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# Full-Time and Adjunct Faculty Priorities for Online Instructional Behavior

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## Abstract

This study explored priorities for online instructional behavior in post-traditional programs at Private Christian University (PCU). No prior study had been identified that compared the online instructional priorities among full-time faculty ( $n = 73$ ) and online adjunct faculty ( $n = 69$ ). This study would benefit those who oversee online instructional standards or who operate online adjunct faculty development programs. Quantitative research was conducted using a survey instrument to answer the three research questions. A  $t$ -test for independent means was used to analyze how full-time and adjunct faculty members prioritized 29 online instructional behaviors. The results indicated statistically significant differences on two items. An implication of the study is that, based on the lead indicator of instructional priorities, adjunct faculty members may provide as high or higher quality online instruction than do full-time faculty members.

## Introduction

Higher education underwent multiple industry disruptions throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries (Baldwin & Wawrzynski, 2011; Gallimore, 2014; King and Alperstein, 2015; Mueller, Mandernach, & Sanderson, 2013). The proliferation of faculty functions and the increased strains on university budgets resulted in an enormous reliance on adjunct faculty members (Austin & Sorcinelli, 2013; Mueller et al., 2013; Puziffero & Shelton, 2008; Sorcinelli, Austin, Eddy, & Beach, 2006; Tucker & Neely, 2010). Likewise, the growth of online learning caused universities to turn to adjunct faculty members for support.

According to Allen and Seaman (2015), in the first decade of the twenty-first century, online enrollment for all institutions of higher education grew at a double-digit percentage rate each year except for 2006, when it grew at 9.7%. Over the same time period, the campus full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollment growth for higher education grew consistently in the low single digit percentage rates. During the same time period, the number of adjunct faculty members teaching in higher education institutions had also grown dramatically (Austin & Sorcinelli, 2013; Backhaus, 2009). This trend led Bedford (2009) to draw a correlation between online enrollment growth and higher education's reliance upon adjunct faculty members. Adjunct faculty provided value to students and institutions, but there were also concerns about the effect of reliance on adjunct faculty on academic quality, student learning, and institutional performance (Baldwin & Wawrzynski, 2011; Mueller, et al., 2013).

Some researchers have correlated problems such as lower student learning outcomes, less sophisticated instructional techniques, and grade inflation with the use of adjunct faculty (Baldwin & Wawrzynski, 2011; Bettinger & Long, 2010; Mueller et al., 2013). However, other researchers have indicated that previous studies were flawed and that better methods produce data not supporting any conclusion that adjunct faculty are less effective than full-time, tenured faculty (Johnson, 2011; Lyons, 2007).

The potential value of adjunct faculty was high. As stated above, numerous factors increased the pressure on institutions of higher education to rely on adjunct faculty. There was no indication that universities would reduce their reliance on adjunct faculty members. The current study will contribute to the understanding of adjunct faculty instructional quality by addressing the question of what differences exist in expectations of online instructional behavior among full-time, residential faculty members and online adjunct faculty members?

## Literature Review

Since the 1970s, faculty roles have greatly expanded. Throughout most of the history of American higher education, the primary role of the faculty member was scholarship (Eble & McKeachie, 1985). For example, from 1810 through the 1960s, faculty development tended to focus on the goal of enhancing faculty scholarship and nothing else (Blackburn, Pellino, Boberg, & O'Connell, 1981; Sorcinelli et al., 2006). During the 1970s, multiple forces converged that ultimately required faculty to expand their roles to include curriculum development, instructional

development, administration, and organizational leadership, according to Eble and McKeachie. By the 2000s, faculty functions included “teaching, research, service, outreach, advising, grant-getting, and administrative duties” (Sorcinelli et al., 2006, p. 4). The expectation that any one faculty member could effectively discharge all of those duties was increasingly unrealistic. Consequently, universities faced mounting pressure to specialize or disaggregate faculty roles during the first decade of the twenty-first century (King & Alperstein, 2015).

Those disruptions were just the beginning. In the 1990s, adult education programs, first introduced in 1949 by Overstreet, went mainstream, and principles of andragogy began to challenge traditional pedagogy (Knowles, 1984). In 1999, 39% of all undergraduate students were post-traditional (Choy, 2002). By 2011, only one-sixth of all undergraduates lived on campus while attending a four-year institution (Hess, 2011).

Disruptions to the higher education industry continued into the 2000s with the rapid growth of online programs and the proliferation of educational technologies, both of which necessitated still more changes in faculty roles (Johnson, Wisniewski, & Kuhlemeyer, 2012). In 1993, for instance, there was no publically available internet for instructional purposes: no discussion forums, chat rooms, synchronous video, and so forth, according to Ko and Rossen (2010). In terms of curriculum development and online teaching, faculty required different skillsets than their traditional, face-to-face teaching experience had provided for them (King & Alperstein, 2015; Ko & Rossen, 2010; Shattuck, Dubins, & Zilberman, 2011). What worked in the on-ground classroom did not often work in the online classroom. As the course delivery modality changed, adjunct faculty more often began to fill the instructional role in those online classrooms.

The fact that universities have asked faculty to take on more roles while instructional modalities have expanded to include adult and online contexts has necessitated the reliance on adjunct faculty to fill the gaps. According to Bedford (2009), few full-time faculty members have wanted to teach online. One-third of full-time faculty have taught an online course (Seaman, 2009). Therefore, universities have had to turn to adjunct faculty to fulfill their missions (Dolan, Hall, Karisson, & Martinak, 2013). As a result, between 1960 and 2010, university reliance on adjunct faculty increased 40% or more (Dreyfuss, 2014; Goldstene, 2012).

The question emerged, do online faculty produce equivalent instructional outcomes as full-time faculty? Do students learn as well under adjunct faculty as they do under full-time faculty? Dolan (2011) pointed out that the rapid proliferation and geographical dispersion of adjunct faculty members raised basic concerns of quality control. Some research has been mixed. Bettinger and Long (2010), in a study of 43,000 students between 1998-1999, found that adjunct professors under 40 years old produced better academic outputs across the data points in the study than did full-time faculty. Landrum (2009) found no significant difference in student evaluations or grade distribution between students taught by adjunct and students taught by full-time faculty members. Kirk and Spector (2009), however, found that students in introductory accounting classes who were taught by full-time faculty members were more likely to become accounting majors than were students who were taught by adjunct faculty members. Likewise, Allison-Jones and Hirt (2004) found student evaluations of the instructional effectiveness of full-time faculty members to be significantly higher than evaluations of adjunct faculty members.

Institutions offering online learning may find themselves in the position of having to defend the quality of their delivery modality while simultaneously defending the adjunct faculty who are likely teaching their online courses. The current study was intended to shed more light on the quality of adjunct faculty members by investigating how full-time and adjunct faculty members prioritized online instructional behaviors.

## **Methodology**

The researcher conducted survey research using a quantitative, non-experimental, fixed design methodology with full-time, residential faculty members and online adjunct faculty members to determine the variance in expectations of online instructional behaviors. The research populations from Private Christian University (PCU) included 197 full-time, residential faculty members and 431 online adjunct professors. PCU was a private, denominational, master’s medium institution in the Midwest of the United States of America.

In order to address the research question, the researcher developed a survey instrument. The survey instrument was based on an established list of 28 institutional expectations for online course facilitators. The researcher added a six-point Likert-style rating scale to each of the existing institutional expectations with one being *not important* to six being *very important*. One institutional expectation contained multiple expectations, so 29 survey items were used in all (see Appendix A). PCU had previously developed the list of expectations through a process of collecting best practices of other successful online programs, reviewing the literature on online facilitation, and by adopting the community of inquiry (CoI) theoretical framework. Full-time faculty provided feedback on the expectations for online instructional behaviors. Adjunct faculty did not.

Responses were grouped and sub-scored according to full-time faculty and adjunct faculty categories. A *t*-test for independent means was used to analyze the data in order to compare full-time and adjunct faculty priorities for the instructional behaviors.

## Results

A total of 142 survey responses were used in this study. The breakdown of responses by full-time and adjunct faculty members is reported in Table 1. The survey response rate was 22.6%.

Table 1

### *Participation by Group*

Group	Surveyed	Responded	Response Rate
Full-time Faculty	197	73	37.1%
Online Adjunct Faculty	431	69	16%

The researcher conducted a study on the internal consistency of the 29-item instructional behavior scale. The coefficient alpha for the scale was .957 among participants at PCU. This score was higher than the .868 of the pilot instrument, which had already indicated a high degree of reliability.

## Data Analysis

Figure 1 presents a graph of the full-time and adjunct faculty mean responses to the 29 survey items. Of the 29 items, the researcher found statistically significant differences on items 15 and 28. In both of those cases, adjunct faculty members held higher expectations for online instructional behaviors than did full-time faculty members. In the remaining 27 instances, the researcher found no statistically significant differences in priorities for online instructional behaviors between full-time and adjunct faculty members.

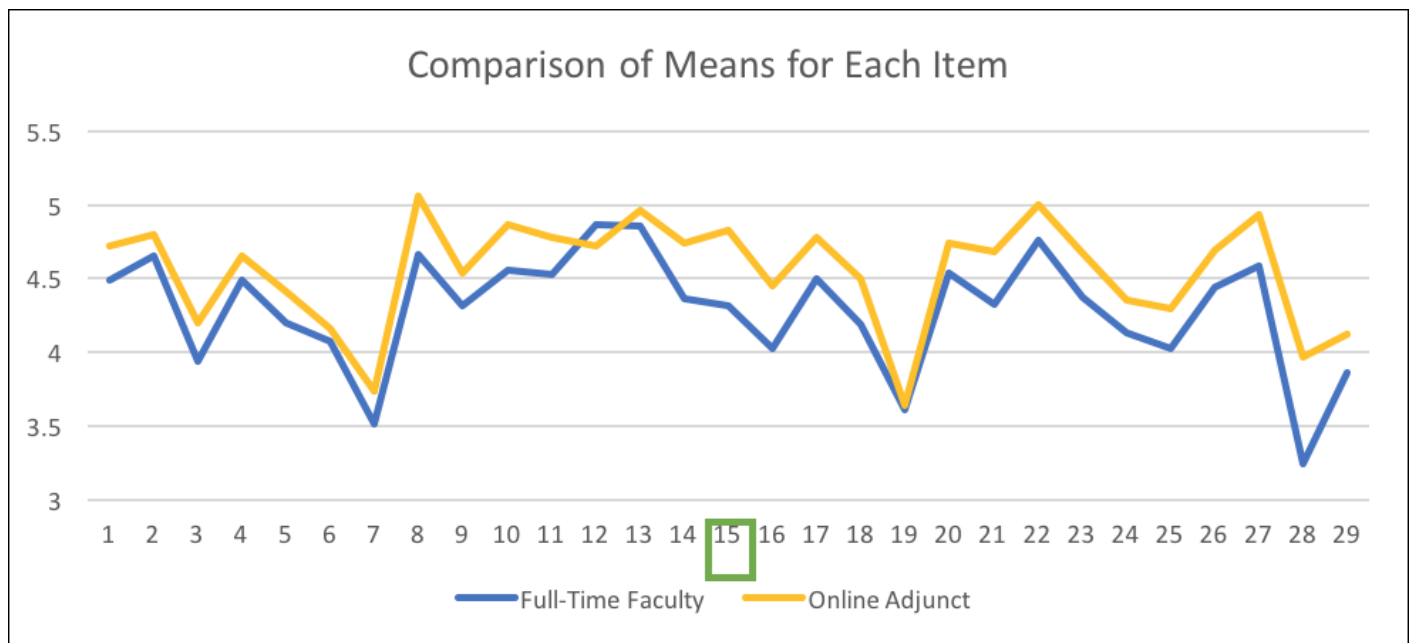


Figure 1. Comparison of means among full-time and adjunct faculty for the 29 survey items. Items with statistically significant differences are indicated with a green box around the item number.

Item 15 read, *online instructors should reach out to struggling students by phone and email by the second week*. For this item, full-time faculty ( $M = 4.32, SD = 1.12$ ) held a statistically significant lower priority for the online instructional behavior than did adjunct faculty ( $M = 4.83, SD = 1.43$ ),  $t(136) = -2.32, p < .05, d = -.39$ .

Item 28 read, *online instructors should ensure a reasonable grade distribution across the class*. For this item, full-time faculty ( $M = 3.24, SD = 1.36$ ) held a statistically significant lower priority for the online instructional behavior

than did adjunct faculty ( $M = 3.97, SD = 1.53$ ),  $t(138) = -2.99, p < .01, d = -.51$ .

Table 2 displays the comparison of full-time faculty members' online instructional priorities to that of adjunct faculty members. In no case of statistically significant difference did full-time faculty members hold higher priorities for online instructional behaviors relative to adjunct faculty members. The only item on which full-time faculty members ( $M = 4.87, SD = 1.17$ ) held higher online instructional priorities than did adjunct faculty members ( $M = 4.72, SD = 1.58$ ) was item 12, which read, *online instructors should grade for writing skills*. That difference was not statistically significant. In every other instance, adjunct faculty members held higher priorities than did full-time faculty members.

Table 2

*Differences between Full-Time Faculty and Adjunct Faculty Responses*

Item	Full-Time Faculty		Online Adjunct	
	M	SD	M	SD
1	4.49	1.21	4.72	1.39
2	4.65	1.29	4.80	1.53
3	3.94	1.35	4.20	1.44
4	4.49	1.21	4.65	1.50
5	4.2	1.19	4.41	1.41
6	4.07	1.13	4.16	1.38
7	3.51	1.13	3.74	1.50
8	4.66	1.38	5.06	1.50
9	4.32	1.28	4.54	1.55
10	4.56	1.42	4.87	1.61
11	4.53	1.31	4.78	1.42
12	4.87	1.12	4.72	1.58
13	4.86	1.22	4.96	1.54
14	4.36	1.30	4.74	1.50
15	4.32*	1.12	4.83*	1.43
16	4.03	1.23	4.45	1.48
17	4.50	1.10	4.78	1.37
18	4.19	1.21	4.50	1.60
19	3.61	1.29	3.64	1.65
20	4.54	1.15	4.74	1.43
21	4.33	1.18	4.68	1.49
22	4.76	1.12	5.00	1.49
23	4.37	1.07	4.67	1.33
24	4.13	1.04	4.35	1.39
25	4.03	1.25	4.30	1.59
26	4.44	1.02	4.69	1.49
27	4.59	1.24	4.93	1.43
28	3.24**	1.36	3.97**	1.53
29	3.86	1.32	4.12	1.63

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

**Limitations of the Study**

The researcher identified several limitations of the current study. First, this study was designed with one model of online learning in mind: asynchronous learning delivered through a learning management system (LMS). Instructional behaviors for other modes of online learning, such as synchronous modes, may require different instructional behaviors. This is a limitation of external validity and the results of this study may not be generalizable to other modes of online learning.

A second limitation was that this study relied upon a convenience sample of one denominational, private, non-profit institution in the Midwestern region of the United States of America. Consequently, the results may not be generalizable to the broader population of full-time faculty or online adjunct faculty members, particularly those at public or for-profit institutions.

Third, this study relied on instructional standards developed by a single institution. While attempts were made to reflect the broader industry standards, the fact remains that the task force had the institutional goals in mind when they created the instructional standards for PCU.

A fourth limitation of the study was that the researcher used a self-created survey instrument. While the researcher conducted a formal pilot and received a strong reliability score, more evaluation and testing of the survey instrument would benefit future studies.

Fifth, while the survey was distributed through the institutional email system, many adjunct faculty members do not check their institutional email regularly. This factor likely reduced the response rate of this group.

Finally, residential adjunct faculty members received the survey. The researcher had not designed the survey for that group. While the researcher made every effort to exclude this group from the results, there was no way to determine if all residential adjunct faculty members had been identified and segregated.

## **Conclusion**

While full-time faculty members add a great deal of value to online instruction – institutional knowledge, access to resources and student support, and exceptional academic qualifications – this researcher suggests an implication of the current study is that heavy reliance on adjunct faculty members for online delivery is not *ipso facto* a liability. Maynard and Joseph (2008) acknowledged that much of the widespread concern about adjunct faculty members may be more of a reflection on their working conditions than on the quality of their instruction. However, the current study supports Mueller et al.'s (2013) recommendation to impose high quality standards upon adjunct faculty members. Of course, institutions should continue to mandate online instructional standards. That said, there is no evidence in the current study to suggest that adjunct faculty members represent a singular vulnerability in instructional quality.

Bedford (2009) reported a popular perception that adjunct faculty members were inferior to full-time faculty members in terms of the delivery of quality academic teaching and learning. While this study did not address every quality factor of online teaching, this researcher found evidence to conclude that online adjunct faculty members have as high or higher expectations for online instructional behavior than do full-time faculty members. This conclusion does not debunk the perception of the inferiority of adjunct faculty members when compared to full-time faculty members, but it does add complexity to that discussion.

PCU's heavy reliance on adjunct faculty members for online instruction was not unusual. Multiple researchers concluded that full-time faculty members have displayed a reluctance or were simply unqualified to teach online at many institutions (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Bedford, 2009; Reilly & Ralston-Berg, 2012). Universities have been called upon to prove the quality of their online adjunct faculty members. The data from the current study suggests that online adjunct faculty members display lead indicators of quality online instruction.

## **Recommendations for Future Studies**

More research is needed to identify and validate the most essential online instructional behaviors. While the current study, as well as a few others (Bailie, 2015; Bair & Bair, 2011; Kuboni, 2013), helped to identify behaviors, these studies are neither exhaustive nor comprehensive. Specifically, it would be helpful to understand better the role of *regular and substantive faculty interaction* currently mandated by the United States Department of Education (2014) for distance education. What instructional behaviors support that quality of interaction, and how do various stakeholder groups view the priority of those instructional behaviors?

Future studies may duplicate the current study in other online delivery modes, such as synchronous, competency-based, or adaptive learning modalities. Does the delivery mode influence the priorities for instructional behaviors?

The current study was conducted at one institution. Additional studies are required to validate the findings to the broader population, particularly at public or for-profit institutions, or those institutions with faculty unions.

Future research may be conducted about the correlation between the priorities that adjunct faculty members ascribe to online instructional behaviors and the success of students in their courses. The literature contained studies

correlating student success with online instruction, but there has been no triangulation of student success with online instruction and with the expectations that adjunct faculty members have for instructional behaviors.

In conclusion, this study provided evidence that, based upon the lead indicator of instructional priorities, adjunct faculty members may provide as high or higher quality online instruction than do full-time faculty members.

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## Appendix A

### Survey Items

- 1 Online instructors should provide a variety of posts (e.g. orienting, summarizing, redirecting, extending) in the discussion forum each week for students.
- 2 Online instructors should provide an orienting post at the beginning of each week that provides guidelines on what the instructor expects from students' forum posts that week.
- 3 Online instructors should provide a summarizing post at the end of each week that summarizes themes from the week's forum discussions.
- 4 Online instructors should provide redirecting posts, as needed, that guide the student discussion back to the main points and/or that correct misunderstandings.
- 5 Online instructors should provide at least one extending post each week that deepens the students' critical engagement with course topics.
- 6 In responding to student forum posts, online instructors should intentionally draw the whole class into the conversation.
- 7 Online instructors should author approximately 20% of all discussion forum posts in a week.
- 8 Online instructors should provide feedback on student work that is positive while pointing out errors.
- 9 Online instructors should provide in-line comments on student papers.
- 10 Online instructors should return a scored rubric with each student assignment.
- 11 Online instructors should grade for adherence to a writing style guide (e.g., APA).
- 12 Online instructors should grade for writing skills.
- 13 Online instructors should post their professional biography and contact information in the online classroom before the course begins.
- 14 Online instructors should respond to each student in the introductory forum.
- 15 Online instructors should reach out to struggling students by phone and email by the second week.
- 16 Online instructors should reach out to students who do not submit class work by day three of each week.
- 17 Online instructors should encourage struggling students with personal notes and communication.
- 18 Online instructors should post an announcement to the class at the beginning of each week.
- 19 Online instructors should personalize announcements by mentioning student names and/or course conversations.
- 20 Online instructors should ensure that announcements are concise.
- 21 Online instructors should ensure that announcements are formative (indicating how to make improvements).
- 22 Online instructors should provide thorough replies to student communications (phone/email).
- 23 Online instructors should provide additional resources when addressing student questions.
- 24 Because online courses are often written by someone who is not the instructor, online instructors should provide additional instructional resources related to course content.
- 25 Online instructors should be visible in the online classroom on at least five out of seven days each week through forum posts and announcements.
- 26 Online instructors should return graded assignments within



- five days of the assignment submission.
- 27 Online instructors should respond to student communications within 24 hours.
  - 28 Online instructors should ensure a reasonable grade distribution across the class.
  - 29 Online instructors should have no student withdraw from a class without a documented attempt to intervene by the instructor.