

# **Adjunct Faculty Engagement:**

## **An Investigation and Recommendations for Action and Ongoing Research**

Laura M. Coons\*, Michael E. Alexander, Tiffany Yates, and Daphne DePorres  
Colorado Technical University  
[LCoons@coloradotech.edu](mailto:LCoons@coloradotech.edu)  
[MAlexander@coloradotech.edu](mailto:MAlexander@coloradotech.edu)  
[TYates@coloradotech.edu](mailto:TYates@coloradotech.edu)  
[DDeporres@coloradotech.edu](mailto:DDeporres@coloradotech.edu)

### **Abstract**

Adjunct faculty engagement is a topic of increasing significance as institutions of higher education drive towards an affiliate faculty model of staffing among their professorships. At the institution presented in this paper, a Human Resources team surveyed approximately 3000 faculty members from a group of universities and colleges, segmenting the data along performance measurements for the respondents. The purpose of this research was to measure adjunct faculty members' commitment to the institution. Through this characteristic, the team sought to gain a clearer understanding of motivators for engagement among this population; specifically, they were interested in developing interventions targeted at enhancing commitment and engagement in order to improve retention of high performing instructors. This paper explores the results of that study and some of the early interventions designed by academic team members from the institutions. It makes recommendations for future research on the topic of adjunct faculty engagement.

### **Introduction**

There is minimal doubt that the landscape of higher education is rapidly changing. In July of 2009, the Society for College and University Planning (SCUP) focused its Trends in Higher Education issue on the impact of the economy on colleges and universities. The authors suggested that colleges and universities were in the "neutral zone" of Bridges's (2003) transitional process – that is, a time of "maximum uncertainty and creative possibility between the ending of the way things have been and before the way they will become" (Grummon, 2009, p. 48). The most recent economic downturn brought with it a series of new and unexpected developments. The first major surprise was the drop in enrollment during the recession (Grummon, 2009). Traditionally, student populations increase when the job market is tight and workers who become under- or unemployed seek additional training to give them an edge for scarcer jobs. Likewise, students currently enrolled are more likely to stay enrolled or move on more quickly to graduate school when employment prospects are reduced.

The immediate impact of fiscal shortfalls has been reductions in force – not only among staff, but also among faculty. Relying more heavily on their adjunct faculty, many institutions froze tenure-track position hiring. Graduate students are less likely now than ever to pursue a career in academia (Grummon, 2009). At the same time, faculty are less likely to choose a

transition into administration, because they refuse to have to live with the challenges of balancing budgets. This paradigm results in faculty not advancing into administrative positions, so tensions between the two groups seem poised to worsen. The aim of this research is to develop a system-wide effort to improve the assimilation of adjunct faculty and ensure strategic organizational alignment for the academic institution. .

As institutions contend with this new reality, questions are being raised about the impact of such changes on the quality of higher education. Adjunct faculty members shoulder more responsibility for institutions without sharing in all the prospects of university life. In turn, these part-time faculty find themselves unfamiliar with the culture of the institution and under threat of the disposable nature of their position. If this contingent workforce is to remain such an integral part of higher education, is there more institutions can do to cultivate, reward, and retain high performers among their ranks?

### **Discussion and Hypothesis**

The purposes of this paper are to: (1) provide a basic overview of literature on the costs and benefits of employing more adjunct faculty, (2) provide data and analysis of results from a faculty engagement survey, and (3) make recommendations for institutions seeking to support their contingent faculty workforce. Based on information in the literature and the results of the survey, it seems clear that more can be done to enhance adjunct faculty members' experiences, consequently leading to stronger retention rates of quality part-time instructors at the college level.

In response to the results of the survey, interventions were designed and implemented by some of the faculty management groups at the institutions. This paper outlines additional techniques and strategies for faculty managers to use in their efforts to support faculty work and improve engagement. Faculty managers and administrators in institutions of higher education can provide greater support to their faculty by working to improve engagement – understanding motivations among their workforce and expanding the resources available to help professors do their work.

### **Literature Review**

The rising number of adjunct professors is one of the most significant changes facing higher education today. Factors such as budget constraints, decreasing state support, retirements and changing enrollment patterns have encouraged many universities and colleges to move toward greater reliance on adjunct professors instead of the more traditional full-time, tenured positions (Green, 2007). The number of adjuncts has risen almost 30% over the last 20 years to the point that they make up more than half of the professor corps at most educational institutions (Delaney, 2001). This substantial increase in the higher education teaching population has resulted in vulnerable fiscal and key performance indicating metrics.

Increased dependence on adjunct professor may result in greater efficiencies in these institutions by reducing the cost of instructor salaries and benefits (Harbour, 2005). Adjunct professors generally teach higher course loads than their tenured counterparts at a lesser salary with little to no benefits (Halcrow & Olson, 2011). The salary for the vast majority of adjuncts is less than \$3000 per course and less than 25% of colleges and universities offer the part-timers health insurance or retirement benefits (Smallwood, 2001). These professors are employed in pure teaching positions. Therefore, institutions are not committing as many resources toward

faculty research (Keels, 2005). Adjuncts normally get lower levels of support for the institutions in the form of expenditure of resources toward items such as office space (Halcrow & Olson, 2011). As a result, the lower cost of labor allows institutions to balance the budget. Adjunct faculty are coming to be something of a migrant workforce in what is now a much more market-driven industry (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). While there are those who feel adjuncts should be afforded the “same rights, protections, and responsibilities as the full-time faculty” (Todd, 2004), for now, colleges and universities are able to put qualified adjunct professors in front of their students and enjoy significant salary savings. There are concerns that such cost-saving measures may lessen the quality of education and the overall student experience.

Susan Steward, Director of Academic Personnel Policy at Cornell University stated, “Our formal use of 'adjunct' is as a modifier for professional titles. It refers to an individual who serves part time and whose main employment is elsewhere” (as cited in Keels, 2005). As a result, students have less opportunity to have access to their professors. Moreover, these instructors may not have designated areas for one-on-one conferences with their students (Scarff, 2000). Students pay handsomely for their education, especially in private schools. Many feel they deserve professors who are available, have permanent offices, and who can spend time with them (Scarff, 2000). Additionally, there can be strained relationships between the full-time faculty and part-timers because of concerns of job security that can affect the student’s perception of the adjunct faculty member. Tenure-track faculty may not view the adjuncts as real faculty members and pass that belief on to the students (Pearch, & Marutz, 2005).

Perhaps the greatest asset adjunct faculty bring to the classroom is industry-current experience; they are often practicing experts in a specific area, allowing them to effectively teach specialty courses in a manner that tenure-track professor cannot (Dedman & Pearch 2004). They present the topics and evaluate students’ solutions based on real-work experience. The adage that has previously been quoted as “those that can’t do, teach” is changing to “those who do, add value to teaching” (Letzmann, Nickels, & Stockdale, 2010).

Criticism is raised regarding higher education institutions compromising their program quality by hiring large numbers of adjunct faculty. However, adjuncts are proving to be extraordinarily dedicated educators as they continue working at sub-standard wages when compared to the hefty workload. These professors justify the pay deficit by applying their love of teaching and the intrinsic value of the student interaction (Illia, & Rubin, 2004). A significant number of adjuncts are not looking to become full-time professors, but instead are there to offer their particular expertise to the students (Keels, 2005). The adjuncts often encourage their students to engage in industry-related networking through the functions of their professional organizations (Letzmann, Nickels, & Stockdale, 2010). Dr. Sadie Gregory is the Provost at Coppin State University, a school that employs 120 full-time professors and 205 adjuncts. She points out the special role adjuncts play by stating, "We have very dedicated adjuncts. We were really surprised by the time they devote to guide and mentor students, which they do very well" (as cited in Letzmann, Nickels, & Stockdale, 2010). Theory posits the rationale that adjuncts produce lower-quality instruction not because they lack skill or ability, but because they may lack employee engagement, succession planning, and organization assimilation.

### **Procedures for Data Collection**

Data were collected using an instrument validated to: a) determine the degree of engagement of adjuncts, b) connect the degree of engagement with the elements shown to correlate with performance and retention, c) map the variations of engagement across the

workforce, d) identify the employee segments at risk of low performance and/or turnover, and e) suggest strategies for improving the engagement of current employees. The instrument was distributed to the adjunct professors employed by a large educational corporation consisting of 12 regionally and nationally accredited colleges and universities with 90 campuses. A total of 2116 adjuncts participated in the survey. These participants were divided into the categories of High Performers (n=351) and Low Performers (n=1765). The data was quantitatively analyzed using the benchmark information based on a 2009-2010 study of more than 161,000 employees in 115 organizations, 51 countries and 23 industries.

## Results

The results indicate both high and low performers were above benchmark in commitment overall. High performers scored lower in Rational Commitment overall than did low and were below benchmark in Rational Commitment to their organizations. Low performers scored higher in Emotional Commitment to the organization. Higher performers were above benchmark in Discretionary Effort. Low performers were below benchmark in Discretionary Effort. Both populations were below benchmark for Intent to Stay. Higher performing faculty drive quality and student outcomes – significantly better than the rest of the faculty population. Furthermore, institutions benefit more from high performing faculty, who go “above and beyond” at much higher rates than lower performing faculty (50<sup>th</sup> versus 35<sup>th</sup> percentiles for Discretionary Effort). On the other hand, results indicate institutions have areas of opportunity with high performing faculty, including in Discretionary Effort.

A key discovery in the results among high performers was that they felt significantly less connected to the institution – in the 40<sup>th</sup> percentile – than the low performers – in the 60<sup>th</sup> percentile. Both qualitative and quantitative data from the survey suggest the reason for this disparity is the university does more to engage with low performers through outreach, coaching, mentoring, and other high-touch interventions. High performers had often been left on their own, not through any intentional marginalization, but because the limited resources for development had been directed to the faculty who demonstrated the greatest need.

Among both high and low performers, some consistent responses highlight areas managers may wish to target as they develop support strategies for faculty. For example, both groups identified the flexibility of adjunct teaching as its most attractive feature. Similarly, both groups indicated their most important relationship in their role as adjunct faculty was with their students – not with the institution or any facet of administration. When asked what would enhance their current adjunct experience, low performers consistently said they wanted more interaction with their colleagues, while high performers said an improved institutional reputation would strengthen their experiences. Interestingly, when asked what would compel them to do more for their institutions, both high and low performers focused on increased compensation and time.

The faculty included in the survey demonstrate dedication to their students and the missions of their institutions, but at the same time, even high performing faculty do not believe that such dedication advances their own self-interest; they self-report feeling underpaid, pressed for time, and under-appreciated for the work they do. These results imply that management and institutional structures may inadvertently erect barriers to the most gratifying aspect of faculty work.

From the data, several key objectives were articulated for the institutions by the Human Resources team responsible for distributing the survey and analyzing the results. These were: (1) to improve new instructor experiences (for those hired within the last 12 months), (2) to maintain discretionary effort among persistent adjunct faculty by the next survey launch, (3) to improve all faculty members' perception of time allotted to complete tasks, and (4) to improve faculty members' perception of appreciation from administration. The implementation process for these objectives was left to local-level administrators and faculty managers; teams were assembled at each institution and tasked with generating action plans, including key tactics, measures for success, timeframes for completion, and dates for the next steps in the action plan process. An example from one campus team is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

*Campus Action Plan to Improve Engagement*

	<b>Objective #1: To improve new instructor (hired within last 12 months) discretionary effort by 10% (based on survey results) by the end of next year</b>	<b>Objective #2: To maintain discretionary effort among persistent faculty by the next survey launch</b>	<b>Objective #3: To improve all faculty members' perception of time allotted to complete tasks and appreciation from administration</b>
<b>Key Tactics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve on-boarding process by coordinating HR, recruiting, and CampusVue / IT processes</li> <li>• Develop follow-up portal training for midterm point during first term on faculty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue providing scheduling flexibility</li> <li>• Continue improving outreach to ensure instructors are staffed at the time, campus, and day they prefer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve nature of communication to faculty – emails, letters, tone of faculty meetings</li> <li>• Develop appreciation measures outside of pay increases</li> </ul>
<b>Success Measures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased discretionary effort (employee provides positive feedback on survey indicating increased drive to provide effort )</li> <li>• Improved student feedback on new faculty members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Persistent scoring above benchmark in discretionary effort</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased satisfaction with these aspects of work (faculty member provides positive feedback on survey indicating satisfaction with time for work and sense of being appreciated)</li> <li>• Improved delivery of timely feedback to instructors – FSS, EOCS, individual coaching efforts</li> </ul>
<b>Timeframe for Completion</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop / implement program during Fall 2011 and Winter 2012</li> <li>• Measure success starting Winter 2012</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Within the year; prior to next engagement survey launch</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop and implement over next 3 terms</li> </ul>

As evidenced by the information contained here, the campus was able to craft tactics to fit their capacities at the local level, based on their experiences with what might cause issues or problems along the objectives. Additionally, because they retained control over what the measures of their success would be, they had a stronger sense of buy-in than they might otherwise have had for institutional mandates about next steps to improve faculty commitment and work experience.

Another strategic initiative for one of the schools included in the survey population was the creation of a Virtual Professional Learning Community (VPLC) for their faculty. This project has been underway for the last year, and has just begun to reach a critical mass of use and engagement from adjunct faculty. The goal of the VPLC was to provide a shared space for

faculty to come together to collaborate with each other, get support from their program directors or chairs, and share materials more efficiently – so they would not have to look everywhere to find a particular document or resource.

The institutions featured in this survey are poised to launch the follow-up engagement survey for their adjunct faculty. They are looking for scores in discretionary effort over time to have remained consistent or improved, particularly in the area of

## **Conclusions**

Institutions relying more heavily on adjunct faculty populations must be prepared to engage with this workforce segment through systemized organization development processes. By expanding support systems and organizational resources for contingent faculty, administrators and faculty managers can ensure the mutually beneficial nature of the relationship remains intact – that schools are able to rely on a practitioner-scholar professor corps, and that such faculty find what they are looking for in a teaching arrangement. Armed with knowledge about motivators for adjunct faculty engagement, managers and administrators can create more efficient processes to support these professors, so they in turn can focus more on their work with the student.

While the data presented here are merely a starting point, they provide insights into some of these motivators. Adjunct faculty enjoy the flexibility of their work, as well as their interactions with students. Being able to share their passion for their subject matter makes their work satisfying, even if it is not necessarily the most extrinsically rewarding. Obstacles to faculty engagement include frustration with administrative workload and concerns over the pace of delivery. Stronger administrative support resources – both for the administrators and for the faculty – may help alleviate some of the pressure from the first issue. Training targeting at helping faculty contend with the pace may also be of value.

Increasing opportunities for faculty to correspond with their colleagues is another vital step in engaging this population. The VPLC mentioned here is an intervention aimed at providing this infrastructure for the faculty experience. Further work in this area is needed to understand how to bring geographically dispersed contingent workers together in a meaningful and engagement-supporting way. Including faculty in the creation of such structures may also enhance engagement.

One limitation of this study is the limited context. While several institutions are included in the population, these generally adhere to one model – predominantly online delivery. There may be key differences in a more traditional brick-and-mortar setting. Additionally, long-term impacts from the interventions described here cannot be presented and must be reviewed in the future to evaluate validity and appropriateness.

## **Managerial Implications**

The primary implication of this work for managers of faculty is that more can be done to engage this population. Our premise is that engagement, as a measure of commitment to the institution, willingness toward discretionary effort, and intent to stay with the institution, is a barometer for adjunct faculty experience. Retaining high performing faculty necessitates appealing to their sense of commitment to students, but also freeing them up to enjoy the flexibility of their role. Further, facilitating growth and development among lower performing faculty may require expanding collaboration opportunities, so faculty are able to learn from each

other. To ensure adjunct faculty engagement, institutional administrators must develop and implement activities that culturally orientate and assimilate this contingent population into the academic environment.

Managers of adjunct faculty might put into practice a variety of employee engagement techniques to improve teaching effectiveness. The appropriate culture for adjunct faculty engagement leverages open internal communication processes and two-way feedback loops. When adjunct faculty share in decision making, they feel more engaged with the academic institution. Administration often hinders adjunct faculty engagement by continuously pushing down precontrived decisions. Building a trusting relationship between adjunct faculty and their intuitional managers motivates teaching performance enhancement and empowers adjuncts to successfully service students' requests. Adjunct faculty engagement levels escalate when there is a strategic career development system in place that formally tracks faculty progress, students' survey results, and personal improvement initiatives. Additionally, employee commitment increases when adjunct faculty clearly grasp how their contingent role fits into the vision of the academic institution. Moreover, it is helpful if the institution makes explicit which individual skills are necessary for future advancement. There are numerous tools, culture indexes, organization design initiatives, and change interventions that can help increase these acknowledged components of employee engagement.

## References

- Bridges, W. (2003). *Managing Transitions: Making the Most out of Change*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.
- Cohen, A. M., & Brawer, F. B. (2003). *The American Community College* (4th ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Dedman, D., & Pearch, W. J. (2004). Perspectives on adjunct and other non-tenure faculty. *Community College Enterprise*, 10(1), 23-33.
- Delaney, B. (2001). Second-class careerist? The long halls of ivy: Adjunct professors. CNN.com. Retrieved November 16, 2012, from <http://www.studentnews.cnn.com/2001/CAREER/trends/01/11/adjunct/index.html>
- Green, D. W. (2007). Adjunct faculty and the continuing quest for quality. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, (140), 29-39.
- Grummon, P.T.H. (2009). Trends in higher education. *Society for College and University Planning*, 61(1). Retrieved from [http://www.scup.org/asset/53017/SCUP\\_TrendsWeb\\_v6n1.pdf](http://www.scup.org/asset/53017/SCUP_TrendsWeb_v6n1.pdf)
- Halcrow, C., & Olson, M. R. (2011). Adjunct faculty: Valued resource or cheap labor? *Focus on Colleges, Universities, and Schools*, 6(1), 1-8.
- Harbour, C. P. (2005). Adjunct faculty in community colleges: An academic administrator's guide to recruiting, supporting, and retaining great teachers. *Community College Review*, 33(1), 63-66.
- Illia, T., & Rubin, D. K. (2004). More adjunct faculty on campus show those who can, teach. *ENR: Engineering News-Record*, 253(22), 31.
- Keels, C. L. (2005). The life of an adjunct professor can be rewarding but uncertain. *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*, 22(20), 32-33.

- Letzmann, P., Nickels, A., & Stockdale, J. (2010). Engaging students to connect beyond the text: A reflection on the value of professionals as adjuncts. *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 16(1), 67-76.
- Pearch, W. J., & Marutz, L. (2005). Retention of adjunct faculty in community colleges. *Community College Enterprise*, 11(1), 29-44.
- Scarf, M. (2000). The Full-Time Stress of Part-Time Professors. *Newsweek*, 135(20), 10.
- Smallwood, S. (2001). Less whining and more teaching. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 47(47), 12-15.
- Todd, J. G. (2004). Adjunct faculty: A crisis of justice in higher education. *Phi Kappa Phi Forum*, 84(4), 17-18.