

The Plight of Adjuncts in Higher Education

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Abstract

Though there is a plethora of articles written over the past years on the ordeal adjunct professors go through while teaching in universities and community colleges, very little has been done to salvage the situation. The work adjunct professors do has been oversimplified while institutions that utilize their services save a lot.

This article will discuss the impact of adjunct professors in higher education, especially those who teach developmental education courses. It will include information on problems and plight faced by these greatly needed employees, their value to educational institutions across the country, data on the number of full-time versus part-time faculty, the lack of pay and benefits offered to the thousands of adjunct and part-time teachers across the country, the savings their work provides institutions of higher education, the beginnings of collective bargaining for this population of workers, and the need to continue to work to find ways to improve working conditions for these professionals.

Introduction

For several decades, numerous research articles as well as various educational newspaper and magazine publications have carried stories on the predicament of adjunct and part-time instructors in the community college and university systems. While much has been written over the years, little has prompted change in the way adjuncts are viewed, used, and reused in educational institutions. This is especially true of those who teach developmental education courses. More than a quarter of a century ago, Boylan, Bon-

ham, Jackson, and Saxon (1994) wrote that 72 percent of those teaching developmental courses, primarily in community colleges, were doing so on a part-time basis.

While the authors of this article note that the adjunctification of the academy is not a new issue, it is important to keep writing about the plight of those who deserve more respect, higher pay, better working conditions, and enhanced benefits.

So, why is it that change tends to have moved slowly for the predicament of adjuncts and part-time instructors in the community college and university system? While adjuncts and part-time instructors, according to the Washington Post (2015), number in hundreds of thousands they have a long way to go to achieve any equity with fulltime faculty. The structure of most institutional systems do not provide a platform for these part-time teaching professionals to have any real voice on matters concerning the classroom, their teaching practices, training, or decisions that apply to the departments in which they teach, leaving this population of teachers without much influence on matters that concern them or the institutions in which they work.

Colleges purport that there are concrete reasons regarding why it is better for the institution to staff course sections with adjunct professors than with full time faculty, mostly related to saving the institution money. So, the question might be how much money is being saved and at what point does staffing classrooms with part-time instructors, who are not paid benefits, level off. Maybe later than sooner. Studies indicate increased hiring of adjuncts and part-time instructors on many college campuses across the

nation is now equal to, and in some cases outnumber, fulltime faculty. TIAA-CREF (2015) reports that fifty percent of today's higher education academic workforce are employed part time on a non-tenure track as adjuncts. In addition, data from the Delta Cost Project at American Institutes for Research (AIR) shows that between 1990 and 2012, the increase in part-time faculty and instructors nearly tripled that of the increase of full-time faculty (AIR, 2013). To explain the heavy reliance on part-time faculty, the Delta Cost Project (2013), indicated that between 1990 and 2012, part-time faculty employment increased 121 percent. During that time, full-time faculty employments rates only increased by 41 percent. Considering private 4-year institutions, community colleges, and public 4-year institutions, adjunct positions in the public 4-year sector increased the most.

State and System Mandates

Certainly, many states have enacted legislative and system mandates to help students to move through the developmental education course sequence and the pathway to graduation quicker than ever before. Unfortunately, while this immediately meant more course sections were available for adjuncts to fill, which in turn meant they made more money, at this same point in time the federal government legislated that the number of hours a part-time employee could work be cut. This caused many qualified adjuncts to flee higher education for K-12 classrooms and other employment. This hiatus, which involved many adjuncts, caused the number of trained, former K-12 faculty who had entered higher education over the last 20 years as adjuncts to be greatly reduced.

According to Gardener (2017), the immediate effects of the repeal of The Affordable Care Act will affect adjuncts in particular. Many of these professors could not afford healthcare prior to the signing of this act, and now will return to this perilous state. Gardener asserts that the soaring costs forced families to go without insurance for about a year before the Affordable Care Act came along. This is quite true as many adjuncts go with less than needed or no healthcare.

A further effect for the institution is savings on retirement and healthcare benefits, as many adjuncts do not receive these as part of their employment package. An unmeasured effect is what this costs the students at the institution. While all of this may be true, an ar-

ticle in Inside Higher Ed poses an interesting question. Where does the saving go? It is apparently not going on investing in more tenure-track faculty. According to the article written by Scott Jaschik, the money saved is ending up in other places including maintenance, administrative and student-services staff. Most of this spending is in recruiting, admissions, counseling, student organizations and athletics (Jaschik, 2017).

Likely, most in Higher Education recognize the value that adjunct professors provide. They are one of the most motivated groups of educators on campus, and most of these motivated adjuncts end up on community college campuses where they are an important part of the educational landscape (Stenerson, Blanchard, Fassiotto, Hernandez, and Muth, 2010). These instructors enter college teaching with broad ideas about changing the ideology of men and the world at the same time. This is a broad pursuit and one that many give up on after their first year or so in higher education. And while critics contend that adjuncts may reduce the educational quality in the classroom because they usually have less teaching experience than full-time professors, Bettinger and Long (2010), state that those adjuncts, who specialize in teaching or are currently employed, could actually enhance the learning experiences for students.

Less Pay than Other Faculty

According to the 2012-2013 annual report on the Economic Status of the Profession published by the American Association of University Professors', the average salary of professors ranges between \$60,000 and \$100,000 a year as opposed to adjunct faculty who are paid an average of \$2,700 per course (AAUP, 2013). So, when faced with paying a salary plus benefits versus a costs per course and no benefits, colleges are electing to have courses taught by adjuncts versus someone who is tenured or on a tenure track. This is not always a bad choice, as adjuncts are dedicated to the success of their students, but this should be rewarded with some form of merit pay or written assurances of future courses. Unfortunately, many adjuncts are forced to live the life of the gypsy academic, moving from campus to campus to teach whatever scraps are left on the college course schedule that higher-paid full-time faculty are not teaching. Hechinger (1982) described gypsy scholars as recent

graduates in the humanities and social sciences who wander from job to job and campus to campus with little prospect of a stable long-term career.

However, a more pressing concern is how many adjuncts and part-time faculty members live at or near the poverty level. Data from the American Community Survey, published in *The Atlantic*, states that 31 percent of part-time faculty are actually living near or below the poverty line, and that one in four families of part-time faculty are receiving benefits from at least one public assistance program such as Medicaid and food stamps (Fredrickson, 2015). This is a simple fact of the fiscal reality that today's educators must deal with, but on the whole the educating of the next generation of Americans must be our overall goal.

Full-time faculty, especially those who serve as Discipline Chairs and in other adjunct supervisory roles, must promote Professional Development opportunities that involve adjunct faculty. This serves as an opportunity to help "bridge the gap" in helping this devoted group of contingent faculty to develop classroom management skills that they may not have gained in obtaining their Masters or Ph.D.'s in their discipline. News Forums (2014) asserts that existing research suggests both intrinsic and extrinsic factors contribute to motivation to participate in professional development. 78.8% were intrinsically motivated to engage in professional development. This includes the desire for professional growth and the opportunity to improve teaching effectiveness. If we, today's professorate, do not partake in these sorts of activities, future generations will lack institutional memory regarding the hard campus choices that were made in the generations preceding them.

As far as one's thinking on higher education, this can certainly be viewed in several ways. Douglas-Gabriel (2019) contends that hundreds of thousands of adjunct instructors teach at colleges and universities, representing two-fifths of all faculty. If this group were trained properly by their institutions, rather than gaining this perspective through trial and error in the classroom, then this could clearly make for a more effective educator, both inside and outside of the classroom. The best way to achieve this is by offering campus educational programs and professional development training to support the evolution of the young educators on a given campus.

Differences in Faculty

This is a double-edged sword of a sort. Since many younger faculty (both tenured and adjunct) have not been trained in using Promising Practices in the college classroom, they enter at a skill deficit. News Forums (2014) contends that asynchronous development opportunities that can be accessed on demand and that adjunct faculty can return to for reference are preferable. In many cases, this is even more evident in the case of the adjunct professor. While they have a set knowledge base in their academic discipline, they have not been trained in basic classroom procedures. Notably, many adjuncts are simply given a textbook and a syllabus and are then asked to teach course sections in classes they have never taught. This is of course a worst-case scenario, but one that is repeated at the beginning of every semester on college campuses around the United States.

The trend to insert adjunct instructors into teaching roles is not a new fad. Edwards (2015) asserts that in 1975, 30% of higher education faculty were non-contingent. This number rose to 51% by 2011. While adjunct professors may be some of the brightest minds on campus in some cases, many are forced to eke out an existence working at several institutions to be able to afford to live. In many cases, adjuncts are never able to retire and many live on or near the poverty line while balancing the constraints of professional and family life. 31% of adjuncts live at or near the poverty line (Kirschstein, 2015).

Kirschstein (2015) states that community colleges have the largest percentage of adjuncts teaching college courses. 65% of their faculty are part-time. Conversely, universities who are identified as research universities by The Carnegie Foundation have the smallest percentage, 32%. A major factor in this discrepancy is that research universities also use a percentage of Teaching Assistants and Research Assistants to lead some course sections.

Adjunct professors are an integral part of the community in many community colleges. Without these professional educators covering a majority of the college's courses, there would be no way for the community college to provide services to all the students that apply to open-admission institutions. Adjunct professors make it possible to fill all the college's course sections. Yakoboski (2014) asserts that a range

of individuals fill adjunct faculty positions. At one end of the spectrum are faculty who bring expertise from nonacademic sectors into the classroom. These are sometimes referred to as “professors of practice”. At the spectrum’s other end are academics employed part-time. These faculty are often used for remedial, introductory, and lower-level courses. They may be responsible for teaching a single course or multiple courses at a given time.

Smith (2016) reports that, “Student success initiatives tend to work better on campuses where faculty members are engaged.” If students have an adjunct professor, however, outcomes of success may be lower than anticipated (Ran & Xu, 2018; Schaffhauser, 2018). Low pay, lack of connectedness, and having to balance multiple positions to make ends meet are just some of the issues that can influence educational outcomes for both the organization and student (Bickerstaff & Chavarin, 2018). Additionally, precariousness of the job, intense workloads, and other inadequate support can lead to stress in non-tenured staff such as adjuncts (Reevyi & Deason, 2014). While adjuncts serve an important purpose in higher education, they are not typically set up for success (Kezar & Maxey, 2016). Therefore, if a university or college is to carry out its mission effectively, attention and time must be given to provide support structures for adjuncts.

Other Contributing Factors

Not only do adjuncts cost less per course fiscally, but they also do not receive healthcare or retirement benefits from the college or system and this translates into a savings of millions of dollars when counted across several academic years. Moreover, while colleges and universities claim to garner significant savings by employing adjuncts, the Delta Cost Project reported that hiring adjuncts, overall, had not resulted in a large amount of savings (AIR, 2013).

Another factor is that since 75.5% of instructors are off the tenure track, they will have no access to tenure. This represents a sample of 1.3 million instructors out of 1.8 total, according to the United Department of Education (2009). TIAA-CREF (2015) contends that only 19% of academics who serve as adjunct faculty are very confident they will have enough money to live comfortably in retirement. Yet, another key factor in hiring adjuncts is that it provides educational institutions more staffing flexibility because tenured

faculty are protected from being fired except for cause. Adjuncts have no protection and colleges and universities can choose not to renew the contract of an adjunct professor. Some institutions even go so far as to limit the number of course contact hours adjuncts are allowed to teach, even if this number is lower than that allowed by the State Higher Education Commission or other legislative mandates.

Another aspect to consider is that faculty of color are relegated to contingent positions. “Only 10.4 percent of all faculty positions are held by underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, and of these, 7.6 percent — or 73 percent of the total minority faculty population — are contingent positions,” (American Federation of Teachers, 2010). This brings to issue the problem of students, especially first-generation college students, not having faces that look similar to theirs looking back at them from the front of college classrooms. This makes it hard for these students to find role models and mentors who come from similar backgrounds and who have similar experiences. Garrett (2018) contends that bridging the gap in becoming a college student can be one of the biggest hurdles a student of color or First-Generation college student must overcome during their first year on a four-year college campus. This is due to a lack of role models who have similar background stories as the student.

Bailey, Jeong, and Cho (2010) state that one in three students who place into developmental education will never complete the developmental education course sequence. These students will also never attempt a college-level course. This is an indirect effect of the surplus of adjunct instructors teaching both developmental education and college-level courses. A lack of training of these contingent faculty is at the root of this issue. Educational institutions must provide proper training for adjunct and new faculty, as well.

Reconceptualizing Adjunct Engagement

While adjuncts and organizations have roles to play in the way of increasing morale, several research studies discuss ways the organization can shift to result in more positive work environments for adjunct faculty. The chief theme among much of the research is increasing organizational socialization. Organizational socialization (Vance, 2018, p. 5) is discussed as an important need for higher education administrators

to evaluate and assess. By extension, Thirolf (2016) addressed the value of considering both integration and engagement in developing a more “robust and inclusive model” (p. 306) for increasing community social interaction on higher education campuses. More specifically, Vance (2018) examined the limitations and problems of orientation practices and made a case for creating formal and informal orientation activities that address inclusive communication strategies and offering resources for new faculty that will give them opportunities for professional growth. Meixner, Kruck, and Madden’s (2010) qualitative study arrived at three themes they saw surface when focusing on adjunct faculty: Receiving outreach, navigating challenges, and developing skills. Receiving outreach had to do with inconsistent communication practices and mentoring strategies. Navigating challenges entailed student engagement, quality of work, and community disconnection. Developing skills involved faculty needs and interests. The trio recommended that more advocacy be done for adjuncts and that programming, such as disseminating digital newsletters about pedagogy and other relevant items of interest to adjuncts be done to achieve more inclusive outcomes.

Organizational Change and Perhaps Collective Bargaining

To take the notion of organizational inclusion strategies further, Linder (2012) noted a need for creating space for adjunct faculty via establishing and sustaining Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTL). The researcher identified six components of deliberate CTL models: programming, physical space, community development, faculty leadership, the organization website, and resource libraries. All of these areas must be considered carefully in CTL models in order to carry out meaningful professional development initiatives that can “strengthen the university mission” (p. 51). Researchers Lapointe, Vandenberghe, and Boudrias (2014) talk about organizational socialization tactics that can assist in newcomer adjustment. They arrived at two possible routes to mediate role clarity, trust and improve relationships. One avenue is to decrease uncertainty of work and the other is to enhance relationships among faculty, coworkers, and supervisors. By extension, Kezar and Maxey (2016) expressed their support by valuing increased collabo-

ration among all faculty while keeping student success at the forefront.

Interestingly, the organizational socialization may also include collective bargaining as a way of improving the plight of adjuncts. Not possible, you say. Think again. A group of adjuncts at the University of Pittsburgh took matters into their own hands and began advocating for higher pay (Korkki, 2018). Andrew Behrendt is just one adjunct who is part of a group striving for unionization. While many adjuncts may advocate for themselves, organizations have a role to play to increase adjunct morale, as well. Adjusting budgeting models, installing mentorship programs, paying adjuncts for professional development time, and creating more predictable work schedules are some ways organizations can establish a more inclusive environment for adjunct faculty (Smith, 2016; Bickerstaff & Chavarin, 2018). Additionally, according to an article in the Washington Post by Danielle Douglas-Gabriel, adjuncts are getting help from Service Employees International Union, United Auto Workers and other unions that have helped them organize in some states, even those labeled right-to-work states.

One such example arose in Florida where seven of Florida’s state colleges filed to join the Service Employees International Union. Now, more than half of the state’s adjuncts, roughly 9,000 people, are organizing or already represented by a union in a right-to-work state (Douglas-Gabriel, 2019). Additionally, Douglas-Gabriel reported that adjuncts at St. Louis Community College recently approved their first union contract, which increased pay per course to \$1,600.

Promising Practices

A provision which should be required of newly hired adjunct and full-time faculty is that they attend professional development training specifically designed to help them with the transition to classroom management. These would help adjunct instructors, especially in developmental education, to be prepared to deal with students who are not only entering college with a skills deficit, as defined by their placement, but also help these students to learn to be successful during these pivotal skill building courses. Boylan (2009) states “This means that at a time when the costs of participating in postsecondary education are

increasing, a very large number of undergraduates must stay in school longer and pay more in order to complete developmental course requirements. Time in developmental education is well spent for many of these students. They complete their developmental courses quickly, and their participation enables them to develop the skills necessary for success in later college-level courses.”

Conclusion

A number of research articles have attested that adjuncts are not treated fairly by educational institutions across the United States of America. They lack job security, as they are only assigned courses from semester to semester, as the classes fill, they lack benefits, such as healthcare or retirement benefits, and they lack the respect of the administration on many campuses. This is evident as they are given classes at the last possible minute and they are given the least desirable hours, sometimes teaching both morning and night time course sections in order to get the full possible course load.

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) supports the idea that “Adjuncts are an important piece of the professoriate and are heavily used, especially at community colleges and in professional programs. For as long as there have been adjuncts, there have been supporters of, and opponents to, their use. Today, as institutions are faced with the challenges listed above, a new call has been made to reexamine the role of adjuncts in the professoriate. With tough economic times and competition increasing from “for-profit” institutions, many fear that the role of the traditional full-time faculty member is diminishing and the role of adjuncts will increase.” This

idea is revolutionary as it is the first time that adjuncts have been appreciated for the work they do on a wide scale.

Adjunct professors teach the majority of courses on college campuses, currently, and should be treated as such, like the professional educators that they are. These individuals are a vital part of the college community and as such make a bona fide contribution to academe, as a whole and thus. They must be celebrated for this and not denigrated because they work at multiple institutions and sometimes work under the poverty level.

Hensel, Hunnicutt, and Salomon (2015) advocate for altering faculty model paradigms by sharing their vision. Their goal is “to provide a balanced faculty work life, creating space for pedagogical innovation, student/faculty scholarship, and application of expertise to solving societal problems in order to prepare students for successful professional, personal, and civic lives” (p. 60). While there are multiple ways of achieving more positive and inclusive organizational climates, the processes involved are accompanied by complexity because ultimately, higher education administrators are tasked with changing both individual and organizational behavior. With special consideration for adjunct faculty development, *New Forums* (2014) identified five key strategies that can yield positive outcomes for instructors. Identify specific and specialized professional development programs, implement monetary incentives, account for intrinsic motivation, understand that awards and recognition are not as important, and give adjuncts opportunities for participating in meaningful work are the key components to consider for inclusive cultural change.

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