

**The Relationship between Part-Time Faculty
Utilization and Student Learning Outcomes and Retention:
Implications for Practice**

Charles Harrington*

Abstract

One very important factor gaining attention in the college student retention literature involves consideration of the impact of increased utilization of part-time faculty and the degree to which this utilization impacts student retention. Colleges and Universities rely heavily on part-time faculty, especially in teaching lower-level undergraduate courses. Is part-time faculty having an adverse impact on student retention, mainly during the first year? Are colleges and universities recognizing and studying potential issues that may arise when incoming freshmen students are exposed to part-time instruction? This paper examines the impact of student exposure to part-time faculty instruction and provides suggestions on how institutions might thoughtfully engage this pervasive issue.

Keywords: Part-time faculty, student retention, student learning outcomes.

Introduction

The growing number of part-time personnel used as teaching faculty in the academy is an issue of increasing concern. Recent national U.S data (NCES, 2002), suggest that nearly half of all college level instruction is delivered by part-time faculty. In 1970, only 22 percent were employed part-time. The utilization of part-time faculty is increasing at a dramatic rate, and this 25-year trend has serious implications for faculty work and institutional vitality. This issue has garnered considerable attention recently (Jaeger & Egan, 2011; Muller, 2013; Ochoa, 2012;).

Does the mere change in these proportions cause major concern? Should greater attention be focused simply on the number of part-time versus full-time faculty? Or, should we be concerned with the broader issues of the depth and breadth of part-time faculty utilization?

One important factor apparently neglected in the literature involves an investigation into whether the increased utilization of part-time faculty has an impact on student retention. Are part-time faculty who are employed primarily to teach introductory courses, having an adverse affect on student retention? Or, is the dedication of the individuals who teach part-time resulting in a positive impact on student retention in the freshman year? In either case, are universities recognizing the potential issues that might arise when a substantial portion of first-time full-time freshman receive the majority of their instruction from part-time faculty?

This paper presents the results of an ongoing study of the relationship between faculty status and student retention at a comprehensive Midwestern university. Of particular interest was the degree to which first-time full-time freshman were exposed to part-time faculty and whether faculty status, defined here at part-time versus full-time, had a discernable impact on student learning outcomes and student retention.

Part-Time Faculty and Student Retention

The point of first departure for understanding issues involving part-time faculty is the 1993 study *The Invisible Faculty*, by Judith Gappa and David Leslie. Subtitled, “improving the status of part-timers in higher education”, the authors based their analysis on data from the 1988 National Study of Post-Secondary Faculty (NSOPF) and personal interviews conducted at eighteen campuses across the country during the 1990-91 academic year. As the subtitle indicates, this study represented a call for change; to more fully understand and improve the plight of those described as “unrecognized, unrewarded, and invisible.”

Major changes have taken place since Gappa and Leslie's initial call to action not all of which may be viewed by academe as positive. Furthermore, institutions are finding more and varied ways to justify their reliance on part-timers. Roles and responsibilities once the sole purview of the full-time faculty, including academic advising, remedial instruction, committee assignments, and curriculum development are increasingly being assigned to part-time and temporary faculty. A second major trend is that a growing research body is emerging which highlights the seriousness of issues surrounding both the number of part-time faculty and how they are used.

The vast majority of the existing research on the subject has concentrated on the number of part-time faculty, their qualifications, and their job market goals and motivations. In considering the principle findings of these various studies and reports, it is clear that, regardless of how one measures or defines part-time faculty, higher education is using more part-time and temporary faculty than full-time faculty to educate students. Yet, little has been done to explore the impact of the use of part-time faculty in higher education on student learning outcomes and retention.

Recently, there has been increased attention relative to the relationship between part-time faculty utilization and student learning outcomes, namely student retention. In a national study being conducted by the authors, issues of where part-time faculty are being utilized were studied, the researchers posit that institutions most frequently use part-time and adjunct faculty in lower level undergraduate courses, particularly survey courses. Especially heavy part-time utilization is being found in the disciplines of English Literature and Writing, and Mathematics. Furthermore, the researchers assert that due to the transitory nature of their academic appointments, part-time faculty is not readily available to provide much needed faculty-student contact outside of the classroom. This contact is especially important for new college freshmen as well as the adult student returning to college. Faculty who teach freshmen must also be able to properly identify at-risk student behavior, but most often part-time faculty do not possess the skills necessary to identify such students. Furthermore, part-time faculty is usually not sufficiently knowledgeable about available institutional services when referrals are warranted. Once on campus, large numbers of at-risk students are increasingly being educated by part-time faculty, a group who historically have few if any formal ties to the institution, and for all intents and purposes teach their courses and then leave campus-no office hours, no contact with students outside of the classroom, no consultation with those teaching remedial courses (be they full-time or part-time), and little if any opportunity for the much-needed professional development requisite to handle the multifaceted and complex challenges that faculty face when remediating students.

No Clear Consensus

Despite the growing research literature on this subject there appears to be a lack of consensus on the degree to which, and how directly, part-time faculty affect student learning outcomes, namely student retention among first year students. A number of recent studies have yielded conflicting results.

Mueller, et al (2013), Ochoa (2012), Jaeger and Egan (2011) and Harrington and Schibik (2004) found a direct negative association between student exposure to part-time faculty instruction and student retention. Their research indicated that the greater the proportion of exposure to part-time instruction, the greater the risk of attrition. In a similar study, Kerhrberg and Turpin (2002) found an equivalent negative association between exposure and retention, however the overall negative association disappeared after controlling for student academic preparation.

Ronco's(2004) work in this area suggests that instructor type has a discernable impact, positively or negatively, on student outcomes. Johnson (2006) also demonstrated that initial negative relationship between instructor type and student retention diminished significantly after controlling for other substantive predictors, such as academic preparation and enrollment status (full-time versus part-time).

A study conducted by Umbach (2007) found that the negative effect associated with part-time faculty instruction was attributable to lower levels of faculty-student interaction, limited knowledge of and use of active and collaborative teaching techniques, less instructor time devoted to class preparation, and lower academic expectations of students. Umbach asserts that the negative effects associated with part-time instruction are much greater at institutions that award advanced degrees.

A Recent Inquiry

In order to study the relationship between faculty status and student retention, a data set was constructed containing both faculty and student characteristics. The data set included all first-time, full-time freshman who entered a mid-sized comprehensive university during fall semesters 2002 – 2006 (a total of 4230 students). For each entering student information was gathered on their cohort membership (age, race, gender, and ethnicity), baseline ability or human capital measures (SAT composite, SAT math, SAT verbal, ACT comp., and course grades), and their academic profile (school of their declared major, hours attempted in each semester, hours completed in each semester, course instructor, and the student's residency status (on or off-campus)). The student information was then matched with instructor characteristics (department of residence, and status (full versus part-time) on a course by course basis.

The first step in analyzing whether faculty status might have an affect on student retention is to determine the degree to which incoming freshman were exposed to full and part-time faculty and then to compare that information to student retention information. Table 1 shows the extent to which the incoming fresh man was exposed to part-time faculty in their first three semesters (fall of 2002 through fall of 2006). Preliminary descriptive analysis of the data reveals several interesting results.

First, as Table 1 reveals, nearly half of all first-time full-time freshman had 25% or more of their first semester coursework taught by part-time faculty. Surprisingly few (<1.0%) had any courses taught by part-time faculty during their first semester on campus. Overall, first-time, full-time freshman at the institution took an average of 50% of their first semester coursework from part-time instructors. Student exposure to part-time faculty was somewhat lower in the second semester on campus. During their second semester, nearly two-thirds (64.4%) of returning freshman took at least one course from part-time faculty. Nevertheless, a significant proportion (25.8%) of freshman took at least half of their spring courses from part-time faculty.

The proportion of part-time faculty exposure was again lower in the first semester of the student's sophomore year (Fall 2003). Students who returned for their sophomore year took roughly one in four courses from part-time faculty.

Table 1

Exposure of First-time freshmen to Part-time Faculty in their First Semester

	Fall 2002		Fall 2003		Fall 2004		Fall 2005		Fall 2006	
Initial NFR Cohort	722		809		760		984		955	
Percent of Courses Taught by Part-time Faculty	Cum.%	Cum.%	Cum.%	Cum.%	Cum.%	Cum.%	Cum.%	Cum.%	Cum.%	Cum.%
	Fall 2002 Cohort	Fall 2003 Cohort	Fall 2004 Cohort	Fall 2005 Cohort	Fall 2006 Cohort					
Count	<i>N</i>	432	<i>N</i>	616	<i>N</i>	557	<i>N</i>	753	<i>N</i>	746
0% (none)	290	39.7	193	23.9	203	26.7	231	23.5	209	21.9
25% or less	354	49.0	374	46.2	419	55.4	525	53.4	512	53.6
50% or less	63	57.8	169	67.1	115	70.3	165	70.1	174	71.8
75% or less	14	59.7	63	74.9	22	73.2	60	76.2	53	77.4
100% (all)	1	<1.0	10	1.2	1	<1.0	3	<1.0	7	<1.0

Of the 722 first-time, full-time freshman on campus in the fall of 2002, 96 did not return for their second semester (87% fall to spring retention rate) and an additional 462 did not return for their sophomore year (64% fall to fall retention rate). Of major interest is whether or not these non-retained students faced a different proportion of part-time to full-time faculty. Table 1 shows that the 57 freshman who did not return to the University for their second semester took a higher proportion of coursework from part-time faculty than did the overall first-time full-time cohort. While nearly 50% of the overall cohort took at least half of their courses from part-time faculty, (58.1% of those students who were not retained for the next semester took at least one course from part-time faculty.

Table 2
Retention of First-Time Freshmen

		Fall 2002	Fall 2003	Fall 2004	Fall 2005	Fall 2006
Initial NFR Cohort		722	809	760	984	955
Taught by PT Faculty	<i>N</i>	432	<i>N</i> 616	<i>N</i> 557	<i>N</i> 753	<i>N</i> 746
Retained in the Spring Semester	No	57	47	48	81	71
	Yes	375	569	509	672	675
Retention Rate (%)		87.0	92.4	91.4	89.2	90.5

Table 2 shows that the proportion of part-time faculty exposure was slightly higher for the students that did not return for their sophomore year. Curiously, it would appear that the greater the exposure to part-time faculty instruction, the greater the likelihood of retention to the subsequent spring and fall semesters.

Overall, students who were retained by the university were exposed to a higher than average proportion of part-time faculty than were overall first-time, full-time freshman who entered during the fall 2002. The authors were not able to determine that a negative relationship existed between student exposure to part-time faculty instruction, and student retention.

Clearly, these results differ considerably from the earlier findings of Harrington and Schibik (2004), Kerhrberg and Turpin (2002), Ronco's (2004), and Umbach (2007). The implications however, are similar. New students entering colleges and universities are facing increasing exposure to part-time faculty instruction. There are clear implications for the orientation and professional development of these important members of the instructional corps.

Table 3
Retention Rates for First-Time Freshmen by Quartile Exposure to Part-Time Faculty

	Fall 2002		Fall 2003		Fall 2004		Fall 2005		Fall 2006	
Initial NFR Cohort	722		809		760		984		955	
Percent of Courses Taught by Part-time Faculty	Cum. %		Cum. %		Cum. %		Cum. %		Cum. %	
	Fall 2002 Cohort		Fall 2003 Cohort		Fall 2004 Cohort		Fall 2005 Cohort		Fall 2006 Cohort	
	N	432	N	616	N	557	N	753	N	746
0% (none)	251	87.0%	189	97.9%	181	89.2%	203	88.1%	176	84.2%
25% or less	309	87.3	346	92.5	383	91.4	459	87.4	460	89.8
50% or less	59	93.7	159	94.1	105	91.3	154	93.3	161	92.5
75% or less	7	50.0	55	87.3	20	90.9	56	93.3	47	88.7
100% (all)	0	0.0	9	90.0	1	100.0	3	100.0	7	100.0
Overall Retention Rate (%)	87.0		93.7		80.1		90.0		89.1	
NFR Retained after One Semester	626		758		690		875		851	

Conclusion

The implications of these findings suggest that institutions support the assertion that institutions should give thoughtful consideration to where part-time faculty are utilized on their respective campuses, and the potential effects of such usage on student learning and retention during the freshman year. Institutions would be wise to focus on the professional development of their part-time and adjunct teaching faculty, paying particularly attention to the development of part-timers as reflective practitioners.

Each academic year, colleges and universities leverage millions of dollars on research, restructuring, and professional development of staff, all in the name of student retention. Academic conferences are filled papers, panels, and other various presentations discussing, in painstaking detail, how institutions engineer new student retention programs in student development, residence life, multicultural, learning communities, honors programs, freshmen year initiatives, adult learners, and the sundry milieu of college student characteristics. Great pronouncements are made

about the anticipated levels of success of these programs, however true project effect has been difficult to identify or measure. Very few retention programs, if any, concern themselves with part-time faculty.

Retention research on part-time faculty may, in fact, be the least expensive and most revealing research that an institution can undertake. The most elementary analysis of part-time faculty on student learning and retention can be completed in a matter of a few short days and with little to no cost.

The issue of the institutionalization of part-time and adjunct faculty is also an area worthy of thoughtful inquiry. Academic planners should pay careful attention to full-time / part-time faculty mix, particularly in the lower-level undergraduate curriculum. Issues of part-time faculty recruitment, selection, appointment, and compensation should be given serious consideration also. Recruitment and selection criteria should be sensitive to the need to maintain diversity. These matters are particularly important, given the fact that nationally, the mean years of institution-specific service of part-time faculty is now approaching two decades (AAUP, 2013).

When part-time faculty is hired initially, they should be provided with a formal and structured orientation to the institution and the academic department in which they will teach. This orientation program should include the articulation of clear and measurable teaching expectations, the timely provision of teaching materials (textbooks and ancillary materials), and early issuance of teaching contracts (including the teaching and compensation schedule). Many part-time faculty are undertaking their teaching roles for the first time. To ease their transition into the classroom, new part-time faculty should be provided with full-time faculty mentors.

The evaluation of part-time faculty teaching is critical. Institutions should implement a regular cycle of peer evaluation, including student evaluation of instruction. Part-time faculty should be provided the opportunity to talk with other part- and full-time faculty as well as their department chairperson concerning the evaluation of their teaching. Teaching improvement plans should be developed and implemented when warranted. Exemplary teaching of part-time faculty should be publicly recognized by the department and institution.

Institutions that prize the contribution of their part-time faculty should provide sufficient resources for professional development. Faculty development funds should be afforded part-time faculty to enable attendance at conferences and workshops devoted to issues of pedagogy and teaching and learning. Special attention might be focused on developing part-time faculty skills with technology or student learning outcomes assessment.

During their collegiate lifetime, many if not the majority of undergraduate students are exposed to instruction delivered by part-time and adjunct faculty. This exposure to part-timers is particularly acute for first year freshmen, who encounter a higher proportion of part-time instruction in the survey courses in which virtually all freshmen enroll. As is well documented in the literature, the freshman year yields the single greatest impact on individual academic success, as defined by student retention and eventual graduation.

Institutional support of part-time faculty should also include appropriate support services. Part-time faculty should have unencumbered access to office space for meeting with students, telephone (particularly with voice mail), a computer (with email access), email accounts, and access to appropriate instructional technologies (laptops, data projectors, etc.). Part-time faculty also requires personnel support, such as clerical support for lecture materials and test preparation, photocopying, and assistance with other instruction-related activities.

Institutions can also provide a wide range of ancillary services which would complement part-time teaching. These include: part-time faculty handbooks, internet resources (part-time faculty webpage), access to teaching and learning resources, invitations to university faculty meetings (both structured and social), and a part-time faculty newsletters. Institutions may wish to consider the establishment of a institution-wide committee charged specifically with issues germane to part-time faculty. Such a committee should include both full-time junior and senior faculty and part-time faculty.

Colleges and universities that strategically utilize part-time faculty should be cognizant to involve part-time and adjunct in the planning and decision making processes, avoid stereotyping or devaluing part-time faculty as less qualified or less effective teachers, and develop and sustain an institutional environment conducive to the intellectual and professional growth of part-time faculty. It is past time for colleges and universities to get beyond “blaming” part-time faculty, and rethinking the levels of support typically designated for part-time faculty development.

Part-time faculty does not typically provide the first year student with the academic integration opportunities necessary to permit students to feel connected to faculty. Part-timers usually don't have office hours (or even an office), conduct research with students, meet with students on an informal basis on campus, advise student organizations and groups, or participate in the academic life of the campus. Because of their transient professional lifestyles, part-time faculty poses a significant challenge to the at-risk student.

For institutions that profess an earnest desire to analyze critically student learning on their campus with an eye toward improved retention rates, a small investment in evaluating the affect of part-time faculty on student retention, particularly during the freshman year, could yield significant dividends. Greater attention to how institution use and support part-time and adjunct faculty should have a direct and positive effect on student learning outcomes.

References

- American Association of University Professors. (2013). *Policy statement on contingent appointments and the academic profession*. Washington, DC: American Association of University Professors.
- Gappa, J., & David, W. L. (1993). *The invisible faculty: improving the status of part-timers in higher education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers
- Jaeger, A., & Eagan, M. (2011). Examining retention and contingent faculty use in a state system of higher education. *Educational Policy*, Vol. 3, pgs. 507- 537.
- Johnson, I. (2006). *Examining part-time faculty utilization and its impact on student retention at a public research university*. Conference Paper Presented at the 2006 Forum of the Association for Institutional Research.
- Kerhberg, N., & Turpin, W. K. (2002). *Impact of part-time on freshman performance, satisfaction, and retention*. Paper presented at the 2002 meeting of the North Carolina Association for Institutional Research, Greensboro.
- Mueller, B., Mandernach, B., & Sanderson, K. (2013). Adjunct versus full-time faculty: comparison of student outcomes in the online classroom. *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 3(9).

- National Educational Association. (2001). *Nea policy statement number 12: higher education policy on part-time and temporary faculty*. National Educational Association.
- National Association of American Colleges and Universities. (2001). *Use of part-time faculty in higher education: Numbers and impact*.
- Naquin, D. (2001). The increasing reliance on part-time faculty: a problem with legal implications. *Inquiry*, 6(1).
- Ochoa, A. (2012). Contingent faculty: Helping or harming students? *Journal of the Professorate*, 6(1), 136-151.
- Ronco, S., & Cahill, J. (2004). *Does it matter who's in the classroom? Effect of instructor type on student retention*. Paper presented at the 44th Annual Forum of the Association of Institutional Research, Boston.
- Schibik, T., & Harrington, C. (2004). Caveat emptor: is there a relationship between part-time faculty utilization and student learning outcomes and retention?"*AIR Professional File*, Number 91.
- Umbach, P. (2007). How effective are they? Exploring the impact of contingent faculty on undergraduate education. *The Review of Higher Education*. 2, 91-123.
- Umbach, P. (2006). *Part-time faculty and undergraduate instruction: Exploring individual and institutional effects*. The University of Iowa. Unpublished paper.