
The Professional Adjunct: An Emerging Trend in Online Instruction

Laurie A. Bedford, Ph.D.

Capella University

laurie.bedford@faculty.capella.edu

Abstract

Expanding enrollment in online programs has concurrently created a demand for qualified faculty to assume the increasing workload. As full-time faculty have been unable to fill the gap due to workload or resistance, organizations are more frequently turning to adjuncts to meet the needs of their online learners. As a result, there has been increasing dialogue regarding the nature of the adjunct-university relationship as well as the quality, rigor, and consistency of courses being facilitated by part-time faculty. Complicating this dialogue are a small but growing number of individuals who do not hold full-time jobs but rely on multiple adjunct positions to fulfill their professional needs. This qualitative study investigates the motivations and demographics of this emerging phenomenon.

Introduction

According to the Sloan Consortium (2007), there were nearly 3.5 million online students in the United States in the fall of 2006, which reflected a ten percent increase in enrollment over the previous year. Expanding enrollment in online programs has concurrently created a demand for qualified faculty to assume the increasing workload. As tenured or full-time faculty have been unable to fulfill these roles due to workload or resistance, organizations are more frequently turning to adjuncts to meet the needs of their online learners. While the use of adjuncts is often seen as less desirable for both the organization and the learners, universities continue to draw upon them—particularly in their online programs—at unprecedented rates (Carnevale, 2004). As a result, there has been increasing dialogue regarding the nature of the adjunct-university relationship as well as the quality, rigor, and consistency of courses being facilitated by part-time faculty. Complicating this dialogue are a small but growing number of individuals who do not hold full-time jobs but rely on multiple adjunct positions to fulfill their professional needs. As institutions continue to rely on adjuncts, they will find it necessary to be able to differentiate among the commitments and motivations of these diverse individuals to determine the best organizational fit.

Adjunct Issues

Issues with regard to the growing reliance on adjuncts are abundant. Much of the dialogue has focused on the organizational structure of the institutions that rely on adjuncts as well as the ability of part-time employees to deliver high-quality instruction (Shakeshaft, 2002). The primary consideration within this argument is whether or not part-time faculty members are sufficiently prepared to facilitate online courses. This rhetoric is complicated by the notion that, since adjuncts typically hold unrelated, full-time jobs, they may not be able to allocate the time and resources (including professional development and training) needed to be effective in the online classroom (Shelton & Saltsman, 2006). In addition, opponents of the use of adjuncts argue that because of their full-time commitments, part-timers have less dedication to the organization to which they provide their instructional services (Shakeshaft; Shelton & Saltsman).

While opinions are abundant, little evidence exists to support the argument that the use of adjuncts results in lower-quality instruction and impacts subsequent learning (Carey, 2008). However, according to Jaschik, (2008a), recent studies suggest that community college students who have been exposed to part-time faculty for a significant portion of their learning are less likely to continue their education at four-year institutions. He also points out that these studies are reflective of the conditions of part-time employment (i.e. class preparation time, professional development exposure, etc.) rather than instructional quality. The studies do not measure learning outcomes, nor do they identify rationale for the lack of transfer. Thus, there is no distinguishable causation between the variables.

On the other side of the debate are the concerns expressed by adjuncts themselves. Adjuncts openly and sometimes contentiously argue that they are undervalued and underpaid. These criticisms are most often endowed to the institution for a lack of attention to concerns. The primary focus of this attention is on the pursuit of equity with full-time employees in terms of wages, benefits, working conditions, and job security (Schnitzer & Crosby, 2003; Lesko, 2008). The adjuncts most often argue that they do the same work as their full-time counterparts and that their compensation should be equal. According to Jaschik (2008b), some gains have been made in efforts to address the “marginalization” of adjunct faculty. However, the collective voice that continues to call for the advancement of the adjunct status most often goes unheard.

A Third Category of Faculty

The duality that informs the dialogue about the use of tenured professors versus adjunct instructors—particularly in online programs—ignores a third group of instructor. An emerging phenomenon is developing in which a new class of faculty is beginning to play a role in the nature of the organization-faculty relationship. These full-time part-timers, as described by Schnitzer & Crosby (2003), make up a portion of individuals who seek online, adjunct work and, according to Carnevale (2004), are finding that they can build a network of opportunities with an entrepreneurial spirit. They capitalize on the need for organizations to hire competent, part-time professors who have significant expertise in their discipline as well as the demonstrated skills necessary to successfully mentor online learners. They are also finding that they have negotiating power as organizations struggle to fill their teaching vacancies and full-time, tenured faculty resist. Furthermore, as more online programs emerge, adjuncts are not bound by scheduling or geography to fill their employment needs (Carnevale). They are finding that, as they build their competencies, they are situated to capitalize on a growing market for their skills that involves multiple opportunities for part-time positions with diverse organizations.

However, little empirical evidence exists to describe this emerging phenomenon. The full-time, professional adjunct needs to be explored as a career choice with the potential for diverse work, flexible scheduling, fair compensation, and professional growth for the individual. Furthermore, this trend also needs to be investigated as a possibly legitimate approach for organizations to meet their online instructional needs.

Method

I engaged 22 individuals in qualitative, written interviews to begin to understand the motivations for pursuing adjunct faculty responsibilities as a full-time profession. As a secondary area of inquiry, I also sought to describe the characteristics that depict individuals engaged in adjunct teaching as a career. The participants were selected from five universities—three online and two traditional campuses with online programs. They volunteered to participate in the study based on a prescribed set of characteristics to which they felt they possessed. These characteristics included (1) receiving more than sixty percent of their annual income from adjunct work; (2) the absence of full-time employment with a single organization; and (3) no current desire to obtain full-time employment with a single organization. Thirty-one individuals responded positively to the request. Following an initial interview, twenty-two were found to be appropriate for the study, based on the information they provided.

This qualitative study drew upon the structured written interview as the primary source of data as a means to increase effectiveness and quality of the data. According to Handy and Ross (2005), “written accounts have been shown to be a time-efficient means of gathering good-quality, descriptively rich data” (p. 40). In addition, they cite this approach as especially appropriate in cases in which participants are well-educated and able to articulate their thoughts in writing. I chose to utilize this descriptive, qualitative approach in an effort to provide a thick, rich response to the primary research question as well as uncover information with regard to issues that emerged from the literature review, such as demographics, motivation, scholarly behavior, and perceptions. The interview consisted of four primary questions with two to four sub-questions in each category. (See the Appendix for specific questions.)

Although the qualitative responses were written, they were treated as traditional interview data for purposes of analysis through a process of coding and categorizing. I employed an analytic plan that involved a systematic comparison approach to uncover “properties and dimensions in the data that might have [otherwise] been overlooked” (Straus & Corbin, 2008, p. 95). Intertwined with these processes, I performed a content-analysis technique described by Patton (1987) through which coherent and salient patterns throughout the data were identified and synthesized into themes. The results of this process are presented in the following sections.

Findings

Each of the twenty-two identified participants responded after a two-week response period and two follow-up requests. The interview questions served to provide the faculty with an opportunity to reflect on and express their opinions about their career decisions, perspectives on adjunct issues, and their roles as an academic.

Participant responses ranged from two or three sentences to one page per question. Analysis of the qualitative narrative revealed four primary themes. First, the participants described the Distinguishing Features of their employment situation. In addition, they articulated several issues, challenges, and opportunities, which I divided into two separate themes—Overcoming Barriers and Professional versus Personal Motivation. Finally, the participants discussed their Scholarly Engagement, which was found to be a primary concern and which seemed to distinguish the professional adjunct from the traditional part-timer.

Distinguishing Features

About one-third (n=7) of the professional adjuncts interviewed for this study assumed part-time teaching positions in a traditional, campus-based learning environment, but all engaged in online positions as their primary employment. As one participant stated, “This makes sense because of the logistical challenges associated with teaching on multiple campuses.” In addition, most of the participants stated that they find that online teaching is a better professional and personal fit to their teaching style which, according to Carnevale (2004), is a common dynamic within online faculty. The participants generally indicated that they enjoyed appointments from two to four universities. In addition to maintaining long-term relationships with these organizations, many also engage in short-term consulting contracts. Over time, they indicated that they have negotiated opportunities that form the framework in which they are comfortably situated with a full-time work load and, for the most part, an appropriate compensation package.

With regard to compensation and benefits, most of the participants were not seeking equity with tenured or other full-time faculty. Rather, they saw themselves as entrepreneurs in a position to selectively associate themselves with those organizations that represented the best fit professionally and personally. These participants made conscious efforts to shift the focus from the challenges associated with part-time instructional work to the benefits of self-employment. As one participant stated:

“I am self-employed. That means I don’t get benefits. I understand that and that’s okay. Self-employed people can successfully plan for retirement, budget for vacations, and organize health insurance coverage through sources such as professional affiliations. I have been able to do that, too.”

Rather than find fault about their situation, these participants realized the opportunity to redefine adjunct teaching and to promote the evolution of the status of its members in the spirit of entrepreneurship. They also felt that, as entrepreneurs, they held the responsibility for seeking alternative associations when treated unfairly. Another participant summarized this sentiment by saying, “Perhaps as adjuncts, we can redefine ourselves as entrepreneurs who can take charge of our own needs rather than plead with organizations for added benefits and more appropriate compensation. . . . This might mean seeking employment elsewhere.”

Overcoming Barriers

Participants stated that one of the major hurdles facing the full-time, professional adjunct is the juxtaposition of her situation with traditional adjuncts, who are often viewed as less prepared. Some related that they had faced administrators and tenured faculty who view their role as an insurmountable handicap that threatened the integrity of the overall program. Many participants believed that stereotyping those who accept part-time appointments perpetuates the organizations’ failure to develop policies that respect the commitment, skills, and intellectual capacity of adjuncts. In addition, many of the participants felt that it ignores the unique skills and potential contributions of this group of professionals. One participant summarized the distress and insecurity with this type of rhetoric by saying: “Some people believe that my part-time status somehow makes me less qualified. This I don’t understand. I have the same degree and much more experience in the online classroom than many of the full-timers.”

As Shakeshaft (2002) notes, an adjunct teacher who has to choose between his full-time work commitments and preparing for class will likely focus on the activity that is related to his primary employment. The issue of

allocation of time and accountability were some of the most profound arguments and likely sources of overall criticism, according to the participants. As one participant stated, “This notion questions the legitimacy and quality of programs that draw upon adjunct faculty to any extent, regardless of reality.”

However, since many campus-based faculty find themselves unprepared to teach online (Shelton & Saltsman, 2006), professional adjuncts in this study believed that their skills in this area could fit a specific niche. As one stated:

“Since most of the faculty I know are more comfortable in traditional classrooms, I have found a niche for myself in the online world. I feel like I have the skills and the temperament better suited for online learning so when schools are in need of online faculty, I am a good fit.”

In addition, as the dialogue with regard to adjuncts revolves around the duality between practitioners and academics (Shakeshaft, 2002), the participants in this study believed that they were able to bridge the gap between the two worlds. Given the growing demand for their services, some of the participants felt an emerging, unique supply-and-demand condition that would shift the power structure in favor of adjuncts. One participant stated:

“As organizations grow more dependent upon our services, I see the day when we will be seen as professionals and be in a better position to negotiate for ourselves. However, this will require purposeful effort on our part. We will need to find ways to purposefully capitalize on the situation. I think that one of these ways might be to demarcate our role as unique.”

Professional versus Personal Motivations

Most participants cited personal reasons such as flexibility and working from home as a factor in their decision to teach online. In a few instances (n=3), the participants cited these personal motivations as primary. In these instances, the personal benefits of this career path were articulated from an egocentric perspective that omitted discussion about academics. Examples of statements made by these individuals included “It’s great to be able to just hang around in my pajamas all day” and “This is a great way to make money with little effort.”

Other participants believed that this kind of dialogue erroneously creates a sense that online teaching is a selfish career choice that has little to do with scholarly behavior. They felt that these selfish motivations serve to hurt the professional standing of those online adjunct faculty members who are sincerely interested in addressing the academic needs of diverse learners, working within an educational venue with which they are comfortable and confident, and engaging in scholarly discourse and activity with colleagues from broad-based backgrounds. As one stated: “I wish they would stop with the ‘teach in your pajamas’ crap. Who cares what you’re wearing. It’s about serving students and my discipline. This kind of garbage gets in the way of the advancement of all online teachers.” Another commented: “As with any profession, there are likely full-time adjuncts whose motivation is not sincerely grounded within academics, but grown out of a more egocentric desire for minimal work requirements and financial gain. But that doesn’t describe all of us.”

A final issue brought up by eight of the twenty-two participants cited concerns with those who amass full course loads at multiple universities as a way to multiply their earning potential without regard for the time it takes to fully engage with learners. Two of the participants indicated that they engaged in this practice, with one commenting: “The more classes I can teach, the more money I can make. There’s really no limit.” The other stated: “The courses just run themselves. I just check in once in a while to answer a few questions.” Six participants took a contrary stance, citing these “assembly-line teachers” as discrediting their ambitions and commitment to their work. One stated, “This kind of thinking does bring a legitimate concern of quality to the online discourse.”

Scholarly Engagement

The majority of the participants (n=16) believed that the full-time, professional adjunct differentiated herself from a part-time teacher through scholarly engagement. They felt that a legitimate, full-time professional adjunct will behave in a scholarly, professional manner in all aspects of her career and should be judged on her individual merits. Since the full-time adjunct’s “primary professional responsibility will be on quality instruction,” as one participant pointed out, a credible instructor will “demonstrate a dedication to interacting with her learners on a

frequent basis and facilitate multiple opportunities for rich conversation.”

They also compared themselves to other academic professionals outside the traditional tenure system who have engaged in a conscious career decision that allows them to pursue scholarly activity and engage in professional growth in a non-traditional format. Orleans (2002) refers to these independent scholars as academically prepared individuals who may follow this career path for a number of reasons—both professional and personal. With an interest in issues such as equity, academic freedom, flexibility, professional growth, and collegiality, many of the participants did describe themselves in this context and articulated their belief in their potential to bring a new dynamic to the full-time versus part-time discourse. As one participant stated:

“I engage in all of the scholarly activities that I would if I was vying for a tenure role—research, publishing, service, etc. The only difference is that I engage in the activities that I enjoy and interest me with no pressure from an organization to find something that will benefit them.”

As another participant stated, “an independent adjunct is not obligated to attend campus activities, meetings, social events, etc. as part of professional obligations.” This, she continued, provided her with the “flexibility to build into ... [her] schedule opportunities to regularly interact with colleagues across diverse organizations and networks that will best meet ... [her] professional needs.” Finally, as scholars, many of the participants indicated that they use this flexibility in scheduling to become involved in research, service learning activities, professional development, and other activities. It was felt that this independent scholarly activity would lead to broad-based skill and, ultimately, significant academic growth and development over time.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As organizations continue to draw upon the expertise of adjuncts to fill their growing instructional needs, understanding their motivations and goals will be a persistent issue. According to Gappa (2008), the majority of contemporary faculty are outside the tenure system—a situation which seems to fit with a contemporary lifestyle. Many professional adjuncts in this study fit this description as they seek careers that provide opportunities for professional and academic stimulation while maintaining the flexibility to meet their personal needs and pursue other interests. However, what this describes “does not match the requirements of the traditional tenure system, with its emphasis upon continuous full-time employment” (Gappa, p. 50). Recognizing these individuals for their contributions to academia and respecting their career goals will likely be a growing concern—particularly as the demand for adjuncts continues to increase.

Employing an adjunct who retains teaching appointments in diverse settings has the potential for numerous advantages for the organization and the learner. The adjunct for whom teaching is a primary professional responsibility is in a position to focus primarily on her instruction (Carnevale, 2004). Thus, she can bring the best ideas from her overall practice into each environment in which she engages. In doing so, she will have the opportunity to interact with a wide range of instructional materials, techniques, and other online resources to effectively support learners. Furthermore, since the professional adjunct does not have an academic bias or political regulations associated with any single organizational philosophy, she can also contribute to the scholarly discourse with the academic freedom necessary to build a significant knowledge base in the discipline in which she teaches.

However, the negative connotations associated with full-time adjuncts often overshadow the benefits that they can bring to an organization. Many continue to generalize all adjuncts as marginally prepared for teaching scholarship, at best (Shakeshaft, 2002). As such, those individuals who consciously choose this career path for its professional attractiveness often have a difficult time breaking down barriers and being respected for their scholarly interests and expertise (Jaschik, 2008b). In addition, given the duality of the motivation with which full-time adjuncts engage in their work, the question that the hiring organization will need to grapple with is how to best identify motivational factors and commitment. One way to accomplish this is to acknowledge the full-time professional adjunct as a legitimate career path. In this way, efforts can be made to understand the characteristics associated with those professional adjuncts that can bring quality, rigor, and unique expertise to the instructional staff.

As with adjuncts that hold full-time positions in practice, the professional adjuncts need to have orientation, ongoing training, and opportunities for dialogue with colleagues (Sixl-Daniell, Williams, & Wong, 2006). However, the management of these individuals should be different and reflect their unique professional position. Rather than consider all adjuncts a homogenous group, they need to be seen as entrepreneurial consultants in command of their own work environment and professional growth. Through this perspective, they can be seen as

collaborative partners in the educational process and be treated as unique individuals with diverse needs and assets.

As the growth in online programs and student enrollment continues to create challenges for organizations, the discourse regarding the resistance of tenured faculty to teach in the online format and the use of adjuncts to fill the void will likely continue (Carnevale, 2004). Despite the rhetoric dismissing their qualifications, full-time professional adjuncts are situated to bring quality education and diversity in perspective to the organization. Like other independent scholars who pursue their interests without organizational affiliation (Orlans, 2002), these academic-minded individuals deserve to have their chosen career path legitimized and acknowledged. With opportunities to demonstrate their potential contributions, organizations have an obligation to determine how to best negotiate their relationship with this group of professionals and to draw upon the expertise that they bring to learning. In this way, organizations can continue to meet the increasing need for instructors with the necessary skills to facilitate growing online programs while ensuring rigorous, quality instruction.

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Appendix

Professional Adjunct Faculty Qualitative Questionnaire

1. Please describe your academic work in which you currently engage for compensation.
 - a. Include the number and types of higher education organizations (public, private, virtual, proprietary, etc.).
 - b. Also include specifics about the type of adjunct faculty work you do, including the number of courses you teach for each and the total amount of a typical work week (based on 40 hours) you spend teaching.
 2. Please discuss your motivation for pursuing adjunct teaching as your primary employment.
 - a. On what basis was your decision regarding adjunct teaching made?
 - b. Reflect on how your expectations evolved from when you first decided to pursue adjunct teaching as a profession.
 - c. Describe your successes and challenges in securing adjunct faculty work. Include a statement regarding how these events affected your motivation.
 3. Please identify other scholarly work in which you engage in addition to your adjunct teaching.
 - a. Include work that you are compensated for and work for which you are not.
 - b. Describe your motivations for engaging in this work.
 - c. Describe the benefits and challenges of engaging in this scholarly work.
 4. State how you describe your current profession when asked. Include in this response:
 - a. How other academics respond when they learn of your employment situation.
 - b. How long you believe that you will engage in adjunct work as your primary employment.
 - c. A description of how your current employment situation is affected by your personal and professional needs.
 - d. What changes you believe are necessary in order for you to maintain your employment situation according to your plans.
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