

Examining Adjunct Faculty Needs Via a Distance Pedagogical Framework in Higher Education

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Adjunct faculty are increasingly more critical in Higher Education. A leading distance-learning program implemented a leveled model to organize ~700 adjunct faculty. Given online engineering and engineering technology graduate/undergraduate programs, the College faced unique challenges posed by distributed work environments and distance learning modalities. This paper examines challenges adjunct faculty face, a continuous improvement processes, quality and sustainability in distance learning, concerns among stakeholders, methodology and results. Results show adjunct faculty would like more feedback, additional course information, increased lead-time, course frequency and effective communication with points of contact. It presents, opportunities for increased efficiency and effectiveness.

Keywords: adjunct faculty, distance education, higher education, adjunct faculty needs, Distance Pedagogical Framework

INTRODUCTION

Changes in technology, social climate, global health and general availability of resources has created a unique landscape ripe for distance learning. Incidents like the global COVID-19 pandemic has caused rapid shifts towards online delivery of academics from early childhood education to higher education. While some organizations face a plethora of challenges including transitioning from traditional face-to-face learning at brick and mortar institutions, other organizations face the challenge of optimizing existing distance learning capabilities to sustain and improve its online offerings and market position.

To meet global demand, one such institution, examined in this document, recognized the importance of leveraging human resources effectively and efficiently. It offers many face-to-face, online and blended courses during condensed, nine-week terms year round. As a national leader in online education in undergraduate programs as rated by U.S. News & World Report in 2020, the College aims to provide the flexibility and availability online students crave. However, this model results in a massive workload shared by full-time and part-time (or adjunct) faculty. Statistics show that about half of the instructional faculty in

the United States are adjunct faculty (Flaherty, 2018); the College, examined in this document, has established an extensive adjunct faculty pool consisting of individuals from a range of demographics, professional backgrounds and phases of their career.

It houses technical programs, including engineering and engineering technology undergraduate and graduate degree programs. The goal of the conducted research was to understand its adjunct faculty pool of nearly 700 individuals. The number of adjunct faculty being one unique factor and the distributed working environment and instructional modality being another. More specifically, the study aimed to:

- Identify and investigate prevailing interests and concerns among key stakeholders
- Understand factors facing adjunct faculty
- Define short-term and long-term opportunities for improvement

This paper presents a literature review, an approach to the study and the results. Additionally, it outlines recommendations that foster efficiency and effectiveness that positively affect the College ecosystem.

Literature Review

The growth of online education, shrinking budgets and rapid growth of online education opportunities have begun to shape the discussions and relevant research in higher education. Online education has experienced explosive growth over the past decade. According to reports from the Education Department's National Center for Education Statistics (Ginder, et al., 2019), the number and proportion of college and university students taking classes online grew solidly by 5.7% in 2017, even as overall post-secondary enrollments fell by 0.5%. The proportion of all students who were enrolled exclusively online grew to 15.4% (up from 14.7% in 2016). The share of all students who mixed online and in-person courses grew to 17.6% in 2017 from 16.4% in 2016. Moreover, the proportion of all students who took at least one course online grew to 33.1% in 2016. Then unexpectedly, courses offered by US institutions have all but totally gone online in 2020.

Shrinking budgets and the rapid growth of online education have stimulated an increase in adjunct faculty in higher education. Disparities in available full-time faculty and other resources has resulted in controversial scenarios where adjunct faculty can make up an entire department's faculty (Roger, et al., 2010, p. 53). Though adjunct faculty have been the majority in community colleges for some time, adjunct faculty assumed the majority position in undergraduate and graduate level institutions collectively between 2005 and 2007, pointing to a "structural shift toward contingent labor" previously predicted by (Smith, 2003, p. 23).

In engineering specifically, adjunct faculty representation is far less, but no less critical. Data shows the adjunct faculty full time equivalence (FTE) represents about 7% (2,940 FTE of 36,776) of all engineering instructional positions (Roy, 2019). Similarly, the National Science Foundation's, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics reports that about 10% of Science, engineering, and health doctorate holders employed in universities and 4-year colleges were adjunct faculty in 2017, i.e. 19,800 of 212,700 faculty positions (NCSES, 2019).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The College discussed in this reported, expressed an impetus to evaluate adjunct faculty concerns and challenges. It sought to support the insurance of fair evaluations, to foster prompt communication, and that the University, College and the respective academic department standards and expectations are clear.

Database Analysis

The College maintains a database of all adjunct faculty. It contains personal information such as demographics, current location, contact information, data about the individual's academic preparation, faculty rank, completed University associated training, time with the university, course assignments, and course clearances (or approved to teach) and faculty evaluation dates.

Stakeholder Perspective

College-Level Insight

For this research, College administrators answered contextual questions to understand processes for adjunct faculty selection, rating and course assignments. In addition, full-time faculty provided input about their experiences related to Adjunct Faculty during College meetings. The results of these queries was a 22-question instrument to obtain Adjunct Faculty perspectives for various aspects in key areas of interest (See Appendix for full instrument). Each survey item is mapped to the administrator questions asked below:

- College Communication (Aligned with Survey Item 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9)
 - Who informs adjunct faculty of course assignments and other needs?
 - How and why are adjunct faculty contacted?
 - What is the expected lead-time between course assignment and course launch?
- Course Assignments (Aligned with Survey Item 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16)
 - Who and what determines which course(s) adjunct faculty will teach and assignments made?
- Faculty Onboarding (Aligned with Survey Item 17)
 - Who hires individuals for the adjunct faculty pool?
 - Does adjunct faculty go through College-level hiring processes or does a central entity such as Human Resources make the decision based on qualifications?
 - How are adjunct faculty prepared to teach for the College?
- Faculty Performance (Aligned with Survey Item 18, 19, 20)
 - Are adjunct faculty rated? If so, by whom? How often?

Questions 21 and 22 are open-ended questions that allowed the participant to include additional comments as needed. Similarly, most items allowed participants to expand response beyond given choices via open-ended response fields.

Adjunct Faculty Survey

- Purpose: The survey obtained adjunct faculty input on College communication, course assignments, preparation, feedback and unmet needs.
- Participants: Sixteen percent of the total adjunct faculty population (n=107 of 684) were randomly selected for the study. These individuals represent different performance ratings and overall time with the College. Nineteen percent, of faculty receiving the survey responded. Eleven percent of email requests returned due to invalid email addresses stored in the adjunct faculty database.
- Dissemination: Potential participants were sent online surveys, using their University email address, per University policy. The email contained a custom link generated using SurveyMonkey.com and anonymity was ensured.
- Period of Collection: Emails were sent from September to October, (1-month total). After the first and third weeks none respondents were sent reminders.

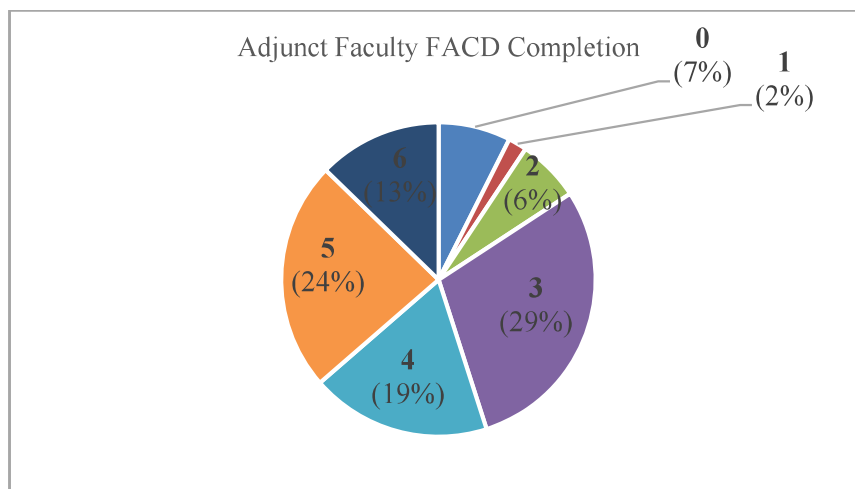
RESULTS

The administrator queried confirmed that processes are in place for adjunct faculty selection and designation to teach each course. Though the College's Procedures and Operating Manual (POM) is available, the absence of a centralized location featuring real-time maintenance of the faculty database and other key information needed. This led to the discovery of inefficiencies in the College's ability to meet the standard operating procedures for selection, rating and course assignments. The data also raised the question of whether the total number of adjunct faculty (~700) outweighed the College's need. Results from the study, are discussed in the following subsections.

Faculty Onboarding

The College, analyzed in this report, required all faculty to take a specialized series of up to six faculty development courses, termed FACD herein. Each course is a 4-week combination of synchronous and asynchronous instruction and activities aiming to develop skills specific to the College’s student body, distance learning pedagogy and technology. The specific number of required courses vary by modality but taking the full training series is optimal. Adjunct faculty take these courses in good faith, and without compensation. Figure 1, shows that many adjunct faculty have not completed the full training series despite the common comment that the courses are invaluable to their preparation. Notably, more than 50% have completed at least four FACD courses. This highlighted the missed opportunities to leverage existing resources to better prepare the current adjunct faculty pool.

FIGURE 1
NUMBER OF FACD COURSES COMPLETED BY ADJUNCT FACULTY



Additionally, participants noted a need for improved access to course materials for planning and preparation purposes. One participant suggested that the availability of an online syllabus repository accessible by adjunct faculty, on-demand would allow them to not only prepare for future course assignments earlier but also suggested the additional courses they would like to become cleared to teach. Others suggest that contact with the course monitor (or course-specific POC) for any issues or questions related to the courses can be difficult.

There were also several comments that scheduling related issues impact adjunct faculty preparation- i.e. short lead time between assignment and class start, frequency of assignments for specific courses and payment-to-man hours imbalance, especially for those courses requiring more preparation but having smaller class sizes.

Course Assignments

A centralized entity exists that represents all of the Colleges assigned courses. It is used for clearances and scheduling. Forty percent of participants reported being contacted at least once per quarter to teach a course, while others report as much as once per year (30%) and years between contact (5%). Table 1 shows the number of cleared courses for adjunct faculty. From one course to more than 100 courses, 21% of adjunct faculty were cleared to teach up to five courses, while 11% were cleared for 6 to 10 courses. It was also significant to note that 14% (or 98) of the listed adjunct faculty were not cleared to teach any course, requiring further investigation as to root cause.

TABLE 1
NUMBER OF APPROVED COURSES FOR ADJUNCT FACULTY

Number of Courses	Approved Adjuncts	Number of Courses	Approved Adjuncts
1	51	10 < x <= 20	85
2	31	20 < x <= 30	57
3	18	30 < x <= 40	30
4	22	40 < x <= 50	27
5	19	50 < x <= 100	97
6 < =x <= 10	76	>100	73

All but one of the participants had a favorable experience teaching the last course taught. The survey asked participant if they would like to clearance to teach more courses and which modes. Thirty-five percent were satisfied with the current modes they teach, 30% would like clearance to teach in all modes. Forty-five percent have clearance to teach in all modes, 10% blended, 25% face-to-face and 55% have clearance to teach online. Fifteen percent would like clearance to teach face-to-face, 15% blended and 35% online. Then, 75% of the participants would like clearance to teach more courses with most listing specific courses of interest.

Moreover, thirty-five percent of the participants did not receive notification of future teaching assignments while 55% received notification of a teaching assignment and 10% were on standby or currently teaching. Some participants expressed some concern that they had not received an assignment, even though they had completed the FACD series. Others also stated that a significant time had lapsed since completing the series or the assignment of their last course that they needed new training.

Figures 2 and 3 show the time since the start of the last course assignment for adjunct faculty in the College. Table 3 is the same data, with the time scale changed to show those with less than 100 days since their last course assignment. Notably, there were faculty with as little as 1 day since the start of their last class to those with nearly 8,000 days (or approximately 22 years).

FIGURE 2
TIME SINCE ADJUNCT FACULTY COURSE ASSIGNMENT

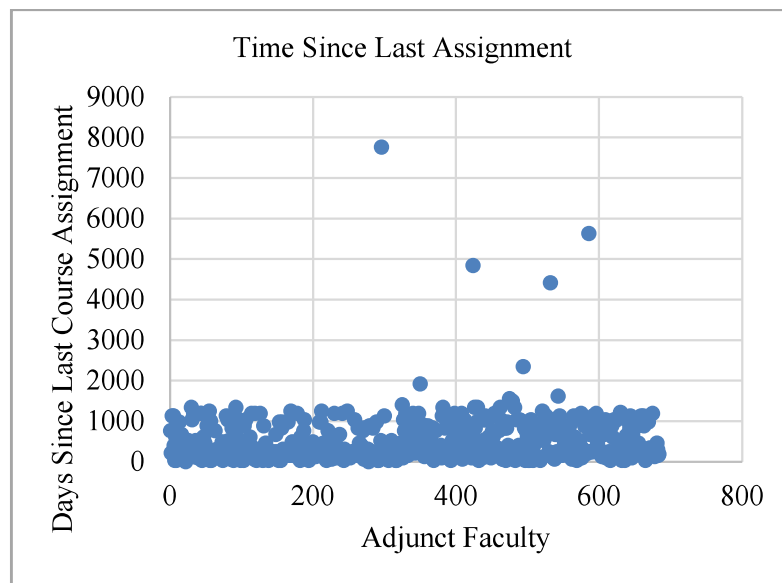
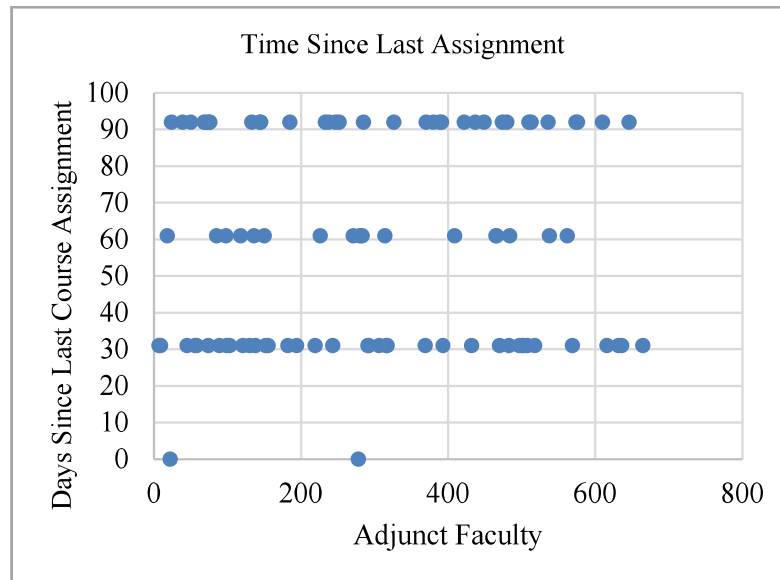


FIGURE 3
TIME SINCE ADJUNCT FACULTY COURSE ASSIGNMENT



Faculty Performance

Ninety percent of participants reported receiving feedback concerning how well they performed but many noted that this was the result of student end-of-course surveys. When asked about College feedback concerning job performance 75% said they received it, 10% said they rarely received any, 10% did not receive any feedback from the College and 5% said that they sometimes received feedback from the College concerning job performance. Thirty percent would like to receive additional feedback.

In addition, participants expressed substantial variance in the frequency and nature of the evaluation. Some Adjunct Faculty reported getting evaluations multiple times in a single term while others only a single evaluation over the full time at the College. Some reported receiving evaluations annually, each term teaching or only when issues raised by others. Based on the adjunct faculty database, about 44% (or 261 of 589) of faculty that had taught at least one course had a formal evaluation by the College (not including student evaluations).

College Communication

Given the rather distributed and discontinuous nature of adjunct faculty engagement with the College, communication between adjunct faculty and the College leads the way for weakened commitments and a low sense of community (Gorden, et.al., 2009, p. 115). Each participant felt that email was the best form of contact with some concern mentioned of using the University email (as required per University policy); they would rather use personal email or phone. Fifty percent of the participants did not have or know of their point of contact (POC). Yet, 15% of participants reported having more than one.

Sixty-five percent were satisfied with POC contact frequency, but fifteen percent were not, adding comments like “it would be nice to have at least one POC”. Some reported that the contact was usually concerning an assigned course and that contact is more frequent at the beginning of the term. Some participants referenced a desire to engage with one of the University’s 120 regional campuses on a more frequent basis. Recently, the University eliminated the central contact at these campuses, requiring adjunct faculty to find other ways to identify and engage on-the-ground POCs in their local area.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Results ultimately showed that most Adjunct Faculty would like more feedback, more course information prior to the course becoming accessible in the learning management system, increased lead-time and frequency for the courses they teach and more effective communication with the College and its points of contact. A list of recommendations developed by synthesizing the literature related to these findings are:

Faculty Onboarding

- Collect, organize and distribute information about available support systems, structures, controls, resources and contacts showing deliberate synthesis for Adjunct Faculty (Forbes, et.al., 2010, p. 116), (Mueller, et.al., 2013, p. 341)
- Provide faculty support resources and repositories for continuous learning, teaching tools and technology assistance (Forbes, et.al., 2010, p. 116)
- Continuously examine institutional policies to address inherent and unintentional effects of these policies (Muller, et.al., 2013, p. 341)
- Employ more intentional information systems that can handle more coordinated storage, tracking and dissemination of information (Fagen-Wilen, et.al., 2006, p. 39)
- Examine opportunities to standardize certain expectations like time on task, student interaction requirements and training needs (Puzziferro-Schnitzer, 2005, p. 1)
- Ensure formal and informal training and education is available on both a voluntary and required basis (Fagen-Wilen, et.al., 2006, p. 39)

Course Assignments

- Examine alternative institutional structures and policies that encourage Adjunct Faculty to invest their time, effort and resources beyond their contracted course (Muller, et.al., 2013, p. 341)
- Ensure that course templates and overall course design help to maintain consistency and quality of courses but also allows some level of autonomy to Adjunct Faculty in the delivery of that course (Puzziferro-Schnitzer, 2005, p. 1)

Faculty Performance

- Create process controls and evaluation measures that promote teamwork among all faculty (Roger, et.al., 2010, p. 53)
- Provide detailed, written guidelines and expectations of Adjunct Faculty in the totality of their role that can be formally traced to the reward system, consistency of contracts and recognizes valuable contributions (Forbes, et.al., 2010, p. 116), (Fagan-Wilen, et.al., 2006, p. 39), (Puzziferro-Schnitzer, 2005, p. 1), (Arnold, et.al., 2011, p. 409)
- Employ an open loop evaluation system that allows ongoing tracking, analysis, communication, synthesis and communication of findings for continuous improvement of the faculty and the institution (Puzziferro-Schnitzer, 2005, p. 1)
- Require more equitable scrutiny and evaluation among various faculty groups to communicate the need for quality irrespective of faculty status (Arnold, et.al., 2011, p. 409)
- Allow time for active learning for Adjunct Faculty including reflection, writing and self-improvement audits (Puzziferro-Schnitzer, 2005, p. 1)

College Communication

- Integrate the use of two way communication platforms and powerful technological tools into processes to help build rapport and preserve the personal attributes of communication (Roger, et.al., 2010, p. 53)
- Provide constant and consistent faculty-institution contact and disseminate information to Adjunct Faculty that acknowledges professional, timely and available support and opportunities are available (Rogers, et.al., 2010, p. 53), (Puzziferro-Schnitzer, 2005, p. 1)

- Multiple points of contact should be established with Adjunct Faculty including staff interaction and full-time faculty interaction (Forbes, et.al., 2010, p. 116), (Fagan-Wilen, et.al., 2006, p. 39)
- Foster reciprocal communication (Rogers, et.al., 2010, p. 53), (Puzziferro-Schnitzer, 2005, p. 1)
- Communicate institutional and program goals, priorities, policies, beliefs and culture that foster a holistic understanding of the collective vision and mission of the institution and how individual contributions impact the larger system (Rogers, et.al., 2010, p. 53), (Mueller, et.al., 2013, p. 341), (Puzziferro-Schnitzer, 2005, p. 1), (Giess, et.al., 2016, p. 36)

Additionally, a brainstorm of more specific short-term and long-term initiatives to exploit these recommendations are captured in Table 2.

**TABLE 2
PROSPECTIVE INITIATIVES**

Extend invitations to school functions, faculty meetings and workshops, including pinning ceremonies	Develop a newsletter containing pedagogical strategies, teaching and general resources on campus and calendar items
Ensure department wide recognition of Adjunct Faculty	Give Adjunct Faculty preference for full-time positions
Centralize hiring, assignments and evaluation	Promote reading circles, brown bag lunches, informal and formal sessions
Set limits to the number of adjunct faculty an institution could hire or setting full-time/part-time faculty ratios	Schedule specific times for all faculty to meet, plan, share resources and discuss different topics
Consider consolidating more consistent adjunct needs into full-time positions	Appoint a liaison to serve as the voice of Adjunct Faculty
Send personalized thanks you from leadership	Increase the lead time for course assignment
Send regular communications from administrators and colleagues that are both meaningful and relevant to their teaching	Consider diversity in the orientation and FACD modality-e.g. an online orientation, a meet and greet, etc.
Develop an incentive program that offers priority scheduling for Adjunct Faculty that demonstrates an ongoing commitment to professional growth through participation in faculty development initiatives	Develop an incentive program that offers priority scheduling for Adjunct Faculty that demonstrates an ongoing commitment to professional growth through participation in faculty development initiatives

CONCLUSION

Adjunct Faculty have become an essential part of the higher education system, especially given the rise of distance learning. These educators have a direct impact on the quality of the education that students receive. Whether Adjunct Faculty are adequately trained to teach in available modalities effectively, actively engage with the College they serve via course assignments and ongoing communication or gain sufficient feedback to gauge and improve their performance directly impacts many aspects of the University ecosystem. This paper introduces a study to understand various factors affecting adjunct faculty within the College. The results have led to a list of recommendations and several specific initiatives that could be adapted with varying levels of resources. While this study, conducted in the distributed learning space, it provides broad implications for traditional learning modalities as well.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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**APPENDIX
SURVEY QUESTIONS & RESULTS**

Survey Item	Fixed Response Results
1. How does the College usually contact you?	100% Email
2. Is this the best way to contact you?	90% Yes
3. Who is your point of contact at ERAU?	15% Identified; 50% Didn't have one; 35% Unknown
4. Do you have more than one point of contact?	15% Yes
5. How often are you contacted?	20% Once a Year; 25% Once a month; 5% Everyday; 5% 2/3 times week; 45% As needed (class)
6. Are you satisfied with the frequency of contact?	65% Yes; 15% No; 20% Other
7. What is the context of your contact?	Teaching (majority); technical difficulties; curriculum approvals; upcoming events; newsletter and other University generic information
8. Are you satisfied with the frequency of contact?	75% Yes; 20% No; 5% Other
9. How often are you contacted to teach a course?	30% Once year, 40% Once a quarter, 5% Years between contact; 25% Other
10. Would you like to be asked to teach courses more often?	80% Yes, 5% No, 15% Other
11. What was the last course you taught and when?	<i>Various text, no percentages</i>
12. Have you been notified of your next teaching experience?	10% Other (on Standby or currently teaching a course), 35% No, 55% Yes
13. Which additional modes would you like to be cleared to teach in?	15% Face to Face, 15% Blended, 35% Online, 35%; Are satisfied with the current modes they teach in; 30% Would like to be cleared to teach in all modes
14. Which modes are you cleared to teach?	45% Are cleared to teach in all modes, 10% cleared to teach in blended, 25% cleared to teach Face to Face, 55% cleared to teach online
15. What course are you cleared to teach?	<i>Various text, no percentages</i>
16. Are there additional courses you want to be cleared for?	
17. What, if anything, could the University do to help you better prepare to teach a course?	
18. Were you made aware of how well the students/course observer felt you performed after you taught your last course?	90% Yes; 5% No; 5% Other
19. Do you receive any feedback from the University concerning job performance? What kind?	75% Yes; 5% Sometimes; 10% No; 10% Rarely
20. Would you like to receive additional feedback concerning your performance?	30% Yes; 70% No
21. Questions you feel are missing from the survey	<i>Various text, no percentages</i>
22. Comments including your name if you would like it included	