

THE ADJUNCT DIFFERENCE

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ABSTRACT

The use of adjunct instructors is on the rise in higher education. The increase is a result of enrollment growth, budget cuts, and an increasingly competitive environment. One way to adapt demand with a reducing budget is to hire adjunct instructors for temporary assignments at a lower rate of pay than full-time faculty. Survey research was conducted to determine if students perceived a quality difference between adjunct and full-time faculty. Historical grades were also examined to find out if adjunct instructors assessed students differently than full-time faculty.

INTRODUCTION

Southern Oregon University's resources are stretched as enrollment increases and budgets decrease due to a struggling economy. In the last three years, enrollment at SOU has increased 20% while the budget was reduced by 27% (Wheeler, 2012). To keep up with demand and manage budget cuts, the University did not fill many full-time faculty positions (due to retirements or other departures) and turned to hiring more adjunct instructors. In the 2006-07 academic year, SOU's School of Business hired adjunct faculty to teach 19% of its classes. In the 2011-12 academic year, adjuncts represented 33.5% of the business classes taught. One of SOU's points of differentiation among the competition has been that the University employs full-time faculty to teach classes and does not rely on adjuncts or teaching assistants. The assumption is that full-time faculty offer a higher quality experience to students. As pressure to hire more adjuncts increases, question arise: Do adjuncts offer the same quality of the education? Is the student experience different when taught by adjunct faculty?

DEFINITIONS

For the purposes of this paper, the following definitions are used:

Adjunct Faculty: Faculty hired on part-time term-by-term contracts.

Full-time Faculty: Faculty who are on full-time contracts. They may be hired to teach for a year rather than term by term, or they may be tenure-track or tenured.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Do students perceive a difference in classes taught by adjunct faculty as compared to full-time faculty?
2. Do adjunct faculty assign higher grades than full-time faculty?

SELECTION OF SUBJECTS

An email requesting participation in a survey was sent to 739 students who were enrolled in business classes during spring 2012. The population included undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in face-to-face classes and online.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The increase in numbers of adjunct faculty is happening across all academic fields and all types of institutions. The U.S. Department of Education reports that the number of adjunct faculty in degree-granting institutions has grown from 22% of instructional faculty in 1970 to 48% in 2005 (Kirk & Spector, 2009). The American Federation of Teachers (2008) estimates the number to be even higher at 70 percent of the faculty. Between 1976 and 1995, the number of part-time faculty increase by 91% whereas full-time faculty increased by only 27% (Clery, 1998). The change in faculty characteristics is adversely affecting the academic environment and students' educational experiences (Kirk & Spector, 2009). Adjuncts are causing the quality of higher education to deteriorate (Bettinger & Long, 2005).

The relationship between students and faculty plays a critical role in development of academic success. Surveys show a negative relationship between the heavy reliance on adjuncts and student dropout rates (Bettinger & Long 2005). Adjuncts do not have the same information about the university as full-time faculty and may not integrate undergraduate students or prepare them for graduate-level education as well as full-time faculty. Adjuncts are usually employed on a class-by-class basis and may have other jobs and obligations outside of teaching leading to less involvement in scholarship, knowledge acquisition, or professional development (Clery, 1998; Freeland, 1998; Rifkin, 1998). Meixner, Kruck, and Madden (2010) found that adjunct faculty had difficulties related to keeping students engaged, maximizing students' learning experiences, dealing with unprepared and unmotivated students, establishing appropriate policies for classroom management, meeting students' growing needs on a part-time schedule, and finding ways to reach students in large lecture classes..

Several studies have attempted to examine the quality of instruction by adjuncts using student or administrator evaluations as a basis for comparison. Grenzke (1998) reported that adjuncts are more likely to be evaluated than full-time faculty and that students do not rate adjuncts as high as full-time faculty (Jackson, 1986). Full-time faculty are rated higher on knowledge of the subject and presentation of material. Adjuncts have a tendency to reduce academic rigor to avoid student complaint (Kirk & Spector, 2009). If adjuncts are too hard on students, their student evaluations may be low, which could affect their future employability (Sonner, 2000; Kezim, Parideau, and Quinn, 2005; Gohmann and McCrickard, 2001).

Keeping the academic rigor low to earn higher student evaluations may result in adjuncts assigning higher grades than full-time faculty (Moore and Trahan, 1998). It could be argued that adjuncts assign higher grades because they are simply trained better and more motivated, which leads to more effective teaching. Gohmann and McCrickard (2001) conclude that the temporary nature of adjunct may be the reason for grade inflation. Faculty grade better as they gain experience. Over time, untenured faculty actually start to grade harder as they gain more experience distinguishing good student performance from poor performance. Sonner (2000) examined several other variables to explain the grade differential such as class size, subject area, and class level. After controlling for these variables. Sonner still found that adjuncts graded higher than full-time faculty. Kezim, et al (2005) also examined the student grade point averages over a 20-year period from fall 1983 through Spring 2003. They found significant

differences between the grade point average of students being taught by full-time and adjunct faculty with adjuncts awarding higher grades.

One positive attribute expressed about the use of adjunct faculty is that adjuncts bring real world experience to the classroom (Baldwin, 2012). Some evidence suggests that part-time adjunct instructors are comparable in their teaching abilities to full-time faculty members, are just as committed to teaching as full-time (Freeland, 1998), and have high expectations for their students (Freeland, 1998; Rifkin, 1998). So, the question remains about whether there is a difference in the quality of education received by students.

METHOD

Primary data was gathered from an e-mail survey to 739 students enrolled in business classes during spring 2012. The population included undergraduate and graduate students, face-to-face classes and online, and full-time and part-time students. The purpose of the research was to determine if students could distinguish between adjunct and full-time faculty and if there were differences in the student experience. The mean responses were calculated and compared using an ANOVA.

In addition to survey data, historical grades were also examined for students who studied in the SOU School of Business during the 2010 to 2011 school years. To determine whether the difference in the mean GPA observed was statistically significant, a one-way ANOVA was performed.

RESULTS

Of the 739 students in the sample, 156 responded to the survey providing a response rate of 21%. The sample consisted of 3.9% freshman, 8.6% sophomore, 22.4% junior, 39.5% senior, and 25.7% graduate students.

Survey Findings

Ability to Identify Adjunct. Respondents were asked if they could identify if their instructors were adjunct faculty or full-time faculty. Seventy-five percent felt they could identify. The ability to differentiate was thought to be closely related to a student's longevity at the institution; however, the opposite was true. Freshman and sophomore students showed higher percentage of ability to identify (83.3% and 84.6% respectively) than junior, senior, and graduate students (73.5%, 73.3%, and 74.4% respectively).

To judge how accurate respondents were with their ability to differentiate between adjunct and full-time faculty, a random sample of 60 students were asked to evaluate their transcripts and indicate which business classes were taught adjunct instructors. The average number of correct answers was 90% meaning the students were fairly accurate in their identification of adjuncts and full-time faculty.

Student Experience. If respondents felt they could differentiate between full-time and adjunct faculty, they were asked to rate their experiences using ten dimensions. The responses were limited to three choices: one (more effective), two (less effective), and three (no noticeable difference). The ten dimensions were communication, subject knowledge, ability to convey knowledge, class preparation, reasonable work load, meaningful assignments, grading fairness, responsiveness, and empathy. Table 1 provides a summary of the results.

Table 1. Differences Adjunct vs. Full-time Faculty: Frequencies and Percentages

Item	Differences	Frequencies	Percentages
Communicated course requirements and expectations clearly	Less	22	0.7769
	No Difference	57	
	More	17	
Knowledge about subject matter	Less	16	0.8386
	No Difference	57	
	More	22	
Conveyed subject matter effectively	Less	21	0.7891
	No Difference	57	
	More	18	
Prepared for class	Less	20	0.8374
	No Difference	53	
	More	23	
Assigned reasonable amount of work	Less	13	0.8374
	No Difference	56	
	More	26	
Assigned meaningful and challenging assignments & exams	Less	15	0.8662
	No Difference	55	
	More	25	
Graded fairly	Less	8	0.7632
	No Difference	72	
	More	16	
Answered my questions in class clearly and effectively	Less	14	0.8091
	No Difference	62	
	More	19	
Responded to emails within a reasonable amount of time	Less	17	0.857
	No Difference	52	
	More	24	
Exhibited empathy and flexibility in assignments when needed	Less	7	0.9051
	No Difference	58	
	More	27	

Scale: Less (not as good as full-time faculty), No difference, More (better than full-time faculty)

In every question, there was a significantly higher response rating of “no difference.” The highest “no difference” response was in the category for fairness of grading (75%). Adjuncts scored lower when it came to communication of course requirements and expectations, conveying the subject matter effectively, and being prepared for class. Full-time faculty appeared to have more empathy and flexibility in assignments when needed and assigned a reasonable amount of work.

Table 2 displays the descriptive statistics for each variable. There is a significant difference between adjunct faculty and full-time faculty for each variable except answering questions clearly and effectively.

Table 2. Adjunct vs. Full-time Faculty: Difference Level

Item	n	M	SD	r-value	p-value
Communicated course requirements and expectations clearly	57	2.4167	0.7769	-0.258	0.011
Knowledge about subject matter	58	2.3684	0.8386	-0.421	0.000
Conveyed subject matter effectively	57	2.4063	0.7891	-0.280	0.006
Prepared for class	57	2.3125	0.8374	-0.220	0.031
Assigned reasonable amount of work	58	2.3158	0.8374	-0.216	0.035
Assigned meaningful and challenging assignments & exams	58	2.3158	0.8662	-0.246	0.016
Graded fairly	57	2.5833	0.7632	-0.249	0.014
Answered my questions in class clearly and effectively	58	2.4526	0.8091	-0.152	0.141
Responded to emails within a reasonable amount of time	60	2.3011	0.857	-0.281	0.006
Exhibited empathy and flexibility in assignments when needed	61	2.337	0.9051	-0.311	0.003

Scale: Less (not as good as full-time faculty), No difference, More (better than full-time faculty)

Not only were student perceptions examined but so were actual grades assigned by adjunct and full-time faculty. Table 3 illustrates the description statistics of the GPAs offered by both groups of faculty. The results support the conclusion of previous research that adjuncts grade higher than full-time faculty.

Table 3. Adjunct vs. Full-time Faculty: Grade Differences

Faculty Status	n	M GPA	SD
Full-time	6984	3.2038	0.90063
Adjunct	1504	3.5144	0.8185

Qualitative responses. The last question on the student survey was open-ended and resulted in 29 responses. Respondents provided their insights about the differences of full-time and adjunct faculty. Some respondents commented on the value of adjunct faculty due to their ability to share real business experiences and their passion for the subject. Other respondents raised concerns that adjunct faculty have less confidence and are less able to control the class. They might know their subject area well, but they don't know how to teach it. The consensus was that there is a lot of variability in the quality of adjuncts. Out of the 29 responses, 9 were favorable toward adjuncts, 8 were unfavorable, and 12 were neutral.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Researchers conclude that students in business school for the Spring 2012 term at Southern Oregon University can identify the difference between full-time and adjunct faculty. The attitude of respondents toward adjunct faculty were less favorable than full-time faculty. Adjunct faculty tend to have less communication, knowledge, preparation, and timely responses than full-time faculty. Students believed that full-time faculty exhibited more empathy and flexibility in assignments when they needed and assigned a reasonable amount of work. Students see no difference between adjunct and full-time faculty when it comes to fairness of grading even though an analysis of historical grades does show that adjuncts do grade higher.

It appears the use of adjunct faculty does change the student educational experience. If institutions want to preserve quality and hire adjunct faculty to meet demand and budget projections, the following should be considered: 1) Institutions should offer office space to all adjunct faculty and require scheduled office hours for adjuncts to meet with students. 2) Online adjuncts could provide virtual office hours with the use of two-way video conferencing such as Facetime™, Skype™, or Elluminate™. 3) Institutions should require adjunct instructors provide reliable contact information to students for questions.

To respond to the problem of adjuncts' communication of course requirements, teaching of the subject matter, and being prepared for class, adjuncts should be required to attend a training session on writing the syllabus and teaching methodologies. Oftentimes, adjunct are given courses on short notice with little or no time to prepare. Lack of preparation time sets the adjunct up for poor performance (June, 2012). Adjuncts should be hired and trained the term before teaching the class. Full-time faculty should be assigned as mentors to help with adjunct faculty with methods, communication, expectations, and classroom management.

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