

A role for disciplinary societies in supporting community college adjunct faculty

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Abstract

Disciplinary societies have a role to play in supporting the needs of community college adjunct faculty. The potential exists to improve the professional lives of these faculty members, an underappreciated segment of the higher education workforce, and to positively influence outcomes for students enrolled in community colleges.

Efforts to improve engagement opportunities for community college faculty must account for the needs and experiences of part-time, contingent (i.e., adjunct) instructors. In community colleges, more than two-thirds of instructional faculty are employed part-time (Hurlburt & McGarrah, 2016) and more than half of course sections are taught by part-time faculty (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014). In this chapter, we draw on findings from a study we conducted in partnership with Achieving the Dream (ATD), a nonprofit organization focused on evidence-based, institutional improvement of community colleges to promote student success. ATD provided leadership, guidance, and resources to six community colleges to develop and implement strategies to support adjunct faculty with the ultimate goal of improving student outcomes. The authors of this chapter and other researchers at the Community College Research Center collected qualitative and quantitative data from these six colleges to understand the needs and experiences of adjunct faculty and strategies for faculty engagement that may lead to improved student outcomes. For a detailed description of the data sources and methods for this study, please see Bickerstaff & Ran, 2020.

In this chapter, we first establish the importance of adjunct faculty in supporting student success. We then draw on transcripts from 90 interviews and focus groups with faculty and administrators as well as a survey of 482 faculty members at six community colleges to describe the experiences of adjunct faculty. Finally, we offer four suggestions for disciplinary societies who seek to meet the needs of adjunct faculty.

THE INFLUENCE OF ADJUNCT FACULTY ON STUDENT OUTCOMES

In commuter institutions, faculty are perhaps the most critical stakeholder group in supporting student success (Whitten et al., 2017). Research shows that curricula, instructional methods, and other faculty behaviors can influence student outcomes (Lancaster & Lundberg, 2019; MacArthur et al., 2015), particularly for students from traditionally marginalized

groups (Bauer, 2014; Rendon, 1994). In addition to their instructional role, faculty support students through formal and informal advising, triaging, and troubleshooting based on a student's needs, as well as referral to support services like financial aid, tutoring, library services, and counseling (e.g., Hutson, 2013; Lundquist et al., 2002).

Research shows mixed findings on the effects of adjunct faculty on student outcomes. Several studies show that when compared to students taught by full-time faculty, students taught by adjunct faculty have similar or better course outcomes (Xu, 2019). On the one hand, in the six colleges that were the focus of this project, students with part-time instructors had slightly higher course grades in developmental and gateway math and English courses, and similar pass rates in the next course in the sequence, compared with students with similar individual characteristics taught by full-time faculty in the same courses (Ran & Sanders, 2020). On the other hand, studies also show that students who were taught by adjunct faculty tend to have lower enrollment persistence and weaker longer-term outcomes (Eagan & Jaeger, 2009; Ran & Xu, 2019; Yu et al., 2015). For example, using a student fixed effects model, Xu (2019) suggests that a student was around 5 percentage points less likely to continue to enroll in a subject area when the introductory course was taught by a part-time faculty member. This finding aligns with the outcomes at the six colleges in this study. We found that students taught by part-time faculty in developmental or gateway math and English courses were 3 to 5 percentage points less likely to enroll in a subsequent course in the sequence (Ran & Sanders, 2020).

Our analysis identifies two specific factors that may contribute to these unfavorable longer-term student outcomes: a lack of institutional knowledge by adjunct faculty and course meeting times. First, as compared to their full-time counterparts, part-time faculty survey respondents consistently reported less knowledge about student support services, such as advising, library resources, counseling, academic supports (i.e., tutoring), and financial aid (Ran & Sanders, 2020). A national faculty survey conducted by the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2014) showed that part-time faculty were less likely to refer students to academic advising and planning services by 11 percentage points, to computer labs by 8 percentage points, and to financial aid advising services by 21 percentage points. Second, Ran and Sanders (2020) found that more than one-third of course sections taught by part-time faculty are night sections that begin after 5 p.m., while only 11% of sections taught by full-time faculty occurred at night. In this analysis, differences in course meeting times accounted for a large proportion of the negative effects of part-time faculty on student outcomes. To provide greater insight into the mechanisms underlying these two factors and to inform the kinds of engagement strategies that may provide meaningful support to part-time faculty, in the next section we share findings from survey and interview data on the experiences of part-time faculty in community colleges.

EXPERIENCES OF ADJUNCT FACULTY IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

In understanding the needs and experiences of adjunct faculty, one must first acknowledge the diversity of their motivations, life circumstances, and backgrounds (Eagan et al., 2015; Fuller et al., 2017). In community colleges, adjuncts include aspiring full-time faculty members, K-12 educators, those with previous or current work experience in a range of industries, retirees, individuals who prefer part-time work for personal reasons, and college administrators and staff who teach in addition to performing their full-time responsibilities (Ott & Dippold, 2018; Wagoner, 2007). This diversity of backgrounds suggests the need for differentiated engagement strategies. Yet despite these variations, research has

identified a set of experiences common to many part-time faculty, including low pay, a sense of being undervalued, and frustrating working conditions (e.g., Government Accountability Office, 2017; Kezar, 2013; Kezar & Maxey, 2014; Kezar & Sam, 2013; Schuster & Finkelstein, 2008).

In our interviews we found that part-time faculty members' professional lives are complicated—in part because of the semester-by-semester unpredictability of their employment and teaching schedules and in part because the information needed to be successful in their job may not be readily available. Information needs for these faculty include, but are not limited to, how to order textbooks, where key resources on campus are located, and how to use instructional support technology (e.g., course management software). In our survey, among the 254 part-time faculty respondents, only 54% of part-time faculty reported attending a formal orientation—a potentially efficient mechanism for providing important institutional information—when they were newly hired. Part-time instructors reported spending a lot of time searching for the particular information they need to be successful, especially during their first semester. One part-time faculty member reflected: “I had to figure a lot of things out, and it was a lot of me emailing my chair and asking her questions and her emailing me back.” Other realities make faculty life complicated: in our survey, one-third of part-time faculty reported receiving their course assignments less than one month before the start of the semester; fewer than one-third of adjuncts we surveyed were provided a personal desk, phone, or computer (Bickerstaff & Chavarin, 2018). When teaching only at night, part-time faculty were much less likely to have reliable access to physical resources on campus or spaces where they could meet with students (Ran & Sanders, 2020).

Professional isolation was a second prevalent theme in our interview data. Part-time faculty reported feeling largely disconnected from the life of their department and institution, and they rarely mentioned disciplinary associations as a source of professional connection or support. Formal structures to foster collegiality among part-time faculty are uncommon, thus interactions with colleagues may happen infrequently or through happenstance. For example, instructors reported getting to know faculty who use the same classroom right before or after them, but those relationships may not be maintained after the term ends. Instructors who teach in the evenings, when departmental staff are not on campus, frequently cited isolation as a challenge.

Part-time faculty reported in interviews that they would benefit from additional mentorship and professional development, particularly on topics related to student engagement and classroom management. Forty-three percent of part-time faculty surveyed reported access to funding for professional development. For adjunct faculty who do wish to become involved in the life of the department, the existing opportunities (i.e., committee work) were frequently unpaid (Bickerstaff & Chavarin, 2018).

Finally, it is important to note that in spite of these challenges, adjunct faculty report a strong commitment to their students and to teaching (Kramer et al., 2014). When asked about their overall job satisfaction in our survey, 68% of part-time faculty reported being extremely or moderately satisfied; this finding resonates with previous research showing part-time faculty satisfaction with aspects of their profession, particularly the professional autonomy afforded them (Antony & Valadez, 2002; Kim et al., 2008). Interview data suggest that this satisfaction derives from experiences with students and colleagues and respondents' belief in the open-access mission of community colleges. One part-time faculty member summarized it this way: “I love my department, I love my chair, but the life of an adjunct sucks.” Our data show tensions between the fulfillment faculty experience from teaching and the frustration they experience as a result of their working conditions.

ROLE OF DISCIPLINARY SOCIETIES IN ENGAGING ADJUNCT FACULTY

We hypothesize that greater supports for adjunct faculty can contribute to stronger student success. Specifically, part-time faculty need clear and readily accessible information about institutional resources and student services and they need support to mitigate the challenges associated with teaching evening sections. In addition, institutions and disciplinary societies should consider the range of adjunct faculty experiences—the diversity in their backgrounds and professional goals, their feelings of disconnection from their professional colleagues, a lack of basic resources, limited opportunities for professional development, and their passion for instructional work with students. Drawing on lessons learned from the six colleges who participated in this project and the broader literature on faculty engagement, we offer four suggestions for disciplinary societies seeking to improve supports and engagement structures for adjunct faculty (See Chapter 4 for some examples).

First, we ask disciplinary societies to consider whether they are reaching adjunct faculty in their current programming and communications. In our study, adjunct faculty reported rarely traveling to off-campus meetings, which suggests their rates of attendance at professional conferences is low. Given the resource constraints facing adjunct faculty, societies should consider reduced membership and registration fees for part-time instructors. In addition, societies might look for ways to bring their programming to adjuncts by hosting virtual, regional, or campus-based events to replace or complement national meetings (See Chapter 8 for example). Remote mentoring programs may be a low-cost approach to engage adjunct faculty and decrease their sense of professional isolation. Interested adjunct faculty might be paired with a mentor who can orient them to the disciplinary society's resources or who can offer expertise in a specified area of the adjunct's choosing: navigating career pathways, improving teaching practice, strengthening research skills, among others.

Beyond expanding programming, disciplinary societies should consider whether their communications are reaching adjunct faculty. Not surprisingly, part-time faculty survey respondents reported relying on email to learn about professional development opportunities at the college (unlike full-time faculty in our sample who were more likely to learn about opportunities through word-of-mouth). However, email overload was a common theme in our interviews, particularly for faculty teaching at multiple institutions. As one respondent explained: "I am inundated with emails about things that may be important, but I don't really know how important." Disciplinary societies may want to engage full-time community college faculty as ambassadors to reach out to their part-time colleagues.

Personalized communications from colleagues may be more effective at highlighting resources and programming that are tailored to part-time faculty. In addition, given that part-timers may be less likely to rely on word-of-mouth, society websites should be inviting and up-to-date and should feature resources that are relevant to the needs and concerns of part-time faculty. Our findings suggest that many part-time community college faculty members desire a stronger professional community; disciplinary societies may have the potential to fill that gap.

Second, disciplinary societies are encouraged to account for the diversity of adjunct faculty as it relates both to their needs and the value they bring. Survey data from this project showed that part-time faculty vary in terms of their professional goals and experiences, as well as in their availability and interest in participating in professional development activities. For example, an aspiring tenure-track faculty member has different professional needs than a retiree who teaches part-time. Adjunct faculty profiles differed across the six participating institutions, but in aggregate, 57% of the 254 respondents reported having ever sought a full-time faculty position. One-fifth reported currently holding another full-time

(non-faculty) job (Bickerstaff & Chavarin, 2018). Our survey did not explore differences in part-time faculty characteristics across fields of study, but we know from our qualitative data that K-12 educators are significantly represented among community college adjunct faculty in English and mathematics departments. This is likely to be less true in sociology, economics, and other fields that are taught less prevalently in high schools. Surveying faculty can reveal needs as well as strengths that might be leveraged in events and programming. High school teachers may be a resource for other faculty without formal instructional training. Also, some adjuncts are emeritus faculty who may bring a unique perspective on professional pathways. Industry professionals can report on current practices and issues in the field, making part-time faculty expertise a valuable resource.

Third, disciplinary societies should recognize that many of adjunct faculty's most pressing needs are best addressed by their college employers. Adjuncts need easy-to-find institution-specific information about college resources and student services. They need the basic resources to do their job. They should receive extra supports to combat the challenges of teaching evening sections. And they should be fairly compensated and recognized for the work they do. The six colleges who participated in this project enacted a number of strategies to address these challenges (Bickerstaff & Ran, 2020). They strengthened or created web-based resources tailored to the needs of part-time faculty. In some cases, online platforms were designed to compile existing online resources—including policies, procedures, forms, key contacts, and other relevant information—in one central location. Some colleges also created new text and video resources specifically in response to part-time faculty questions. Some colleges created new centers on campus for adjunct faculty, these physical locations include workstations, private meeting rooms, lockers, lending libraries, and common areas with couches and kitchen facilities. Additional engagement strategies adopted by the colleges in this project include orientations, workshops, and cohort-based professional learning activities (e.g., faculty learning communities). Colleges were encouraged to consider how hiring, review, and promotion activities might be realigned to value adjunct faculty contributions and engagement.

Disciplinary societies might consider the extent to which they can advocate for their adjunct faculty members, using their platform to call attention to the ways that institutions can change practices and policies to improve part-time faculty working conditions with the ultimate goal of providing students with optimal educational experiences. This may include public statements, position papers, or testimony that articulates how and why adjunct faculty are critical to the mission and goals of the society. Given that adjunct faculty teach approximately half of course sections in community colleges, and community colleges are a key gateway to higher education for students from underrepresented backgrounds, societies may consider advocating for adjunct needs as part of their equity-related initiatives.

Finally, disciplinary societies should consider the extent to which their programming and resources address issues of instruction in the lower-division curriculum. While this is relevant to both full-time and part-time faculty at teaching colleges across higher education sectors, part-time community college faculty carry a significant burden for meeting the learning needs of first- and second-year college students. This work comes with challenges: community college faculty teach an increasingly diverse set of students who bring with them a set of experiences and strengths that may not be reflected in the traditional college curriculum. To support and retain community college students, faculty may need to adopt a set of instructional and relational practices that broadly fall under the term culturally responsive teaching (e.g., Pappamihel & Moreno, 2011). For faculty who do not share their students' backgrounds (more than two-thirds of community college faculty are white, compared to about half of community college students) (Snyder et al., 2019), this

may mean confronting implicit biases and adopting new ways of interacting with and supporting students (Booker, 2016; Guiffrida, 2005). As a whole, community college faculty tend to have limited access to intensive or reflective professional development focused on improving student learning and success (Bass et al., 2019), and due to lack of time, opportunity, and financial support, adjunct faculty's access to teaching-focused professional development is likely even more limited.

Disciplinary societies have an advantage over institutions and other providers of professional development in that they can focus on field-specific questions of practice related to helping students achieve specific learning goals; an approach more promising than general or decontextualized discussions of teaching strategies (Garet et al., 2001). Disciplinary societies might organize virtual experiences that allow faculty from across institutions to explore common questions of practice for lower-division courses. These may include faculty inquiry groups or communities of practice focused on teaching threshold concepts in a field, adapting equity-minded practices to a content area, or identifying curricular or co-curricular activities that will fuel students' interest in further study in the field.

In this chapter, we have described how and why adjunct faculty are essential to the institutional success of community colleges. This highly diverse group of instructional staff teach significant proportions of course sections and demonstrate strong commitments to their students, their disciplines, and the mission of open-access higher education. Yet they do their work with some distinct disadvantages, in particular unequal access to institutional resources and limited time on campus to build institutional knowledge. With these challenges in mind, we outline four ways that disciplinary societies might support the needs of community college adjunct faculty. Doing so has the potential to improve the professional lives of an underappreciated segment of the higher education workforce as well as positively influence outcomes for students enrolled in community colleges.

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