All Adjuncts are Not Created Equal: An Exploratory Study of Teaching and Professional Needs of Online Adjuncts

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Abstract

Online education programs continue to rely on a significant contingent of adjunct faculty to meet the instructional needs of the students. Discourse relating to this situation primarily focuses on the extent to which adjuncts are able to ensure the rigor and quality of instruction as well as the ability of the organization to attract, retain, and support qualified professionals. In response, organizations have created very structured, standardized professional development opportunities, meticulous monitoring of adjunct activities and inflexible policies to guide interactions with learners. This one-size-fits-all strategy limits the organization's ability to facilitate an adjunct-organizational relationship that supports the adjunct in ways that meet their individual needs. The purpose of this exploratory, quantitative questionnaire study was to examine the difference between the adjuncts' primary rationale for teaching, and their self-identified professional category. In addition, the study sought to explore the difference between the adjunct's primary professional needs and their self-identified professional category. The results of the study demonstrated that there was a significant difference between the self-identified professional employment groups in the areas of student focused instruction, personal needs, an interest in online pedagogy, career advancement, and flexible work schedule categories. There was *not* a significant difference in the self-identified professional employment groups and the category of skill development.

Introduction

As early as 2002, online education experienced an explosion in students seeking educational opportunities as well as institutions and programs offering them. While students engaged in online learning continues to increase, enrollment has been stabilizing over the past couple of years (Allen & Seaman, 2011). However, some of the issues created by the rapid expansion remain unresolved. One salient concern has been the need to attract and retain qualified faculty to support the learners (Allen & Seaman, 2008).   To fill the void, organizations began to rely on adjuncts to meet their instructional needs (Milliken & Jurgens, 2008). As a result, as of 2009, adjunct and part-time instructors made up nearly 40% of all instructional staff throughout higher education (Haynie, 2012).

There continues to be an increasing concern with regard to the nature of the relationship between the adjunct and the organization. The primary consideration is the extent to which adjuncts are able to ensure the rigor and quality of instruction as well as the ability of the organization to attract, retain, and support qualified professionals (Bedford, 2009; Street, Maisto, Mervies, & Rodes, 2012; Langen, 2011). Although there is growing support for adjuncts in their roles (Thornton, 2011) discourse continues to situate the adjunct working condition as so poor, little can be done to effect change. Since adjuncts are under-represented in collective bargaining groups such as the American Association of University Professors, American Federation of Teachers, and National Education Association (Schmidt, 2011), there is a feeling that improvement is not inevitable and that organizations should look only to full time faculty to ensure the quality education that students deserve (June, 2012).

Background

While pay is a major issue for part-time faculty (Langen, 2011; Schmidt, 2011), the problem appears to be more complex. A key issue identified is that those engaged in adjunct teaching lack the support structures available to full time employees (Curtis & Jacobe, 2006). This problem is exacerbated by just-in-time hiring practices that do not allow opportunities to participate in faculty development, limit access to the pedagogical resources needed to succeed (Street, Maisto, Mervies, & Rhodes, 2012) and exclusion from institutional, departmental, etc. meetings (Haynie, 2012; June, 2012). Consequently, critics often characterized adjuncts as unprepared for the rigors of their instructional duties, uncommitted to the organization, more interested in personal gain than professional contribution and unemployable elsewhere (Shelton & Saltsman, 2006; Bedford, 2009). While adjuncts might meet minimum educational or experiential requirements, their currency in the discipline, pedagogical expertise, and willingness to put forth effort comes into question (Bedford, 2011).

In some instances, these articulated concerns have resulted in calls for ending the use of adjuncts or risk compromising the quality of education (June, 2012). This generalization—that all adjuncts lack the skills to perform and that all institutions are deficient in their efforts to recruit, select, and support adjuncts—is disconcerting. It positions adjuncts as a homogeneous group with little regard for individual differences in expertise, experience, professional needs or rationale for engaging in part-time teaching. In addition, it situates organizations that use adjunct faculty as uncommitted to high quality instruction.

Literature Review

Adjuncts and online organizations supporting them have begun to respond to these criticisms by citing strengths, unique perspectives, and skill that adjuncts bring to the organization. In recent years, adjuncts have spoken out regarding their diversity and unwillingness to be characterized in a negative paradigm. The discourse has created a call for stakeholders to acknowledge their value as colleagues. They have drawn on their rationale for engaging in online teaching and their desire to meet their professional needs as indications that they are committed to their students and to the organizations that hire them (Street, Maisto, Merves, & Rhodes, 2012; Allen & Seaman, 2008; Schmidt, 2011; June, 2012; Haynie, 2012).

Online adjuncts describe their rationale for teaching from a variety of perspectives including a focus on the student, an interest in online pedagogy, and to meet personal needs (Allen & Seaman, 2008). They articulate the advantages of their efforts specifically as being able to interact with a diverse group of students (Bedford, 2011; Allen & Seaman, 2008) as well as to earn additional income, create opportunities for professional development and the love of teaching (Eaton, 2012). While, Kanuka, Judgey, Heller, and West (2008) describe the remote professional as being in a potentially tenuous situation because of their lack of regular, face-to-face contact with colleagues, adjuncts see this as a benefit. According to Bedford (2009), adjuncts express their desire for a balance between personal and professional facets of their lives, which, in turn, allows them to fully focus on the needs of the students and ensuring high quality pedagogy.

Online adjuncts also argue that they are a diverse group in which membership ranges from those employed full time outside of academia to an individual employed as an adjunct in several institutions (Schnitzer & Crosby, 2003; Bedford, 2009). When referring to the adjunct situation however, these unique groups of instructors are rarely differentiated from those teaching in face-to-face settings or in a combination of environments. While the adjunct relationship with the students and the organization in a traditional setting is very different from those in an exclusively online environment, the results of research and opinion are typically generalized to all adjuncts. For example, while Charlier, & Williams (2011) primarily speak about community college settings, their conclusions about adjuncts feeling overworked, underpaid and underappreciated are generalized to all. Similarly, Haynie (2012) generalizes adjunct concerns by overarchingly saying "While university officials say the practice brings many benefits to the campus, others find the trend worrisome" (p. 9).

As adjunct faculty are used more consistently for regular instruction in online courses, they recognize the critical role they play in student success (Langen, 2011). They have articulated the important role that opportunities for career advancement, a flexible work schedule that allows for breaks, and inclusion in organizational development programs bring to their teaching repertoire. They have asked organizations

to recognize the value that they bring to the organization (Thorton, 2011) and have acknowledged the organizational responses that have begun to provide differing levels of support (Street, Maisto, Merves, & Rhodes, 2012).

The organizational response to adjunct concerns has primarily been mentoring and formal training (Allen & Seaman, 2011). While meant to provide support and ensure high quality instruction in the online setting, the result is often very structured, standardized professional development opportunities, meticulous monitoring of adjunct activities and inflexible policies to guide interactions with learners (Bedford, 2011). For example, Hixton, Barczyk, Buckenmeyer, and Feldman (2011) provide framework for a faculty mentoring program that utilizes a set of standardized strategies regardless of whether the faculty were considered early adopters or laggards. The result is a one-size-fits all strategy that characterizes all adjuncts as having like experiences, skills, and rationale for their engagement with the organization and with their learners. Unfortunately, this model situates the adjuncts as an unprepared and unqualified homogeneous group that requires a substantial level of supervision. It ignores the diversity that adjuncts bring to the learning environment and fails to capitalize on the strengths that individuals can bring.

Bedford (2011) suggests that rather than focus on the challenges created by the reliance on part-time faculty, organizations offering online coursework consider the unique contributions that adjuncts might offer. This paradigm is based on the premise that adjuncts are a heterogeneous group with diverse rationale for engaging in a part-time teaching relationship with the organization. Associated with their individual rationale for part-time teaching emerges consideration with regard to examining the professional needs and best practices for supporting instructional efforts of adjuncts. This is an important aspect of the organization-employee relationship in that it leads to job satisfaction and can result in increased performance (Simonds, 2010). In the case of the online adjunct, increased levels of performance could directly translate into increased instructional effectiveness.

Problem Statement

The growing body of evidence describing online adjuncts suggests that there is a trend towards the recognition that they emerge from diverse situations and is beginning to suggest practices to support them (Thornton, 2011; de la Vergne, 2012; Bedford, 2009, Bedford, 2011). While online, adjunct faculty report a significant diversity in how they are treated and what resources are available to them (Street, Maisto, Merves, & Rhodes, 2012) best practice in the recruitment and hiring of online adjuncts continues to rely on uniform, basic credentials according to Chua and Lam (2007) and include:

- Minimum educational attainment (usually a Ph.D.)
- Extensive teaching experience at the academic level and discipline being sought
- Evidence of significant scholarly activity
- Recorded success in practice

These standardized recruiting tools do nothing to help an organization better understand why adjuncts seek online professional opportunities or what support they might expect. This situation is complicated by gaps in the literature that present obstacles to the in-depth understanding of how organizations might appropriately respond. First, the evidence that currently exists with regard to rationale for engagement in online, part-time teaching is primarily anecdotal. For example, Eaton (2012) suggests that adjuncts teach for a variety of reasons but relies on a first-person account. Furthermore, current research intended to identify the needs of adjunct faculty either fail to differentiate online from face-to-face teaching issues (for example, Charlier & Williams, 2012; Haynie, 2012: Street, Maisto, Mervies, & Rhodes, 2012) or focus on a single category of adjunct (for example, Bedford, 2009; Bedford, 2012). As a result, organizations lack a framework from which to acknowledge the unique circumstances and identify the needs of diverse groups of adjuncts. This limits the organization's ability to facilitate an adjunct-organizational relationship that supports the adjunct in their efforts to guide learners towards high expectations.

Method

The purpose of this exploratory, quantitative questionnaire study was to determine how online adjuncts professionally categorize themselves. In addition, the study served to examine the difference between the online adjuncts' primary rationale for teaching, and their self-identified professional category. Finally, the study sought to explore the difference between the online adjunct's primary professional needs and their self-identified professional category. The research questions were as follows:

- How do online adjuncts self-identified professionally categorize themselves?
- Is there a difference in how online adjuncts who have self-identified a professional employment category perceive their motivation towards students?
- Is there a difference in how online adjuncts who have self-identified a professional employment category perceive their motivation towards their personal needs?
- Is there a difference in how online adjuncts who have self-identified a professional employment category perceive their motivation towards pedagogy?
- Is there a difference in how online adjuncts who have self-identified a professional employment category perceive their motivation towards career advancement?
- Is there a difference in how adjuncts who have self-identified a professional employment category perceive their motivation towards their work schedule?
- Is there a difference in how online adjuncts who have self-identified a professional employment category perceive their motivation towards professional skill development?

Participants were drawn from the population of online, adjunct faculty. One hundred seventy six individuals participated in the study and were volunteers from several electronic consortiums targeting online, adjunct faculty. Participants were invited through a series of invitations via e-mail, listserve, and electronic discussion boards.

An exploratory, quantitative questionnaire was used to collect data to answer the research questions. Upon IRB approval, the survey was disseminated using an online, electronic survey development tool available in *Google Docs*. This provided for anonymous participation in the study and electronic data capture.

The questionnaire consisted of three sections based on the literature reviewed (See Appendix A). Section one asked participants to identify a professional category. The selections were based on those described by Schnitzer and Crosby (2003), and modified to include other groups identified by Bedford (2009) that best described adjunct situations. The resulting categories were defined as follows:

- Not professionally employed in the career in which the participant was degreed. In this category participants were identified for which online teaching provided the opportunity to use their degree (Not Employed in the Field)
- A full-time instructor who also works part-time as an online adjunct (Full-Time Instructor).
- A Full-Time Part-Timer who is employed as an adjunct at several institutions (Full-Time Part-Timer).
- A full-time administrator who also works part-time as an online adjunct (Full-Time Administrator).
- A graduate from an advanced degree program and seeking her first teaching position (Recent Graduate).
- Looking for a full time faculty position at a higher education institution, using the adjunct position as a stepping-stone (Seeking Employment).
- A retiree seeking part time work (Retiree).

The second section asked participants to identify their primary rationale for seeking online teaching opportunities based on Allen and Seaman's (2008) survey of chief academic officers and a sample online faculty. The identified rationale categories were:

- Meeting the needs of students
- Earn additional income
- To interact with students from diverse situations
- For personal and professional growth
- It is the wave of the future
- Because of the pedagogical advantages

- The desire for a flexible schedule
- As a way to secure full-time opportunities
- To apply an advanced degree professionally
- Maintain a relationship with a university for scholarly purposes

In the final section of the questionnaire, participants identified their professional needs from a list based on Bedford's (2009) framework for supporting the online adjuncts. The listed needs were:

- Networking opportunities
- Professional development in the area of instruction
- Professional development in discipline
- Professional development in other areas
- Recognition of the contributions brought to the organization
- Recognition of instructional expertise
- Recognition of discipline specific expertise
- Flexibility in my work schedule
- Breaks in work schedule
- Support for scholarly engagement

 For purposes of analysis, the second and final questionnaire items were then further refined into broader categories supported by themes within the literature including those articulated Eaton (2012) and Bedford (2009; 2011). This process served two purposes 1) to look for patterns in the data between the self-identified groups and 2) to see where the self-identified groups differed. Three themes were identified as capturing the essence of the questions in each of the original categories dealing with rationale for teaching part-time, online and the professional needs sections of the survey.   With regard to teaching rationale, these themes were a focus on the student, personal needs, and online pedagogy (see Table 1). *"Focus on the Student"* included those questionnaire items that dealt with an interest in serving students.   *"Personal Needs"* encompassed those questionnaire items that aligned with personal rather than academic or professional issues.   Finally, *"Online Pedagogy"* included those questionnaire items in which the emphasis was a desire to learn more or interact with the unique instructional techniques of online education.

Table 1. Teaching Rationale Questionnaire Items by Category

Category Name	Second Section Questionnaire Items
Focus on the Student	• Meeting the needs of students • To interact with students from diverse situations
Personal Needs	• Earn additional income • For personal and professional growth • The desire for a flexible schedule • As a way to secure full-time opportunities • To apply an advanced degree professionally • Maintain a relationship with a university for scholarly purposes
Online Pedagogy	• It is the wave of the future • Because of the pedagogical advantages

In the Professional Needs section of the survey (the third and final section), three themes also emerged as appropriate categories for analysis (see Table 2). First, items aligned with career and professional advancement were grouped in *"Career Advancement."* Two questionnaire items were aligned with the second identified theme, *"Flexible Work Schedule,"* to demonstrate the articulated needs of the participants in this area. Finally, "Skills Development" was identified as a third theme of questionnaire items that had a similar focus on professional growth.

Table 2. Professional Needs Questionnaire Items by Category

Category Name	Third Section Questionnaire Items
Career Advancement	• Networking opportunities • Recognition of the contributions brought to the organization • Recognition of instructional expertise • Recognition of discipline specific expertise
Flexible Work Schedule	• Flexibility in my work schedule • Breaks in work schedule
Skills Development	• Professional development in the area of instruction • Professional development in discipline • Professional development in other areas • Support for scholarly engagement

The data were analyzed using a chi-square goodness of fit test to identify differences between the groups. An alpha value of $p = 0.05$ was used to examine the difference between the self-identified professional employment groups. The selected analysis technique was appropriate because of the exploratory nature of the study, which was based on an informal theory and assumptions that needed to be made explicit (Harris, 1998).

Findings

The first section of the survey asked participates to self-identify their professional category with regard to their online teaching responsibilities. The one hundred seventy six participants who responded were almost equally divided among the groups with the percentage in each category totaling between eleven and 16%. The exception to this was in the Full-Time Part-Timer category, which represented nearly one quarter of the sample at 22% (see Table 3).

Table 3. Self-Identified Professional Category

| Professional Category	Participants Self-Identified	Percentage of Total Sample
Not Employed in Field	22	13%
Full-Time Instructor	28	16%
Full-Time Administrator	19	11%
Full-Time Part-Timer	38	22%
Recent Graduate	22	13%
Seeking Employment	29	16%
Retiree	18	10%
Total	N=176	100%

The second section of the survey asked participants to identify the primary rationale for their desire to teach online. The percentage of participants who self-identified themselves into professional employment groups did differ in how student focused they were $\chi2$ (6, $N=176$) =35.32, $p = .0000003$. The percentage of participants who self-identified themselves into professional employment groups did differ in personal needs $\chi2$ (6, $N=176$) =157.9, $p = 0.0$. The percentage of participants who self-identified themselves into professional employment groups did differ in personal needs $\chi2$ (6, $N=176$) =20.14, $p = 0.002$. Descriptive data reveals the number of responses by category between the self-identified professional employment groups as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Primary Rationale for Teaching by Self-Identified Professional Category
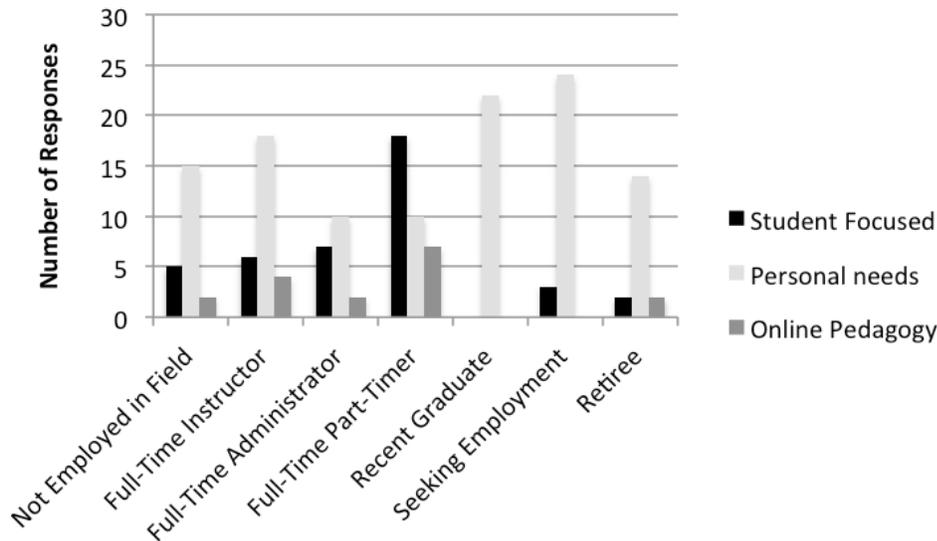
In the final section of the survey, participants were asked to identify their primary professional need and, as previously described; the questionnaire items were collapsed into themes for analysis. The percentage of participants who self-identified themselves into professional employment groups did differ in career advancement $\chi2$ (6, N=176) =149.39, p = 0.0. The percentage of participants who self-identified themselves into professional employment groups did differ in work schedule preferences $\chi2$ (6, N=176) =16.68, p = 0.01. The percentage of participants who self-identified themselves into professional employment groups did differ *not* in skill development needs $\chi2$ (6, N=176) =8.20, p = 0.224. Descriptive data reveals the number of responses by category between the self-identified professional employment groups as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Primary Professional Need by Self-Identified Professional Category
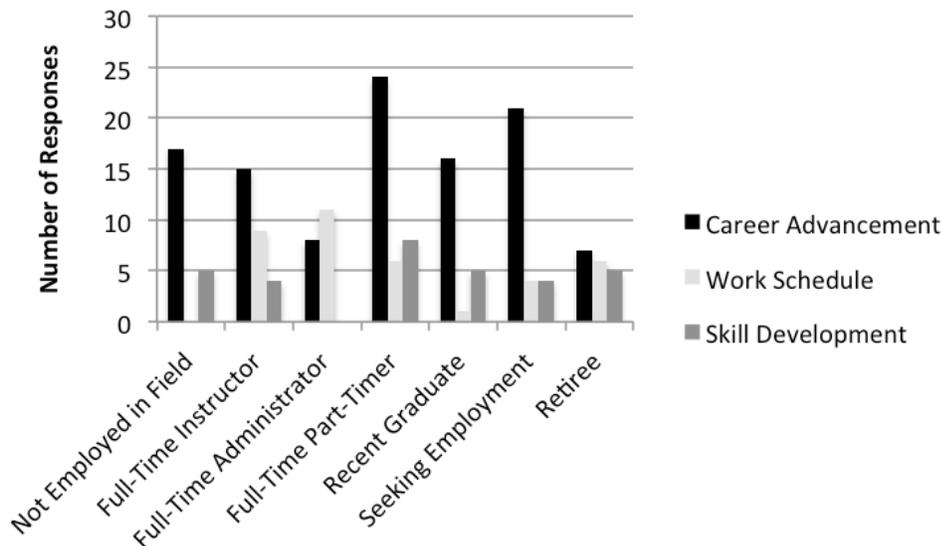
 The results of the study demonstrated that there was a significant difference between the self-identified professional employment groups in the student focused, personal needs, online pedagogy, career advancement, and work schedule categories. There was *not* a significant difference in the self-identified professional employment groups and the category of skill development.

Discussion and Conclusions

Overall, the findings demonstrated a difference between the online adjuncts in the self-identified groups

with regard to both their primary rationale for teaching online as well as their primary professional need. The exception to this was in the category of skill development. Because of the exploratory nature of this study, differences between specific groups of adjuncts are not able to be measured. However, differences among groups provide an initial inquiry into how adjuncts might be considered a heterogeneous group and supported by the organizations that employ them.

Given that more than one-third of all faculty in higher education are classified as adjunct or part-time (Haynie, 2012), the reliance on these faculty to meet the growing instructional needs of online educational programs is unlikely to change. It is also unlikely, that the concerns regarding the adjuncts' ability to meet the needs of the students they serve, their unpreparedness to teach and their lack of regard for the best needs of the organization (Bedford, 2009; Street, Maisto, Mervies, & Rodes, 2012; Langen, 2011) will diminish without professional development and intervention. Organizations with a desire to support their online, adjunct faculty should be leaders in this transformation. Rather than defend their use of adjuncts, organizations are in a unique position to demonstrate the strength that this group of faculty bring to the organization (Bedford, 2011).

Recently, online adjuncts have been articulating their diversity and arguing for the value they bring to organizations based on that diversity (Street, Maisto, Merves, & Rhodes, 2012; Allen & Seaman, 2008; Schmidt, 2011; June, 2012; Haynie, 2012). While the findings of this study demonstrated some trends in rationale for teaching online and a predisposition to certain professional needs, it confirms that adjuncts are a dynamic, heterogeneous group (Schnitzer & Crosby, 2003; Bedford, 2009). Organizations need to consider how to best differentiate support structures to provide for their adjunct faculty who teach in online programs.

Although exploratory in nature, the findings from this study can be used to help organizations understand the importance of identifying and developing support structures focused on the specific needs of their adjunct consortium based on their identified professional category. For example, the findings from this study indicate that online adjuncts from the self-identified category of recent graduate have a high interest in meeting their personal needs through online teaching (100% of respondents). Similarly, this group also rated their desire for opportunities for career advancement as high (77% of respondents). Organizations that observe a high number of recent graduates among their adjunct ranks could well serve this group by creating purposeful opportunities. They might choose to support these faculty by offering departmental meetings on a flexible schedule, video or audio taping meetings for archival reviews, or creating subgroups that meet at various times. The intent of such flexibility would be to accommodate the personal needs articulated by this group which included issues such as a desire for a flexible schedule. It could simultaneously create opportunities for professional networking that may lead to career advancement. Better understanding of the characteristics of the online, adjunct faculty within an organization and these types of responses can lead to a more comprehensive program of support, professional development, and career advancement opportunities and are likely to translate into increased performance (Simonds, 2010).

The findings from this study can be used to build upon the support structures that many organizations already have in place (Street, Maisto, Merves, & Rhodes, 2012). They can be used a tool for organizations to structure conversations with adjunct faculty on how they will best meet the needs of the student, their interest and expertise in online pedagogy, and their personal needs with regard to their adjunct status. In return, the organization can share their interest in supporting their faculty in the areas of career advancement, providing a desirable work schedule and opportunities for skill development. These actions have the potential to shift the discourse from the challenges that a reliance on adjunct faculty bring to the organization to the value added from their contributions.

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Appendix A

Adjunct Rationale/Needs Survey

1. Please select the category of adjunct instructor best describes you:

    ☐ Not professionally employed in the career in which I am degreed. Online teaching provides me the opportunity to use my degree.
    ☐ A full-time instructor who also works part-time as an online adjunct.
    ☐ A Full-Time Part-Timer who is employed as an adjunct at several institutions.
    ☐ A full-time administrator who also works part-time as an online adjunct.
    ☐ A graduate from an advanced degree program and seeking my first teaching position.
    ☐ Looking for a full time faculty position at a higher education institution, using the adjunct position as a stepping-stone.
    ☐ A retiree seeking part time work.

2. My primary rationale for teaching online is:

    ☐ Meeting the needs of students
    ☐ Earn additional income
    ☐ To interact with students from diverse situations
    ☐ For personal and professional growth
    ☐ It is the wave of the future
    ☐ Because of the pedagogical advantages
    ☐ I desire a flexible schedule
    ☐ As a way to secure full-time opportunities
    ☐ Apply my advanced degree professionally
    ☐ Maintain a relationship with a university for scholarly purposes

3. My primary professional need related to my adjunct work is:

    ☐ Developing a professional identity
    ☐ Networking opportunities
    ☐ Professional development in the area of instruction
    ☐ Professional development in my discipline
    ☐ Professional development in other areas
    ☐ Recognition of the contributions I bring to the organization
    ☐ Recognition of my expertise in instruction
    ☐ Recognition of my expertise in my discipline
    ☐ Flexibility in my work schedule

- ☐ Breaks in my work schedule
- ☐ Support for scholarly engagement

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