Screening for Highly Qualified Adjunct Business Faculty: Which Attributes Correlate to Faculty Performance?

Kurt D. Kirstein, EdD

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Abstract

City University of Seattle, a comprehensive teaching university that focuses on the needs of working adult students, sought to streamline its faculty recruitment and hiring practices by identifying a list of candidate screening criteria that could be used to identify adjunct faculty candidates who are likely to be successful as instructors. To this end, student evaluations and ratings by primary supervisors were used to separate faculty members into groups based on performance metrics. High performers were compared to the lower performers and differences between the groups were noted regarding factors such as education, professional and academic experience, and scholarly activity. The study revealed limited differences between the groups and calls into question some of the current assumptions regarding the typical minimum qualifications of adjunct business faculty.

Introduction

Accreditation agencies and others place a great deal of importance on business faculty hiring qualifications and typically emphasize such items as business PhDs or related doctoral degrees, evidence of scholarship, and teaching experience (Sixl-Daniell, Williams, & Wong, 2006; Swartz, Swartz, & Liang, 2007). In many cases, decisions are made regarding the likely success of a faculty candidate based solely on how well the candidate has represented his or her qualifications on a CV. Such a screening process and its related criteria may fit well for more traditional, research-based universities but is it an adequate model for the selection and hiring of faculty in a teaching university that is more likely to use adjunct practitioner faculty? Is it appropriate in an environment where more emphasis is placed on practical experience and teaching skill than on academic preparation and scholarship? Should all universities seek to fulfill their faculty positions with candidates that fit the traditional profile or is a different type of faculty member needed for different schools? And if there is a different profile for teaching universities, what factors should administrators look for in the initial screening process?

This study sought to identify a correlation between qualifications used to screen adjunct business faculty and faculty performance by examining a group of business instructors at a teaching university. Several factors were examined including professional experience, academic experience, degree levels, and scholarship. These factors were compared to two primary measures of faculty performance: 1) student ratings of the effectiveness of instruction on end of course evaluations (EOCEs), often the subject of debates regarding their use and application, and 2) a performance assessment received by the faculty member's primary supervisor. The goal of

these comparisons was to discover if there was a reliable link between the initial screening criteria and specified measures of performance, related to instruction, in a university that utilized a practitioner faculty model.

Background

University business programs, primarily those at research institutions, are facing increasing difficulty in their attempts to find faculty that fit accreditation standards (Swartz, Swartz, & Liang, 2007). In many cases, faculty positions remain unfilled or are filled on a temporary basis by part-time faculty because full-time qualified faculty cannot be found. As Kjorlien (2001) states, hiring part-time faculty should be an intentional decision and not one that has to be undertaken as a temporary solution to a university's recruiting problems. Yet many schools are falling back to part-time, temporary instructors to fill the gap. In many cases, hiring criteria cannot be met but it also appears that they cannot be changed so positions remain open.

For teaching institutions that often utilize large numbers of adjunct faculty, initial screening criteria are often different. Whereas many believe that AACSB accredited schools and research institutions should, at a minimum, require doctoral degrees even for adjuncts (Sixl-Danill, Willians, & Wong, 2006), many teaching institutions place more emphasis on practice and tend to hire master's level instructors with significant industry experience. However, a focus on practice does not exempt teaching institutions from pressures, or even requirements in some cases, to build up the number of doctorates they have on staff and the pressure continues to mount for these institutions to comply with these expectations.

Additionally, at research institutions, faculty must often meet other measures of performance in order to be qualified for hire or tenure. Often cited are evidence of empirical scholarship, records of good teaching, and, in some cases, a history of successful grant applications (Arreola, 2000). In an adult learner focused institution that uses a practitioner-faculty model, many of these factors are not stressed to the same degree. The only clear overlap between the two is quality teaching.

To what extent do varying qualifications and performance metrics present a problem for either type of university? Are the research institutions spending too much time competing for a shrinking number of available doctorates when there is much to gain from practical experience? Should the minimum requirement for every faculty member, including adjuncts, be a doctorate? Are the teaching schools cutting corners by not requiring similar levels of education, teaching experience, and scholarship from their faculty? Should such institutions give in to the pressures to hire more doctorates with evidence of scholarship? If so, where is the evidence to show that such qualities are linked to quality teaching performance in faculty members at adult-focused teaching institutions?

Evaluating Instruction and Performance

Tracking the performance of faculty members has raised a number of concerns largely due to the fact that one of the primary indicators of faculty performance has been student evaluations. Such evaluations are commonly the subject of debate regarding their use, validity, and reliability (Theall, Abrami, & Mets, 2001). Other concerns with the use of student evaluations center on bias introduced by low response rates and non-responder bias, which are particularly problematic when the evaluations are conducted online (Thorpe, 2002). Another issue cited with student evaluations is that they are frequently found to be positively correlated with grade expectations (the higher the grade the student expects to receive, the better the evaluation). Additionally, when student evaluations are mandatory, and all students are required to participate, evidence has been found to suggest a link to grade inflation (Soper, 1973).

Yet, despite these problems, certain steps can be taken to increase the usefulness of the data that come from student evaluations. According to Franklin (2005), most researchers agree that student evaluations are highly reliable and that most students tend to agree with each other in their ratings of an instructor. Additionally, Centra (1993) indicated that most researchers agree that student evaluations are at least moderately valid, and that student ratings correlate positively with other measures of teaching effectiveness.

Other problems with student evaluations stemming from low response rates may not be warranted. Thorpe (2002) found no evident pattern to suggest that web-based responses would be significantly different from responses offered in class even if the response rates were variable. Lastly, many concerns have been raised regarding the subjectivity of student evaluations. This has been shown to be a problem that can have a substantial impact on the validity of the data collected. However, steps can be taken to minimize this impact as well. Arreola (2000) suggests that student evaluations can be structured to focus on specific, objective actions that can be observed. Students can be asked to rate instructors on their tendency to come to class on time or provide timely feedback, as opposed to asking the students how they would rate the overall quality of an instructor.

Thus, it would appear that many researchers believe that with proper cautions, student evaluations can be an effective measure of faculty performance, if steps are taken to both correct for systematic bias and limit the subjectivity of the evaluation items. According to Marsh (as cited in Theall, Abrami, & Mets, 2005) “There is a wealth of evidence that when ratings instruments are properly constructed, properly administered, properly analyzed, properly reported, and used in a comprehensive systematic way, they can provide information felt by teachers, administrators and students to be useful” (p. 1).

The question remains whether student evaluation results can be used to provide support to the consideration of different hiring qualifications that should be sought in faculty candidates. Can a link be found between the factors used for an initial candidate screening and instructor performance as measured by student evaluations or other measure of performance to suggest a

desirable candidate profile for a teaching institution? Are there any clear indicators of candidate characteristics that hiring managers at teaching institutions should be screening for? The study described in the sections to follow sheds light on these questions.

The University

City University of Seattle, headquartered in Bellevue, WA, is primarily a degree completion and graduate university that focuses on an adult student population. Since its founding in 1973, the university has valued practical education and has utilized a network of practitioner faculty who are hired for their industry expertise. Courses are designed to allow the faculty to teach skills that are directly applicable to the careers and lives of their students.

Because of its reliance on a large number of adjunct faculty, the university continually hires new faculty members who need to be trained, oriented, and managed. This becomes a complex task given that the university employs over 700 adjunct faculty members across its three schools. With 252 adjunct instructors, the university's School of Management encounters unique challenges as the majority of its faculty are hired for their subject matter expertise and typically do not have formal training in adult learning techniques. On average, the School of Management hires about 100 new faculty members per year and, once hired, these faculty need additional oversight and training to be effective as, often, subject matter expertise is necessary but insufficient to ensure effective instruction (Arreola, 2000).

Any methods that can be identified to streamline the faculty screening, selection, hiring, and training processes could have an important impact on the amount of time that needs to be dedicated to each faculty hire. This would be especially true if the School of Management was able to identify faculty candidates who are likely to be successful instructors, based on attributes that could be identified during an initial screening of the candidate's CV. Such attributes would include aspects of the applicant's education, experience, or scholarship. Having a profile for a "highly qualified" applicant, where the qualifications were actually linked to success in the classroom, could be of great assistance to the hiring supervisors in the School of Management.

Identification of Highly Qualified Faculty

Recently, the university engaged in a faculty profile project to gather information about its adjunct practitioner faculty. A web-based survey form was created that allowed respondents to provide information about their education, experience, and scholarly achievements. It was hoped that once the data were collected they could be used to identify whether any of the factors in the faculty profiles could be used as potential indictors of likely faculty performance. This could potentially help refine the typical screening profile of a successful faculty candidate for the School of Management. It was believed that once the data were collected for all of the current faculty, that certain attributes would emerge in consistent patterns and that these attributes could be used as part of the screening criteria for new faculty hires.

During this effort, the university examined a group of top-performing faculty in the School of Management and compared their characteristics to a group of faculty with moderate performance metrics to see if 1) there was any difference in selected faculty profile factors and 2) if there were any factors that correlated with performance. The sections below describe the results of this effort.

Methods

End of Course Evaluations

The university employs an end of course evaluation (EOCE) tool consisting of 16 instructor-related and 6 course-related statements. Students are asked to respond using a Likert scale of 1 – 5, with 5 representing the strongest agreement with each statement about the instructor's behavior. Students provide feedback on several different aspects of the instructor's performance and the quality of the course. Both the instructor and course sections of the evaluation are summarized by calculating a simple average of the responses to the questions in that section. The average of the instructor-related questions is used as a metric to gauge overall student satisfaction with instructor performance, yet, at any time, data can be easily pulled for all 16 instructor-related characteristics. A copy of the university's EOCE tool can be found in the appendix.

Many of the instructor-related questions are based on the work of Chickering and Gamson (1987) and are intended to link back to their seven practices of effective instruction. Other questions are founded in adult learning theory and link back to the tenets of Knowles, Holton & Swanson (1998). In the initial design, efforts were made to limit the subjectivity of the evaluation questions by focusing on specific instructor behaviors, yet subjectivity is a fact of student evaluations and the results reported in this study are impacted by an amount of unavoidable subjectivity.

For the purpose of this study, cumulative EOCE data were gathered on a population of instructors from spring of 2009 to as far back as 2006, which is when the university began collecting EOCE responses in a web-based format. Some veteran instructors had taught many sections that spanned the past four academic years and, as a result, had a large pool from which to pull EOCE data, whereas others may have had data for just the past academic year. These data were collected to be used as one metric of faculty performance to be compared to the characteristics that faculty reported in their profiles. Three values were recorded for each faculty member: EOCE instructor score average for the entire period, number of possible responses, and the number of actual responses. From the last two figures, a response rate was calculated.

The EOCE response data also served as a filter for the faculty members who were included in this study. This was to eliminate any faculty for whom there were no data or too little data to be of any use. The filter eliminated any faculty members who had not taught at least five sections from which EOCE data could be collected, or did not return at least 10% of the possible EOCE

responses for all sections. Another filter eliminated faculty members who had not updated their faculty profiles. Once these filters were applied, the study's sample was reduced to 101 instructors. Most of the eliminated faculty members were new instructors who had not yet taught five full sections.

Classifying the Instructors

Once the EOCE data were gathered, the faculty members were ranked and then classified into four quartiles based on their average instructor scores. The purpose of this classification was to enable comparisons of faculty profile characteristics across groups of faculty with different EOCE averages. The average instructor scores for these four quartiles were:

Table 1
Average instructor EOCE scores by quartile

Quartile	Average
One	4.55
Two	4.32
Three	4.15
Four	3.86

n for quartile 1-3 = 25
n for quartile 4 = 26

Top-Performing Faculty

The next step was to gather a group of faculty members who were identified as top performers by their primary supervisors. This was done to have a second group of highly rated instructors that were identified in a way that did not involve EOCEs. That way, there were two measures of effectiveness to compare against the weakest group.

The identification of these faculty members was done by asking each Primary Supervisor in the School of Management to name his or her top instructors based on factors such as instructional quality, job performance, service to students, and subject matter expertise. This yielded a list of 25 faculty members. This top performing group had an average instructor score of 4.32 on the EOCEs.

When comparing this list to the original list of 101 faculty members identified for this study, it was discovered that the top-rated faculty were fairly widely distributed among the four quartiles with most clustering into quartile one. There were, however, notable intersections between each of the quartiles and the list of top performers. These intersections are as follows:

Table 2
Top performers intersected by quartile

Quartile	Intersection with Top Performers
One	10
Two	4
Three	6
Four	5

Faculty Profiles

Next, data were pulled from the faculty profiles for each faculty member who was in the top quartile, the bottom quartile, and those who had made the list of top performers. The factors for which data were gathered included:

- Graduate degrees
- Years of professional experience
- Years of instructional experience external to the university
- Years of instructional experience within the university
- Scholarly publications
- Scholarly presentations
- Other scholarly activities

The data from each of these factors was compared across instructor groups to determine if the following questions could be answered:

1. Were there any significant differences between cumulative or average values for the profile factors when comparing the faculty members in quartile one and quartile four?
2. Were there any significant differences when comparing the top-rated faculty and quartile four?
3. Were there any correlations between the profile factors and the scores on the EOCEs for faculty in quartile four when combined with the top-rated performers?
4. Can any of the factors be used as potential screening indicators to help predict highly successful faculty?

Results

Comparisons

Table 3, below, shows a breakdown of the findings from the faculty profiles that were analyzed in this study. The main comparisons were made between quartile one versus quartile four and the list of top performers also compared against quartile four. The second comparison required adjustment due to the intersection of the five faculty members who were included in both groups.

Table 3
Cross group comparison of faculty factors

Factors	Toprated	Quartile One	Adjusted Quartile Four
Average EOCE Scores	4.32	4.55	3.88
Average Possible EOCE Responses	315.3	220.5	211.6
Average Actual EOCE Responses	127.2	94.3	72.6
Average EOCE Response Rate	37.8	43.1	35.8
Number of Doctoral Degrees (Including JDs)	8	8	6
Number of Master's Degrees	25	27	31
Number of Certifications	18	23	18
Average Years of Professional Experience	23.3	19.9	24.5
Average Years of Instructional Experience – External	5.4	6.6	6
Average Years of Instructional Experience – Internal	8.8	7.5	6.5
Scholarly Publications	15	28	30
Scholarly Presentations	20	17	25
Other Scholarly Work Including Consulting and Instructional Design	4	8	6

To ensure mutual exclusivity between the groups, the five top-rated faculty members were removed from the fourth quartile and replaced with the five faculty members from quartile three that had the lowest EOCE scores. Both the top-rated group and quartile one had 25 members; the fourth quartile had 26 members.

The top-rated group had a significantly higher number of possible EOCE responses indicating that they teach more classes. This makes sense given that these faculty members were identified by their primary supervisors who are usually the ones who select them to teach classes. There was a noticeably higher EOCE response rate in quartile one. This is also the group that had the highest EOCE average score. This may suggest that among the stronger faculty, higher EOCE response rates may lead to better scores.

The initial findings about educational levels are perhaps the most surprising given the emphasis on the importance of doctoral degrees in academia. The two top-rated groups each had a total of eight doctorates among them whereas the lower group had only six. These differences do not rise

to the level of significance primarily due to the low sample size. Perhaps if the numbers of faculty being compared were higher, a significant difference could be found.

When comparing the number of master's degrees in each of the groups, the numbers are higher (some faculty members held multiple master's degrees) but there still does not seem to be any significant differences between the three groups. The faculty in quartile four had six more master's degrees that the top performers and four more than the faculty in quartile one. Essentially, the metrics tracked for education yielded no useful data to differentiate one group from another.

Some interesting results were also found regarding professional experience, which is important given the emphasis on practical experience at the university. The faculty in quartile four had the most professional experience, whereas the faculty in quartile one had the least. Similar results were reported regarding academic experience. There did not seem to be any differences in experience levels outside of the university, however, top-rated instructors had the highest average years of experience teaching at the university, which, again, is not surprising given that the university makes efforts to keep and use its strongest instructors.

Overall, average years of experience, both professional and academic, was fairly static across the three groups except for a notable drop in the average years of professional experience in quartile one which is different from the same figure for the top performers and leads to no useful conclusion in regards to the main objectives of this study. There were also no significant differences in the number of scholarly publications, presentations, or other scholarly work except for what looks to be an anomalous drop in the number of scholarly publications for the top-rated group.

Correlations

As a further measure, correlations were calculated to determine the extent to which some of the quantifiable factors were matched with EOCE scores. This step was taken to further highlight the relationships between the EOCEs and the faculty factors and to ensure that no outliers were adversely impacting the comparisons shown in table 3. To calculate the correlations, the list of faculty members in the top performer group was combined with the list of faculty members in the adjusted fourth quartile and correlation coefficients were calculated by comparing EOCE average scores to EOCE metrics, years of professional experience, and years of instructional experience (inside the university, outside the university, and combined).

The correlation coefficients can be found in table 4. There was a minor, yet probably meaningless, correlation between both possible / actual EOCE responses and the EOCE average scores. However, there does not appear to be any significant correlation between EOCE average scores and response rates. There also does not appear to be any real correlation between the

number of years of professional experience and EOCE scores. The same holds true for the comparison to the number of years of educational experience outside of the university. There is

Table 4
Correlations between EOCEs and Faculty Factors

EOCE Averages Correlated With:	r
EOCE Possible Responses	0.27
EOCE Actual Responses	0.23
EOCE Response Rate	0.15
Years Professional Experience	0.10
Years External Educational Experience	0.09
Years Internal Educational Experience	0.30
Combined Educational Experience	0.28

a small, positive correlation between EOCE scores and the number of years experience within the university but this can be attributed mostly to the reliance on qualified faculty and the university's tendency to eliminate faculty who do not perform to expectation.

Limitations

The data gathered for this project and the conclusions that can be drawn from them are subject to some clear limitations, the biggest of which is the fact that the primary measure of faculty performance was student evaluations, which are subject to a number of issues often having to do with validity. It is clear that, in general, student evaluations are intended to measure student perceptions of faculty performance and this study is no different. However, as Centra (1993) pointed out, student evaluations often correlate with other measures of faculty performance. Furthermore, efforts were taken to ensure that the student evaluations in this study focused on objective measures of faculty performance as Arreola (2000) recommended. Thus, for the most part, there is reason to believe that the use of student evaluations, as used in this study, can be a useful measure of faculty performance.

A second limitation is that the data regarding the faculty factors were gathered on instructors who had been teaching at the university long enough to have taught at least five sections. Some faculty members were in their first year whereas others had been teaching at the university for more than ten years. The goal of this study was to see if there were factors that were evident at the time of hire that might correlate to strong faculty performance yet the faculty members who were measured were not new. This is a valid concern given that the strongest correlation found in this study was between EOCE scores and the number of years that the faculty member had been teaching for the university. Yet, in some ways, this limitation actually strengthens this study in

that it allows the focus to be only on faculty who have met a certain performance threshold and it eliminates those instructors whose performance was not satisfactory to be retained long enough to teach five sections. Still, it could be argued that there may be value in expanding this study to include faculty members who did not meet performance thresholds, something that would not have been possible in this study since the university did not gather faculty profiles on these instructors.

Conclusion

The initial conclusion is that there does not appear to be a useful difference in the measures of the quantifiable factors in the faculty profiles among the three groups identified for this study. When the groups are adjusted to remove overlaps, the results do not improve. Neither education level, professional or academic experience, nor scholarly activity proved to be a clear indicator of instructor success. Given this, it does not appear that the university's School of Management will benefit much by creating a "highly qualified" faculty profile to assist with faculty candidate screening, at least not one that is based on the factors examined in this study. Thus, the School of Management should now turn its attention toward other means of applicant screening such as carefully structured interview questions or teaching demonstrations, both of which could be strengthened through a validation process similar to the one that was attempted in this study. This could be a significant area of future research for business programs in teaching universities.

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Appendix

End of Course Evaluation Questions

Students are asked to respond using a Likert scale of 1 – 5, with 5 representing the strongest agreement with each statement.

Instructor Statements

1. The instructor encourages students to participate actively in the course.
2. The instructor provides opportunities for students to learn from each other.
3. The instructor communicates the value of the course.
4. The instructor responds to my questions in a timely fashion.
5. The instructor facilitates a supportive learning environment.
6. The instructor communicates the course content in a clear and organized way.
7. The instructor clearly explains the course learning goals, assignments, and grading criteria.
8. The instructor uses class time effectively.
9. The instructor is knowledgeable about the subject matter.
10. The instructor effectively uses a variety of teaching strategies.
11. The instructor connects the course to real-life situations.
12. The instructor provides useful feedback on my progress in the course.
13. The instructor grades assignments in alignment with the grading criteria.
14. The instructor respects diverse styles and ways of learning.
15. The instructor asks for periodic feedback from students to improve his or her teaching.
16. Overall, the instructor is very effective in teaching this course.

A section for comments about the instructor is provided at the end of the instructor section.

Course Statements

17. The course connects learning to real-world situations.
18. The learning goals for this course are clear.
19. The projects and assignments help me meet the learning goals of the course.
20. The required resources contribute to my learning in this course.
21. The work load is logically distributed throughout the course.
22. Overall, the way this course is designed is effective in helping me achieve the learning goals.

A section for comments about the course is provided at the end of the course section.