

Understanding the Needs of Part-Time Faculty at Six Community Colleges

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Over the past decade, community colleges have engaged in an array of reforms focused on increasing student learning, persistence, and completion. This work has included reforms to developmental education, advising, and student support services. And more recently, community colleges in many states have embarked on whole-institution reforms designed to impact multiple dimensions of the student experience, from intake to completion. Yet, within this broad reform movement, an area that has garnered less attention is the working conditions of adjunct faculty. In community colleges, about 67 percent of instructional faculty are part-time (Hurlburt & McGarrah, 2016). A long history of research has shown that part-time faculty work under challenging conditions with limited institutional support (e.g., Kezar & Sam, 2013; Kezar, 2013; Schuster & Finkelstein, 2008). Not unrelated to these circumstances are research findings suggesting that students taught by part-time faculty have less favorable outcomes in terms of persistence, completion, and transfer (Eagan & Jaeger, 2009; Ran & Xu, 2017; Yu, Campbell, & Mendoza, 2015). Thus, a comprehensive vision for the improvement of community colleges must include improving the working conditions of adjunct faculty, as doing so may well have attendant implications for student success.

This recognition is the rationale for *Engaging Adjunct Faculty in the Student Success Movement*, a project launched in 2016 by Achieving the Dream (ATD), a nonprofit organization focused on evidence-based, institutional improvement of community colleges to promote student success. The project acknowledges the critical role faculty play not only in supporting student learning and course persistence but also in shaping students' broader perceptions and experiences at college (Rendon, 1994; Tinto, 2004). Six ATD leader colleges¹ were selected through a competitive process to receive funds and technical assistance to develop and pilot scalable strategies to engage and support part-time faculty within two academic departments or divisions. The Community College Research Center (CCRC) is serving as an external research partner for the project, documenting and analyzing the strategies undertaken by the colleges and their impacts.

One goal of this research is to understand the lives and needs of part-time faculty² and to investigate how institutional policies and practices can support the contributions of adjuncts in promoting student success. In this research brief, we examine data from 59 semi-structured interviews and focus groups conducted with full-time faculty, part-time faculty, and

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administrators. In addition we draw on data from a faculty survey completed by 254 part-time faculty at the six colleges. Our analysis explores the experiences of part-time faculty—their commonalities and their differences. We also outline several categories of supports offered to adjuncts by the six colleges through this pilot project, and we draw connections between these supports and part-time faculty needs as identified in our analysis. Forthcoming publications from this research will explore the supports offered through this project in greater detail, including their implementation and their impacts.

Part-Time Faculty Characteristics

CCRC disseminated a survey to full- and part-time faculty³ at each college participating in this project to learn more about them. It included questions on departmental culture, professional development, and job satisfaction.⁴ Slightly more than half of the respondents were part-time faculty, and the aggregate response rate for all respondents was 39 percent. In this brief we discuss survey findings from part-time faculty only. Our sample of 254 part-time faculty at six community colleges is not intended to be nationally representative, yet the experiences of part-time faculty at these colleges are reflective of themes established in large-scale studies of faculty.⁵

Like previous scholarship, our data suggest substantial variation in the current employment configurations and previous educational and professional experiences of part-time faculty (Eagan, Jaeger, & Grantham, 2015; Fuller, Brown, & Smith, 2017). Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of part-time faculty survey respondents. Overall, the majority of our part-time sample are White and female, and nearly three fourths of them hold a master’s degree. They reported an average of nine years of teaching at their college and 18 years of teaching experience in any setting. Half reported holding a degree in education or a teaching credential. In the six colleges participating in this study, part-time faculty teach 45 percent of course sections.

Table 1.
Characteristics of Part-Time Faculty (*n* = 254)

Characteristic	Percent of Survey Respondents
Female	64%
White	72%
Currently only employed in part-time position at this college	34%
Currently have full-time job elsewhere	19%
Currently have part-time job elsewhere	41%
Currently teaching at multiple colleges or universities	33%
Ever sought a full-time faculty position	57%
Hold master’s degree	73%
Hold degree in education or a teaching credential	50%
Mean years teaching experience at any level	18
Mean years teaching at this institution	9
Average age	52

Approximately 41 percent of the survey sample reported holding part-time position(s) elsewhere (this is inclusive of the 33 percent of the total respondents who reported holding teaching positions at multiple colleges and universities); 34 percent indicated they are only

employed at their current institution; and 19 percent indicated that they currently have a full-time non-teaching position in another field.

Qualitative interviews reveal the diversity of part-time faculty. Adjuncts we spoke with 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 (see Gappa & Leslie, 1993, for in-depth analysis of part-time faculty profiles).

The diversity of motivations, life circumstances, and instructional backgrounds among adjuncts implies that the relationships they have with their institutions may also vary widely. For example, a college administrator may have stronger ties to the institution, an intimate understanding of college policies, and the security of full-time employment, but might not have extensive pedagogical training. Conversely, a high school teacher likely has more pedagogical training but limited understanding of college policies. This suggests the need for differentiated supports targeting the needs of those with more or less experience with instructional design, those seeking a full-time faculty position, and those new to working with community college students. Despite these variations, a set of experiences common to many part-time faculty members clearly emerges from our fieldwork. Several common features of the part-time faculty experience are presented below.

Commonalities of the Part-Time Faculty Experience

Complicated Circumstances of Employment and Instruction

“I feel like I’m a lot like my students. I’m trying to kind of like scrape together a better life. I mean, we have very similar, very complicated life structures. I think that’s one of the reasons a lot of us really enjoy what we’re doing and why we make connections with students—because we understand a lot of the struggles that they’re going through in a really tangible way.”

Our analysis shows that many 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. Part-time faculty’s professional lives at their institutions are often marked by instability, with the majority of our survey sample reporting that their employment contracts are renewed on a term-by-term basis. This contingent structure of employment has a clear impact on their sense of financial security and their need to consider or plan for other employment possibilities. It is a major factor in the complexity of their work lives, especially among those with additional part-time positions. As one instructor explained, “My work schedule changes at the last minute. This makes it very difficult for me to have the one to two other part-time jobs that I need to survive financially.”

In our survey, one third of part-time faculty reported receiving their course assignments less than one month before the start of the semester. One faculty member explained how last-minute course assignments can impact instructional quality:

I need to be set up for success. So when I'm getting classes the day before [the semester starts], or when I'm not given any instruction on how to access books, or when the copy machine is down and I have to make 50 copies of the syllabus, then I'm stressed and I'm rushed. I'm a big believer in being prepared the very first day because it just kind of sets the mood and the tone for the classroom. So when those types of things happen, it makes students not trust you or not believe in you.

Last-minute course assignments and an inability to plan beyond the current semester have implications for instructors in terms of organization, confidence and preparation at the beginning of the term, and the ability to make term-by-term course refinements.

Most part-time interviewees noted that their work is complicated by the challenge of finding pertinent information and resources. Information needs 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). Part-time instructors reported spending a lot of time searching for the particular information they need to be successful, especially during their first semester: "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." Part-time faculty also reported that sifting through institutional email is a challenge: "I am inundated with emails about things that may be important, but I don't really know how important." Only 54 percent of part-time faculty reported attending a formal orientation—a potentially efficient mechanism for providing important information—when they were newly hired (see Table 2). We also learned that not having critical, sometimes basic, information is not uncommon for new hires and can lead to mistakes, further complicating instructors' work:

I haven't been informed of many of the policies associated with my position, so I constantly have to ask for information and have made a few mistakes. I wasn't informed that I had been given two classes for next term, so I ended up ordering my textbooks late. I also made a mistake about canceling a class.

To some extent, information becomes elusive because part-time faculty are often disconnected from the college, a second common feature of their experience.

Limited Connection to Department and College

"I don't really feel connected to the department. I know the supervisor and the secretary, but I don't know anyone else and haven't really been encouraged to meet with anyone else. I don't know if I have a mentor teacher who is supposed to be observing me. I don't know very much about the school itself."

In interviews, part-time faculty reported feeling largely disconnected from the life of their department and institution; they likewise reported having limited awareness of campus initiatives and resources. In survey responses, on average, part-time faculty reported being less than "somewhat knowledgeable" about a number of student services, including student life, financial aid, academic advising, and counseling services.⁶

Professional isolation is a prevalent theme in our interview data. Formal structures to foster collegiality among part-time faculty are uncommon; interactions with colleagues may happen infrequently or through happenstance. 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 semester ends. Instructors who teach in the evenings, when departmental staff are not on campus, frequently cited isolation as a challenge. A chemistry instructor teaching an evening lab in an extension center explained: “In the beginning it was kind of scary to think that if something goes wrong, nobody is there.”

Part-time faculty reported in interviews that they would benefit from additional mentorship and support. When asked on what topics they would like professional development, they frequently mentioned student engagement and classroom management. One adjunct explained: “I would love to go to a meeting where they had someone show you how to address certain behavioral problems in the classroom. I would love for someone to model different types of scenarios with different types of students with different methods for addressing those issues.”

While part-time faculty often spoke about the downside of their isolation, they also typically described a strong singular benefit. As found in previous research, participants in this study were highly satisfied with the professional autonomy associated with their position (Kim, Twombly, & Wolf-Wendel, 2008). Part-time faculty reported that they particularly appreciate the freedom to make decisions in the classroom. As one explained: “I love my job because of benign neglect: You leave me alone, and I pay you back by doing the best job I can.” In part, their autonomy is related to their disconnection, as part-time faculty perform their work with limited professional oversight and are free to remain uninvolved with college and departmental matters if they choose. Across 10 areas of satisfaction queried for in the survey, autonomy was ranked the highest (see Table 2).

Table 2.

Satisfaction With Job Features Among Part-Time Faculty ($n = 254$)

Feature of Position	Percent of Survey Respondents Feeling Satisfied
Autonomy	85%
Administrative support	72%
Supervision and department leadership	71%
Overall satisfaction with your position	68%
Professional relationships with colleagues	68%
Teaching load	59%
Salary and benefits	48%
Job security	43%
Prospects for career	26%
Availability of full-time positions	20%

These features of disconnection—limited knowledge of student services and institutional initiatives, professional isolation, and minimal professional oversight—are common across interviewees. For faculty who do wish to build relationships with colleagues and access additional support, avenues for increased connection are reportedly not always available.

Strong Commitment to Students and Teaching

“The students, my colleagues, and the subject I teach are the reasons I love being here.”

A third common feature of part-time faculty members’ experience is a passion for teaching their students (Kramer, Gloeckner, & Jacoby, 2014). Part-time faculty work for relatively low pay

under less-than-optimal conditions (Government Accountability Office, 2017); fewer than one third of adjuncts we surveyed were provided a personal desk, phone, or computer (see Table 3). Despite these challenges, many part-time faculty members reported being satisfied with their work; interview data suggest that this largely derives from their experiences with students. When asked about their overall job satisfaction, 68 percent of part-time faculty reported being extremely or moderately satisfied. Acknowledging conflicted feelings about the adjunct faculty employment experience as a whole, one instructor said, “I love my department, love my chair, but the life of an adjunct sucks.”

Table 3.

Provision of Institutional Resources to Part-Time Faculty (*n* = 254)

Resource	Percent of Survey Respondents
Attended a formal orientation when first hired	54%
Provided with professional development funds	43%
Provided with phone line with voicemail	35%
Provided with private office or personal desk in shared office	29%
Provided with computer or laptop	13%

In the prior subsection, we described how many part-time faculty reported feeling disconnected from their departments and colleges. And yet we did interview part-time faculty who attend department meetings and professional development activities, serve on committees, and engage in other forms of service to the college. This engagement is often uncompensated. For example, roughly one third of part-time faculty reported attending a workshop or seminar in their department during the prior academic year; 57 percent of those who attended were not compensated. One part-time faculty member explained:

I'd get here at 8 o'clock in the morning and I'd work a full workday until 3, 4 o'clock in the afternoon because [my schedule allowed it]. Sometimes I would just stay because I got to work with other people and see what was going on, get to be on committees and things. Yes, I'm not getting compensated for it, but I'm learning more about how things work here.

In our fieldwork, we encountered many part-time faculty with a deep sense of commitment to their work:

I love my students and have great respect for the challenges they face on a daily basis in order to make a college education part of their really busy lives. And I am a huge supporter of community colleges and the fundamental and irreplaceable role they play in communities and individual lives.

This commitment is exemplified by the length of their tenure at their institutions, which averages nine years. Thus, many part-time faculty persist in their positions despite the inherent challenges.

Poor Compensation and Sense of Being Undervalued

“As adjunct instructors, we really feel like we're not valued. I notice my classes are just as full, my classes use the entire time frame, and I put in so many hours helping students, but for poor pay.”

Challenges related to compensation were among the most prevalent themes in part-time faculty interviews. As documented elsewhere, some part-time faculty struggle financially as a result of low pay, lack of access to benefits, and unstable employment (Coalition on Academic Workforce, 2012; Government Accountability Office, 2017; Kezar & Maxey, 2014). In our interviews and focus groups, even those adjuncts with other sources of income articulated the sense that their efforts are undervalued. As one part-time faculty member stated: “The pay is very, very low in relation to the number of hours that I put into the class. I estimate that I make between five and seven dollars per hour for this work.”

In interviews, most faculty reported few if any position openings in their departments. Just 20 percent of survey respondents indicated satisfaction with the availability of full-time positions. In interviews, part-time faculty at some colleges said they feel they are overlooked when full-time faculty openings are available. As one person explained:

I am a trained teacher and I love what I do; however, my biggest disappointment is the inability to advance. All positions are thrown open to all comers rather than allowing advancement to those of us who have been serving the school for years.

According to our interview data, there is strong perception among part-time faculty that adjuncts must become involved in the life of the college beyond teaching to be considered for a full-time position. Several interviewees reported being passed over for an interview on multiple occasions. A full-time faculty member who had once been part-time stated: “You couldn’t just be a great teacher [to] get a full-time job. You had to accumulate this other service and, you know, these other bullet points on your CV.” For faculty seeking full-time employment, this implicit requirement was a reported motivation for becoming engaged in college life. As noted above, this engagement was largely uncompensated.

Although part-time faculty teach 45 percent of course sections, they reported few opportunities to participate in departmental decision-making.

Adjuncts are not included in department discussions that may impact our work. For example, we all were moved into a new single office three or four years ago, but [we were] never consulted. The college is also now trying to standardize all introductory courses so that they can offer college credit to high school students, but we were never asked for our opinion about this.

While some part-time faculty we spoke with did not express interest in attending department meetings or becoming involved in college initiatives, others stated that the lack of opportunities to participate in matters related to their work contributed to a sense of being undervalued. One interviewee said that as an adjunct, “you are considered a second-class citizen.”

Addressing Part-Time Faculty Needs

We have identified common features of the part-time faculty experience—having a complicated and unpredictable schedule and work life, feeling disconnected from the department and the college as a whole, feeling underpaid and undervalued, enjoying relative autonomy, and possessing a deep passion for instructional work with students. Earlier we also described substantial variation in occupational background, motivation for faculty work, prior teaching experience, and familiarity with the college among part-time faculty. These

commonalities and differences are important considerations in providing useful supports for adjuncts. The six colleges participating in this project have been designing and implementing a range of strategies that are largely responsive to these findings in order to improve the working conditions of adjuncts. In this section, we discuss a variety of these approaches and draw connections between strategies to address part-time faculty needs and the potential for institutional improvement and increased student success.

Providing Clear and Accessible Information About Resources and Policies

A primary way to ease the complications of part-time faculty life is to provide clear and readily accessible information about departmental and college resources and policies. Some information about resources is important for students themselves. Our analysis suggests that part-time faculty members who are more knowledgeable can guide students to needed resources and thus use more of their limited time to focus on instruction and direct student support, rather than on tracking down information. This is particularly true for new faculty. College resources are likely to be familiar to part-time faculty with a long tenure at the institution, but our interviewees reported a need to understand evolving college policies, new initiatives, events, and activities.

All six colleges in this project are exploring online resources as a potentially efficient way to disseminate important information. Transitioning to a digital model allows for faculty to access the information they need when they need it. Colleges house these resources on the college website, intranet, or within a course shell in the college's learning management system. In all cases, the intention is to compile previously disparate information and resources as well as create new content, in the form of text and videos, that specifically addresses questions that both full-time and part-time faculty commonly face. Examples include important phone numbers and dates, forms, tips for using the learning management system, and instructional resources designed specifically for teaching in the community college. One college created an institution-wide, part-time faculty listserv to be updated with active adjuncts who are teaching each semester. In another case, adjuncts receive a weekly digest of campus-wide announcements to avoid overwhelming part-time faculty with too many emails.

Creating Opportunities for Collaboration and Connection

Not all part-time faculty want additional connection. In our survey sample, 68 percent reported that they are moderately or extremely satisfied with their professional relationships. Some experienced and confident instructors in our sample are attracted to part-time teaching because it demands limited engagement in the broader life of the institution. However, for some part-time faculty interviewees, isolation seems to have a negative impact on both their experience at the institution and their effectiveness in the classroom. When faculty who are teaching the same courses or are within the same discipline have the opportunity to share instructional resources and techniques, they create efficiencies (instead of "reinventing the wheel") and are able to troubleshoot challenges (Stevenson, Duran, Barrett, & Colarulli, 2005). Even a single semester-long experience of sharing has the potential to generate long-term informal relationships faculty can draw on when future questions arise (Elizaga & Haynes, 2013).

All six colleges are using mentoring and/or cohort-based learning opportunities to increase opportunities for collaboration and connection. Cohort-based learning opportunities include

the creation of communities of practice and other arrangements that bring small groups of faculty together regularly for a semester or longer. Colleges in this project have organized these as intradepartmental gatherings, focused on instructional issues within a discipline, and as interdepartmental convenings, focused on a selected common interest (such as strategies to enhance student engagement). Mentoring programs may address similar issues, but via a one-on-one relationship, often between seasoned instructors (full- or part-time) and new hires. In one example, the mentoring program is designed to be quite flexible; mentors send email updates and make themselves available, but part-time faculty determine if and when they want to arrange meetings with their mentor.

Inviting Part-Time Faculty Perspectives and Feedback

Although part-time faculty teach a substantial proportion of course sections, they largely do not contribute to departmental instructional design efforts, including program mapping, curricular selection, and assessment. Likewise, they are largely uninvolved with other departmental or institutional student success initiatives. Some part-time faculty we interviewed are eager to have a voice in shaping the educational experiences of students at their colleges. Given their experience (recall that half of part-time faculty in our sample have a degree in education or a teaching credential) and enthusiasm, departments might benefit from finding ways to solicit the perspectives and expertise of adjuncts interested in contributing to departmental and institutional life.

Colleges in this project are working to become more intentional about inviting part-time faculty to participate in departmental and college-wide initiatives. This includes committee work focused on course learning objectives, texts, assessments, and instructional reform. Clear communication about these opportunities and appropriate compensation can remove barriers to participation for part-time faculty. All the colleges have engaged adjuncts in leadership positions on several instructional and student success initiatives, including the infusion of High Impact Practices⁷ in introductory-level courses and the examination of instructional practices related to enhancing equity in STEM fields. Part-time faculty serving on these committees and leading in these efforts have been compensated for their time. Colleges also administered surveys to part-time faculty, which served as a cost-efficient way to solicit part-time faculty feedback.

Assessing Practices Related to Compensation and Advancement

In addition to providing opportunities to forge connections, offer feedback, and address part-time faculty needs, colleges must assess the overall picture of faculty work, including job responsibilities, compensation, and opportunities for advancement. This includes evaluating the extent to which part-time faculty are expected to or are relied upon to do uncompensated work. Inviting part-time engagement and collaboration without compensation can further exacerbate pay inequity between part-time and full-time faculty.

Colleges in this project paid part-time faculty for their participation in a variety of engagement and professional development activities. Some colleges participating in the project are working to offer pay enhancement, longer-term contracts, priority course selection, or guaranteed interviews for full-time positions to part-time faculty with demonstrated professional development and college service. Colleges may also consider additional transparency about

hiring decisions and explicit guidance and support for faculty who express interest in full-time positions. These practices can create a stronger pipeline of highly qualified candidates for available full-time positions and yield benefits for the department and the college as a whole.

Conclusion

Given that they teach significant proportions of course sections, part-time faculty are essential to the institutional success of community colleges. Many have deep knowledge of their students, their subject matter, and instructional practices. Yet they do their work with some distinct disadvantages: fewer professional relationships to leverage when challenges arise, unequal access to institutional resources, and limited time on campus to build institutional knowledge. As community colleges engage in a myriad of improvement efforts to increase student success, they must consider the extent to which part-time faculty are sufficiently supported to contribute.

Colleges participating in the *Engaging Adjunct Faculty in the Student Success Movement* project are working to address these challenges by assessing the needs of their faculty. This is a critical first step, as this study and others find notable variation in terms of part-time faculty characteristics, motivations, and needs. The approaches these colleges are enacting will be described in detail and evaluated in future research, but the preliminary analysis we discuss in this brief shows the ways in which online resources, cohort-based experiences, mentoring programs, and opportunities for leadership have the potential to make the lives of part-time faculty less complicated and more connected to the life of institution. Colleges in this project have also created compensated opportunities and other incentives for part-time faculty to contribute to student success initiatives so they are able to capitalize on part-time faculty members' expertise fairly. Armed with more information and a stronger collegial network, part-time faculty at the participating project colleges may be better positioned to help their students learn and succeed.

Endnotes

1. Leader colleges are those in ATD's network of colleges that have shown three years of sustained student success improvement. The six ATD leader colleges selected for this project were Community College of Baltimore County, Community College of Philadelphia, Delta College, Harper College, Patrick Henry Community College, and Renton Technical College.
2. We use the terms part-time and adjunct interchangeably to refer to faculty who teach less than a full load and are classified by their institution as part-time employees.
3. Each college identified two departments or divisions in which to focus their engagement work. The survey was administered only to faculty in those two areas.
4. A version of the survey instrument can be found here: <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/understanding-part-time-faculty-community-colleges.html>
5. Large-scale studies on faculty characteristics and experiences include these: American Federation of Teachers, Higher Education (2010), Center for Community College Student Engagement (2014), and Coalition on the Academic Workforce (2012).
6. The Center for Community College Student Engagement (2014) national survey found that part-time faculty were less likely to make referrals to academic and student supports.
7. High Impact Practices are educational practices or experiences with evidence of improving college student success (Kuh, 2008). An excerpt from Kuh (2008) can be found at <https://www.aacu.org/leap/hips>

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