of motivational and behavioral scientists, like Maslow and Herzberg, as well as from the work of human resource professionals.



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