# Characteristics of Adjunct Faculty Teaching Online: Institutional Implications

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**Abstract**

Over the last decade, there has been a steady increase in online learning enrollments. The proportion of college students taking at least one online course is at an all-time high and 66% of higher education institutions indicate that online learning is critical to their long-term strategy (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Universities are increasingly relying on adjunct faculty to meet this need; as such, it is important for institutions to understand the unique motivations, characteristics and needs of online adjunct faculty to better support teaching effectiveness. A survey of 603 adjunct faculty teaching online courses provides an overview of characteristics of modern online adjunct faculty and highlights institutional adaptations necessary to accommodate a changing faculty body.

**Introduction**

The continued growth of online learning is undeniable. According to Sener (2010), from 2002 to 2009, online higher education enrollments in the United States rose from fewer than 10% (around 1.6 million learners) to almost 30% of total enrollments (around 5.6 million learners). While recent reports indicate the rate of growth may be slowing from its previous rapid rate, the number of students taking at least one online course continues to grow at a rate exceeding overall enrollment trends in higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2014). To accommodate the growth of course offerings, institutions are increasingly relying on adjunct faculty to teach in the online classroom (NCES, 2011; Gappa, Austin & Trice, 2007). This growing reliance on online adjunct faculty mandates that institutions have a clear understanding of the unique characteristics, background and needs of this specialized faculty population. The current study provides an overview of characteristics of modern online adjunct faculty member and highlights institutional adaptations necessary to accommodate a changing faculty body.

**Online Education and Adjunct Faculty**

To balance financial constraints (Gappa, Austin & Trice, 2007) with growing online enrollments (Allen & Seaman, 2009; Bettinger & Long, 2010), postsecondary institutions are becoming increasingly reliant on adjunct faculty (NCES, 2011). Over the last decade, adjunct faculty have remained the fastest growing population of college instructors (i.e., NCES, 2005; NCES, 2010; NCES, 2011; NCES, 2012). While discussions of the increased reliance of adjunct faculty are not unique to online education (for an overview of concerns targeting

general concerns with adjunct faculty dependence, see Bombardieri, 2006; Capriccioso, 2005; Carroll, 2003; Eisenberg, 2010; Fagan-Wilen, Springer, Ambrosino, & White, 2006; Finder, 2007; Glenn, 2008; Hickman, 1998; June, 2008; Klein, 2003; Marshall, 2003; Modarelli, 2006; Murphy, 2002; Pedersen, 2005; Smallwood, 2002; Stephens & Wright, 1999; Wilson, 2006; Woodson, 2005), the prevalence of adjunct faculty in the online classroom mandates increased attention to this unique population (Dailey-Hebert, Mandernach, Donnelli-Sallee & Norris, 2014). As highlighted by Lazerson (2010), "The shift to part-time faculty members, already under way during the last two decades, is accelerating, and almost no one knows the consequences" (Lazerson, 2010, B6).

The value of adjunct faculty, and their increasing presence in higher education, is primarily discussed as a function of financial considerations. Because adjunct faculty work at a lower salary and are contracted as a function of enrollments, they are cost-effective for the institution (Benjamin, 2002; Dedman & Pearch, 2004; Finder, 2007; Gappa & Leslie, 1993; Grusin & Reed, 1994; Kekke, 1986; Levin, 2005; Reichard, 2003; Wagoner, Metcalfe, & Olaore, 2005; Wyles, 1998). But, beyond this practical consideration, there may be pedagogical benefits of adjunct faculty; specifically, research finds that adjunct faculty provide an applied perspective, critical expertise and real-world experience that may be less pronounced for fulltime academics (Berry, 1999; Cowley, 2010; Lyons, 2007; Peters, Jackson, Andrew, Halbomb, & Salamonson, 2011; Puzzifero & Shelton, 2009).

Critiquing the application and relevance of these findings, researchers caution against a "one-size-fits-all conceptualization of part-time faculty" (Wagoner, 2007, pg. 26) and challenge the assumption that adjunct faculty are a homogenous population. Recognizing differential motivations and backgrounds of those with contingent teaching roles, Wagoner (2007) differentiates between two distinct types of adjunct faculty: 1) highly-skilled scholars employed fulltime outside of academe with close ties to the private sector; and 2) less-skilled scholars with traditional academic backgrounds and aspirations who seek fulltime faculty appointments. Recognizing that broad categories may be too generalized and fail to capture the variability of adjunct faculty, Gappa and Lesslie (1993) differentiate adjunct faculty even further into four categories based on lifestyle and motivation:

- *Specialists, experts, or professionals* (aligned with Wagoner's, 2007, category of highly-skilled scholars) have full-time employment outside their part-time teaching responsibilities; these faculty teach as a means of sharing their expertise, networking and contributing to the field.
- *Freelancers* are employed in two or more part-time jobs (or even a regular full-time job at another college), but are not seeking fulltime employment as a faculty member.
- *Career-enders* are professionals who are near or at the end of their work lives and utilize adjunct teaching as a means to maintain contact with the professional community.
- *Aspiring academics* (aligned with Wagoner's, 2007, category of less-skilled scholars and similar research by Gottschalk & McEachern, 2010) are individual with traditional academic backgrounds who utilize adjunct teaching contracts as a means of increasing opportunities for fulltime academic positions.

While these categories and differentiations apply to adjuncts teaching face-to-face and/or online, the geographic flexibility for those teaching online also creates a new category of adjunct faculty who simultaneously teach multiple part-time contracts at a number of institutions to fulfill their professional needs. These "full-time part-timers" (Schnitzer & Crosby, 2003) or "professional adjuncts" (Bedford, 2009) are unique in their entrepreneurial approach to creating a unique academic role (Carnevale, 2004) and have emerged as a function of the increased opportunities to teach online. Recognizing the challenges associated with treating adjuncts as a homogenous group, scholars are critical of assumptions and generalizations about adjunct faculty as "there is still remarkably little nation-level

information about their [adjunct faculty] numbers or upon the variety of their employment and contractual circumstances, let alone about their own views on the nature of their employment" (Husbands, 1998, pg. 259).

Historically, adjuncts were limited in employment opportunities based on the physical proximity of nearby campuses, but the geographic flexibility of online teaching challenges many of our previous assumptions about adjunct faculty and calls into question the relevance of current literature on the needs of adjunct faculty (in relation to training, support, evaluation and retention) as it applies to those teaching exclusively online. The purpose of the current investigation is to examine characteristics of modern online adjunct faculty member to help guide institutions in effectively adapting to a changing faculty body.

## Methods

We created an online survey to examine personal demographics, motivations and academic background of faculty teaching online courses in an adjunct capacity. Due to our focus at the individual faculty level (rather than the systems level), no data was collected concerning the institution, program, discipline or online course. A request to complete an anonymous online survey was emailed to all adjunct faculty currently teaching an online course at two target universities. In addition to the initial request, we utilized a snowball sampling technique and asked all email recipients to forward the request for participation to other adjunct faculty teaching online. The snowball sampling technique was implemented to expand the survey population and to help ensure anonymity of potential survey respondents (a concern highlighted during the IRB review process as some adjunct faculty may be hesitant to honestly reveal supplemental employment). Per the nature of the snowball solicitation process, the response rate is unknown as there is no data on the number of faculty that ultimately received a request to participate. It is important to note that the snowball sampling technique may limit generalizability of findings as results cannot be examined with respect to potential influences of the practices and policies of particular institutions. The online survey was available for six weeks. During the six-week period of survey availability, 678 faculty opened the survey with 603 participants submitting survey responses for an 88.94% completion rate.

## Results and Discussion

Faculty (N = 603) currently teaching an online course at the post-secondary level responded to the online survey examining personal demographics, motivations and academic background. Aligned with the survey parameters, all faculty respondents indicated that they were currently teaching an online course in an adjunct capacity. The demographic data obtained via the survey are analyzed to examine characteristics of modern adjunct faculty members teaching online.

## Personal Profile

*Gender*. Results indicated more female (62.6%) than male (37.4%) online adjuncts. While research finds no gender differences in terms of faculty job satisfaction (Yazici & Altun, 2013), there are differences in student satisfaction as a function of an instructor's gender role. Freeman (1994) found that students prefer instructors who possessed both feminine and masculine characteristics (i.e., both sensitive and assertive), regardless of the gender of the instructor. One could argue that the online classroom is unique in allowing faculty the ability to mask individualized characteristics (such as gender), but the online environment also presents unique opportunities to train faculty to respond to interact with students in a more structured manner. Recognizing that students prefer faculty who exhibit high levels of both leadership (masculine gender role) and empathy (feminine gender role) (Freeman, 1994), faculty development initiatives can train faculty in asynchronous interaction strategies that display preferred faculty characteristics. For example, faculty can be provided guidance on effective ways of conveying emotions (i.e., empathy, care, warmth) within the context of an

asynchronous discussion which lacks traditional non-verbal indicators of expressiveness.

*Age*. Online adjunct faculty reported a mean age of 46.32 years (SD = 11.28); the large standard deviation highlights the expanded age range of online adjunct faculty (ranging from 25 to 79 years). As highlighted in the previous discussion of the various categories of adjunct faculty (specialists, freelancers, career-enders, aspiring academics, professional adjuncts), the disparate age of online adjunct faculty indicates considerable variability in career progression. In addition, the wide age range may be an indicator of differential effectiveness of various modes or types of faculty development training (for a detailed discussion of generational differences in learning preferences, see Rosen, 2010).

*Educational Degree*. Most online adjunct faculty (64.2%) indicated a master's degree as their highest degree achieved with 32.5% holding a doctorate, 3% specialist and .3% bachelors. Reflecting the high percentage of master's degree faculty, 23.6% of respondents indicated that they are currently pursuing additional degrees. Of those actively enrolled in an advanced degree program, 74.5% are pursuing a doctorate with 13.8% seeking a second master's degree; in addition, 6.9% are working toward a specialists degree and 4.8% are seeking professional certification. The high percentage of faculty who are teaching online while pursuing their own academic degrees highlights a new category of faculty not previously identified in the adjunct literature; these "transitional faculty" (adjunct faculty who are simultaneously engaged as both students and teachers) vary in comparison to other categories of "less-skilled scholars" as they are fully engaged in the academic community, but are still building their credentials in academia. These online adjunct faculty may have a differential set of expectations, needs and experience compared to adjunct faculty who are not actively engaged as students. Importantly, "transitional faculty" may also provide valuable insight to help institutions adapt their faculty training and development to be more responsive to the needs of modern students.

**Teaching Profile**

*Teaching Experience*. On average, faculty participants reported 6.83 years (SD = 6.96 years) college teaching experience with a mean of 4.08 years (SD = 3.30 years) experience teaching in an online environment. As indicated by the large standard deviations, faculty ranged from being complete novices to both college and online teaching to having more than a decade of college teaching experience. Not surprisingly, faculty had more generalized experience teaching at the college level than they did experience specific to the online classroom. While student evaluations of teaching show little difference in perceptions of instructional effectiveness as a function of experience (Marsh, 2007), recognizing variability in teaching experience is a vital component of an effective faculty development and training program. A comparison of the mean faculty age with the mean years teaching experience implies that a majority of faculty went into college teaching (and online education) after spending a portion of their professional life in another career. As such, faculty development programs to prepare online faculty may need to go beyond training in online teaching strategies to include general background in pedagogy and learning theory.

*Mode of Teaching*. The majority of faculty (88%) indicated that they currently teach only online courses with an additional 9% teaching online and face-to-face courses simultaneously. The fact that most online adjunct faculty teach *only* in the online environment has a number of institutional implications. Those that teach only online are likely working from a location that is geographically separated from the campus. Not only does this mandate that faculty training and evaluation can be completed from a distance, but (also) it demands that faculty development initiatives are tailored in a manner to engage faculty with their academic department and the university. Thus, not only should faculty development programming provide the necessary skills and abilities for online faculty to be successful, it should also be structured in a manner that fosters professional networks between geographically-separate faculty. Recognizing the investment necessary to hire, train and support online adjunct faculty, institutions must deliberately engage these faculty in a

manner that promotes faculty satisfaction and retention.

## Employment Profile

*Institutional Affiliation*. A large percentage of faculty (48%) indicated that they teach in an adjunct capacity simultaneously for two (or more) universities. Aligned with this finding, 40.5% stated that their adjunct teaching for multiple institutions is done completely via the online format. Beyond their adjunct faculty role, 15.1% of respondents reported having a fulltime faculty position at one institution while teaching adjunct courses for another. While teaching at a number of different institutions increases one's teaching experience and may be desired by the individual faculty member (Bedford, 2009), it simultaneously raises institutional considerations surrounding intellectual property and course material. Intellectual property and ownership of instructional material in the online classroom is very different than its face-to-face counterpart. When teaching face-to-face, an adjunct faculty's ownership of instructional materials is clearly linked to their synchronous presentations and interactions in the classroom. But in the online classroom, there is often a differentiation between the static instructional material in a course and the instructor's facilitation of the course. While facilitation of the course is seen as the property of the instructor, the static content is generally the property of the institution (either because the institution has contracted with an individual to develop the content or the instructional materials were developed by an institutional team of content developers). Concerns arise when an online adjunct instructor has access to the instructional content at one institution and may utilize that information at another institution; complicating the manner is an inability to monitor for these types of information breaches due to the password-protected nature of most online classrooms.

## Professional Aspirations

*Career Goals*. Examining the professional goals and aspirations in relation to their adjunct position, 55.2% of faculty stated that they are satisfied with their role as an adjunct faculty member and desire to maintain their current status. While it is unclear whether these faculty would be classified as specialists, freelancers, or career-enders, they report that they are currently satisfied with their role and are not seeking additional employment. In contrast, a large proportion of faculty (42.6%) reported that they are seeking a fulltime teaching position at one of the institutions for which they serve as an adjunct; an additional 7% seek a fulltime faculty position at an institution other than one they currently serve as an adjunct. Aligned with the aspiring academic classification, these individuals are utilizing their role as an online adjunct as a means to secure a more permanent position. A number of faculty (12.9%) indicated that while they are not actively pursuing adjunct teaching positions at other institutions, they would like additional teaching assignments at their current institution and 16.6% of adjunct faculty reported that they are seeking additional adjunct teaching opportunities at different institutions to supplement their current adjunct role. While no information was gathered to differentiate these online faculty into career-enders, freelancers or professional adjuncts, the breakdown of faculty according to their professional aspirations provides support for the relevance of generalized categories of adjunct classification as it applies to the online environment.

## Conclusion

As highlighted by Dailey-Hebert, Mandernach, Donnelli-Sallee and Norris (2014), "budgetary constraints and the availability of a lower-cost pool of adjunct faculty make it unlikely that colleges and universities will reverse the current dependence on part-time faculty" (pg. 2). This trend is intensified as a function of the Affordable Care Act (ACA). With institutions facing challenges in how to align hiring and monitoring practices of adjunct faculty to meet ACA guidelines, there is an impending shift in the utilization of adjunct faculty (Land & Salemi, 2014). In an effort to avoid the costs associated with providing

required benefits to those teaching over 30 hours per week, approximately 50% of institutions are restricting course assignments for individual adjuncts (Land & Salemi, 2014); the result is an increased need in the number of adjunct faculty an institution utilizes to cover course offerings. Not only do the ACA guidelines increase the potential number of adjunct faculty teaching at an institution, but it highlights the need for institutions to quantify the working hours of adjunct faculty and to more effectively train adjunct faculty to maximize the efficiency of their limited instructional time.

This reliance on a contingent population mandates that institutions accurately understand the characteristics of their online faculty population and tailor training, support and development initiatives to meet their unique needs. As a function of the current findings, institutions should:

- Provide targeted adjunct faculty training on asynchronous interaction strategies that foster teaching, social and emotional presence in the online classroom.
- Structure adjunct faculty training and development to go beyond exclusive emphasis on online teaching strategies to include general background in pedagogy and learning theory.
- Maximize the expertise of "transitional faculty" (adjunct faculty who are simultaneously engaged as both students and teachers) as they provide valuable insight to help institutions adapt their faculty training and development to be more responsive to the needs of modern students.
- Clearly address guidelines, policies and expectations for intellectual property and ownership of instructional material in the online classroom.
- Offer faculty development and training initiatives in a range of modes (i.e., synchronous, asynchronous, collaborative, independent, static, interactive) that foster faculty engagement regardless of age, technological sophistication or online learning expertise.
- Ensure online adjunct faculty can participate in faculty training and development initiatives remotely and at a schedule amenable to a geographically-diverse population.
- Promote faculty satisfaction and retention by engaging online adjunct faculty as active collaborators in the institution.
- Tailor faculty development initiatives in a manner to engage online adjunct faculty with their academic department and the university.
- Foster professional networks between geographically-separate adjunct faculty.
- Invest additional resources to hire, train and support online adjunct faculty in a manner that is uniquely geared towards the needs, expectations and challenges of this population.

As highlighted by the current study, existing models that differentiate between faculty populations are relevant to those teaching online but the asynchronous, geographically-diverse nature of the online environment allows for an even more diverse faculty body. Along with recognizing the varied training and support needs of adjunct faculty in the specialist, career-ender, freelancer and aspiring academic category, the flexible nature of online education allows for growing populations of online adjuncts classified as transitional faculty and professional online adjuncts. The results of this study align with a growing body of research (Bedford, 2009; Bedford & Miller, 2013; Kanuka, Jugdev, Heller & West, 2008; Milliken & Jurgens, 2008) that emphasize the need to tailor faculty services and support as a function of the variability of the online adjunct population. Each category of online adjunct faculty bring with them a new set of considerations that institutions must address to ensure training, support, evaluation, and policy are aligned to foster an effective learning environment for online students and a productive institutional workplace.

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