
Professional Online Adjuncts and the Three Pillars of Entrepreneurialism, Arbitrage, and Scholarship

Wayne A. Hollman, Ph.D.
Ashford University
wayne.hollman@ashford.edu

Abstract

Significant growth in online programs has created demand for online courses and therefore opportunities for employment for online educators. The vast majority of these employment opportunities have been filled by online adjuncts. A special category of online adjunct has surfaced that leverages the autonomy of working online with freedom from geographic limitations that are emblematic of traditional campus teaching experiences. This category of online adjunct called a Professional Online Adjunct may work for several institutions at once and essentially works full-time as a part-time employee. This qualitative study investigates the characteristics and motivations of individuals who fall within this category of online instructor.

Introduction

The Sloan Consortium (2011) has attempted to track and measure the rise of online education since 2002 by sampling over 4500 educational institutions using a variety of survey question techniques. Of the notable statistics uncovered is that online enrollments as a percentage of total enrollments has steadily increased from 9.6% in the fall of 2002 to 31.3% in the fall of 2010 – roughly going from one-tenth to one-third of the student population in just a few short years. The number of students taking at least one online course has also grown steadily from 1.6 million students in 2002 to over 6 million students in 2010. What is apparent from the Sloan Study is that online education is extremely popular, and continues to grow at very rapid rates.

As a result, educational institutions have had to hire and train large numbers of online instructors to keep up with the increasing numbers of online students. This increase in educational employment opportunities has been particularly keen for online adjuncts. Online adjuncts are not constrained or limited by geography, office hours, and other conventional standards and limitations. Educational institutions, especially the For-Profit Colleges increasingly rely upon their part-time online staff to teach a large majority of their courses (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2005).

A subset class of online adjuncts that has surfaced as a result of this phenomenal online educational growth may be referred to as Professional Online Adjuncts (Bedford, 2009), due to their record of essentially working full-time as part-time online adjuncts. Very little empirical evidence exists that describes or has studied this group. It is this special class of online adjunct that will be addressed in this study.

The thesis of this study will be the following three focal points or primary areas of discovery with respect to Professional Online Adjuncts (POAs). The Three Pillars are:

Pillar I: The Professional Online Adjunct is a self-employed entrepreneur who treats colleges and universities as clients.

Pillar II: The Professional Online Adjunct engages in arbitrage with respect to online teaching opportunities in educational employment markets.

Pillar III: The Professional Online Adjunct engages in scholarly educational activities in addition to teaching.

Literature Review

What the limited academic literature does tell us is that Professional Online Adjuncts (POAs) work online through at least two universities, and may work for several at the same time. They tend to treat their online teaching and associated work as self-employment, and consider themselves more as entrepreneurs rather than employees, hiring and firing institutions as they see fit. (Bedford, 2009; Babb and Mirabella, 2007). Their primary annual income is derived from the sum of all online teaching opportunities. POAs tend to become involved in some level of scholarly engagement.

The three focal points or primary areas of discovery with respect to POAs provides an effective framework that will be used to describe the current literature, and then used again in the present study.

Pillar I – The Entrepreneur

Dani Babb, an early online educational pioneer and frequent contributor on the Fox Business Channel, is a self-proclaimed POA and states “I manage my online teaching as a business” (Babb and Mirabella, 2007, p. 4). This entrepreneurial spirit is a common theme with POAs. In a qualitative study where the emerging phenomenon of POAs was first introduced, roughly one-third of the respondents identified themselves as engaged in online education as their primary source of employment (Bedford, 2009). A quote from one of the participants that seems to typify the results of this study is:

“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.” (p. 3).

Indeed, POAs who act as self-employed entrepreneurs no longer have the traditional restrictions of geography, and therefore really have no limits on how many educational institutions they may work for. The question arises as to how many schools are optimal? This appears to be a personal choice dictated by how much time the POA wants to work, and how much money they want to make. Babb and Mirabella (2007) suggest at least three schools reduces fears of unemployment, and more schools than that puts you in more control of your destiny. It is up to the POA to decide whether to quit unprofitable schools, or schools that are less favored, and bring on additional schools that are more in line with goals and personal preferences.

Pillar II – The Arbitrageur

Arbitrage is a financial investments term usually associated with the simultaneous purchase and sale of an asset in order to profit from a difference in price. It is considered a transaction that provides a profit by *exploiting* price differences of identical or similar instruments, on different markets or in different forms. *Arbitrage exists as a result of market inefficiencies.* (Investopedia, 2012). The inefficiencies that exist in the online educational market that creates arbitrage opportunities for POAs are underpinned by the tremendous growth in demand for online instructors coupled with the elimination of geographical boundaries. This creates many new markets of opportunity.

Further, the rise of online universities has fueled an abundance of opportunities where there are few if any tenured, full-time faculty. The online adjunct can work at limitless nontraditional universities around the world (Babb and Mirabella, 2007). The evidence suggests that there does indeed exist arbitrage opportunities that are operational now in the online educational realm, with POAs seeking to profit by taking advantage of teaching opportunities across more than one institution. In essence, online adjuncts can teach as much or as little as they desire by diversifying their teaching portfolios across colleges without concern for geographical boundaries. The “arbitrage”, or opportunities for profit open up as result of the many new markets – the educational institutions that abound when geographic restrictions are removed.

Of course there are qualifiers necessary to satisfy in order to successfully engage in these opportunities.

Applications, interviews, and typically an initial brief and sometimes paid training session must usually take place before the candidate is able to receive courses to facilitate. The POA has learned to become adept at navigating the waters leading to the port of course assignments. There may be biases and stereotyping of POAs, so in order to successfully traverse those pitfalls POAs develop highly effective entrepreneurial marketing strategies. They become expert at streamlining resumes, removing too many schools from view that clutter up a resume and may cause the hiring institution to question their commitment (Babb and Mirabella, 2007). With so many opportunities to follow up with, it appears that POAs learn from their mistakes and correct them as they go forward.

Pillar III – The Scholar

The majority of participants in the Bedford Study (2009) identified as POAs were involved in some level of scholarly engagement. The scholarly activities ranged from writing books and journal articles, to course writing and curriculum development. This finding identified a clear separation from those seeking online adjunct opportunities to supplement income or for other personal reasons, and those identified as POAs. The fact that POAs understand and have a level of personal commitment toward their academic disciplines in addition to their online classroom responsibilities communicates a higher level of commitment in the traditional sense, and is more on par with the expectations of a traditional full-time professorship. Hence the POA narrows the perceived gap that some claim exists between full-time faculty and their part-time counterparts.

Methodology

As part of this study questionnaires were sent to over 6500 online adjuncts that are part of a social media group specifically designed for online adjuncts. The questionnaire was posted two times within a one-week window, and responses were collected over two weeks. Voluntary respondents were to self-identify themselves according to the qualifier that their primary sources of income on an annual basis needed to be derived from their online adjunct teaching and ancillary responsibilities. Questions were open-ended, and since this is a qualitative study, respondents were encouraged to provide robust and detailed descriptions. 25 respondents returned the completed questionnaire. See the Appendix for a copy of the questions used in this study.

Findings

The previously-identified framework of “Three Pillars” will be used to discuss the results of this study.

Pillar I – The Entrepreneur

Of the twenty-five respondents who submitted the completed questionnaire, most of the respondents (n = 19) indicated a clear preference for being self-employed entrepreneurs, or indicated that they viewed themselves more as self-employed contractors than employees. Some selected quotes from respondents that were common, or typical among many of the responses given were:

“I really like to be my own boss. I enjoy the freedom and flexibility that comes with being self-employed. I feel more like an entrepreneur than an employee.”

“I’m always looking for new schools. I teach so many different subjects that I have a lot of options for different types of schools. So whenever I pick up a new school, I drop one that is less than desirable but I took a job there because I needed another school.”

“Even though technically I am employed by a variety of Colleges, I treat them all as if they were my customers and I am the boss. I decide which schools to work for, and how long I will work for them.”

“I enjoy working online because it provides me with the freedom and flexibility to work from home or wherever I want...”

The numbers of schools the respondents worked at varied greatly. Some respondents had as little as two or three colleges, some would work at a traditional college for one or two classes in addition to online

work, and others who tended to have more experience seemed to take on more colleges. Twenty-five was the highest number over eight years of online teaching experience. Some additional selected quotes from respondents that are representative of those received:

“I have probably worked for about 25 total universities off and on, but never more than 10 or 11 at once, and even that was a bit much. Some assignments are on a regular basis, some are more sporadic.”

“I’ve been doing adjunct teaching for about 15 years, starting on campus at a local private college, then going totally online...”

“I am currently an adjunct faculty at 8 universities. I teach all of them online.”

These typical responses provide strong evidence that POAs are indeed entrepreneurial, and also that they teach at more than one, and sometimes many educational institutions. This evidence further confirms the notion that POAs have a strong desire be their own boss – based upon their own volition and determination of needs they decide what colleges to keep, and which must go.

Pillar II – The Arbitrageur

With respect to the importance of income as a reason to diversify among colleges and universities, almost all respondents stated that the money was important (n = 24), and that the earned income from online teaching and related educational services for the institutions they worked for was their primary means of income (n = 25). Although several (n = 7) indicated that money was not necessarily the most important variable in determining whether they decided to take on additional colleges. Some selected quotes from respondents that were representative:

“My reasons for changing schools relate to both money and job satisfaction. ... Compensation is very important.... Working conditions and overall morale is equally as important as the money.”

“I do track my income on a monthly basis on an excel spreadsheet. I have been doing this for years so I can see how well I am doing as compared to last month, last year, etc.

“Compensation is one of the ways I judge how well I am doing - but not the only way. I work very hard, and long hours at times, and just want to make sure I am being paid fairly for the work that I do.”

“I stayed with [online] adjunct teaching because the money’s decent (and better than that sometimes) and I thrive on change. I like teaching for different schools...”

Pay is one way that POAs tend to judge their success. Geography no longer serves as a limitation on the income that can be earned, so POAs often admittedly work at several colleges at the same time. All respondents seemed to have some workable system in place to measure their successes at some level on a monetary basis.

Pillar III – The Scholar

There was consistency in responses that indicated most of the respondents had engaged in some scholarly activity (n = 17). The respondents indicated that they were either writing books or articles for publication (n = 11), or engaging in some other scholarly activities such as book reviews, presentations, or other services to the university (n = 6). Some respondents who indicated they had not engaged specifically in scholarly activities either wanted to and felt they just had not had the opportunity yet, or were waiting until they finished up their terminal degree programs before they would get involved in scholarship (n = 4). Some selected quotes from respondents that were typical:

“I’ve been doing presentations for the past five years. ...I’ve served on committees (creating standardized rubrics, preparing for embedded peer mentors in classes, brainstorming orientation strategies for a new program). I’ve served as lead faculty and

peer mentor in many classes. I've done a lot of course writing and instructional design work. I've written four books.”

“I have considered writing a book – From \$5,000 to \$50,000 in one year.”

“I am interested in pursuing some scholarly activities, but since I finished my Ph.D. and started teaching full-time as an online adjunct it has been difficult to find the time. I do think that it is important though, and fully intend to become more involved as time goes on.”

“I am working on a Ph.D. If I had time I'd love to write and publish.”

It is interesting to note that even those respondents who stated they had not conducted and type of scholarly research or publishing activities, often had a desire to do so. They were almost apologetic that they had not yet engaged in these activities. More common were responses that books, journal articles, and other traditional scholarly activities were accomplished on an on-going basis. These findings further confirm the notion that POAs have a high commitment to their professions, and for the most part do engage in scholarly activities.

Conclusions

The three pillars of importance that were described earlier have been fully supported by this study. POAs do view themselves as self-employed entrepreneurs. As their experience level increases, they tend to take on more teaching opportunities with more schools. Money, personal preferences, or other criterion are used to weed-out the less-preferential educational institutions. Compensation is important to POAs, but there are also other criteria to be considered along with money that weighs in heavily on decisions. Scholarship is something all POAs are familiar with, and most actively engage in the writing and publication of original research. Those who do not, recognize the importance of scholarship, and look forward to becoming more involved at a more convenient time later on.

Other discoveries as a result of this study indicate that POAs often have many years of professional and online teaching experience, and appear to have a high level of sophistication and understanding of the online educational industry. We can also see that they are comfortable with and know how to leverage technology to their benefit.

Recommendations

It is uncertain at this point whether POAs will withstand the test of time. Political situations have put pressure on postsecondary institutions, especially for-profit online schools to conform in some ways to more traditional standards. Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa being one of the loudest proponents for change (Lewin, 2012). For-Profit online schools that have tended to operate with a lean, full-time faculty force at a central location are now starting to branch out. Argosy University, Ashford University, and other For-Profit schools are now hiring full-time faculty who are able to work remotely. This may be attractive for POAs to transition to, where they still retain freedom and autonomy to work remotely, but have the added advantage of some job security. In addition, the advantage of working full-time at one institution eliminates keeping track of procedural differences between schools, knowledge of various platforms, numerous passwords, and other ancillary duties. POAs could concentrate more on scholarship, or service to the institution and be less concerned about salary issues from teaching a sufficient number of courses. However there are potential downsides. POAs should be aware of exclusivity contracts, which is common in traditional education. In order to be hired on full-time at some universities an exclusive contract to only work for them may be required. As a result there might be a salary reduction. That tradeoff may be acceptable to some but not to others.

Appendix

Professional Online Adjunct Faculty Questionnaire

Q1: Please describe the type of academic work you perform for compensation. Include the number and types of institutions, and the types of work you do for them.

Q2: Please discuss your motivations as to why working as an online adjunct is your primary source of income.

Q3: Please describe any scholarly or other ancillary activities (Service to the university, presentations, etc.) In which you engage.

Q4: How important is compensation in deciding how many Colleges to work for and number of classes to teach?

References

Babb, D. & Mirabella, J. (2007) *Make Money Teaching Online: How to Land Your First Job, Build Credibility, and Earn a Six-Figure Salary*. John Wiley & Sons: Hoboken, New Jersey.

Bedford, L. A. (2009). The Professional Adjunct: An Emerging Trend in Online Instruction. *Online Journal Of Distance Learning Administration*, 12(3). Retrieved from: <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/fall123/bedford123.html>

Bender, K. A., Neumann, R. M., & Skatun, J. (2006). Unemployment and Other Measures of Labor Market Inefficiency: A Comparison of U.K. and U.S. Labor Markets 1931-96. *Economic Inquiry*, 44(4), 629-643

Betts, K. S. & Sikorski, B. (Spring 2008). Financial Bottom Line: Estimating the Cost of Faculty/Adjunct Turnover and Attrition for Online Programs. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, 11, (1). Retrieved from: <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/spring111/betts111.html>

Chronicle of Higher Education. *More Faculty Job Go to Part-Timers*. Chronicle of Higher Education 51 (39). Retrieved from: www.chronicle.com

Dolan, V. (2011). The Isolation of Online Adjunct Faculty and Its Impact on Their Performance. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 12(2), 62-77.

Investopedia (2012) Retrieved from: www.investopedia.com

Jaschik, S. (2008, Nov. 6). Evaluating the adjunct impact. *Inside Higher Education*. Retrieved from: <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/11/06adjuncts>

Lewin, T. (2012, July 29) Senate Committee Report on For-Profit-Colleges Condemns Costs and Practices. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/30/education/harkin-report-condemns-for-profit-colleges.html?_r=0

Rifkin, T. (April 1998) Differences between the Professional Attitudes of Full- and Part-Time Faculty. Eric Clearing House for Community Colleges, Los Angeles, CA.

Schaffhauser, D. (2008). What's It Like to Work for an Online Campus? *Campus Technology*, 22(2), 14-15.

Sloan Consortium. (2011). Going the distance: Online education in the United States, 2012. Retrieved from: http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/survey/going_distance_2011