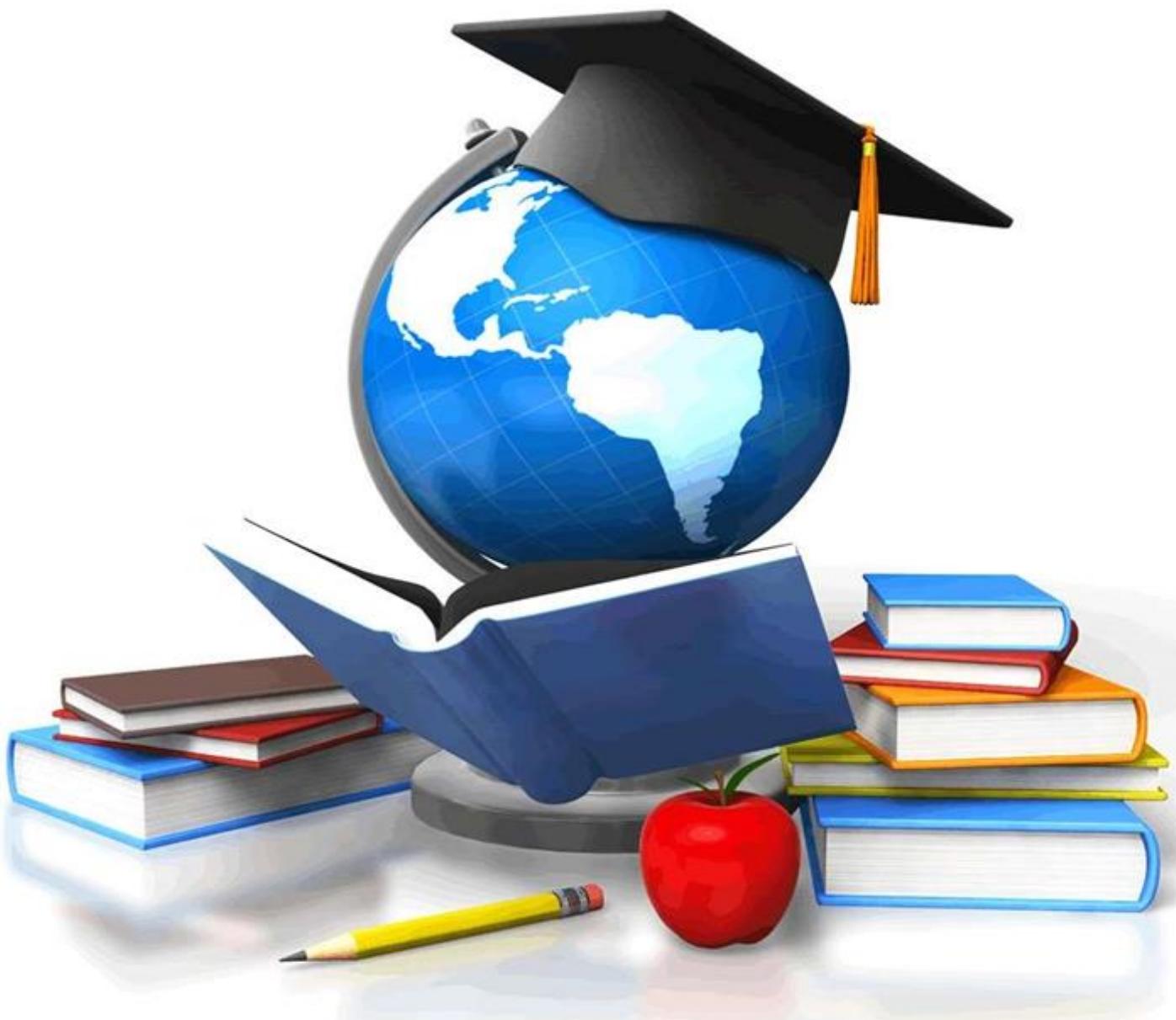


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**Unpacking the Use and Value of Part-Time Faculty: Impacts on the  
Value-Added College Experience**



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## Unpacking the Use and Value of Part-Time Faculty: Impacts on the Value-Added College Experience



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### Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose for conducting the current study was to identify the correlations of part-time faculty use by an institution and student success. Student success was measured, for the current study, as retention, cost, graduation rate, and post-college earnings.

**Methodology:** The study examined the relationship between the use of part-time faculty and student success at 164 Research 1 and 2 universities drawn from the Association of Public Land Grant Universities (APLU) list. Using data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and the U.S. Department of Education's College Scorecard, four outcomes were analyzed: first-to-second year retention, six-year graduation rates, cost of attendance, and post-graduation earnings.

**Findings:** Findings indicated that part-time faculty made up an average of 27% of the instructional workforce, with wide institutional variation. Correlations revealed slight negative relationships between higher part-time faculty use and retention, graduation, and earnings, with minimal impact on cost of attendance. Although the statistical effects were small, the data suggest that heavy reliance on adjunct faculty does not benefit students in measurable outcomes.

**Unique Contribution to Theory, Policy, and Practice:** Findings confirm the complexity of fiscal realities for colleges and universities and best practices for teaching and learning. The study provides the important suggestion that institutional leaders become more purposeful in their use of adjuncts and work more intentionally in their institutional induction.

**Keywords:** *Adjunct Faculty, College Faculty, College Management, College Student Performance, College Student Retention, Part-Time Faculty*

## 1. Introduction

The quality of a college or university is often defined by the quality of faculty members. There have historically been multiple attacks on faculty, mocking them for being out of touch with real world issues and simply reusing the same lecture notes repeatedly (Cahn, 2010; Professor X, 1973), yet the qualifications of and instruction delivered by faculty members is a key determinant of a college-education. Admittedly, out-of-classroom experiences play a critical role in the education and development of students, but at its core, the engagement of students with faculty members is a defining attribute of the higher education experience.

There is a broad range of what are considered “faculty” members currently employed by higher education institutions. As financial pressures have forced institutions to reconsider their expenditure patterns, there has arisen a complex variety of faculty titles, including “research,” “clinical,” and “teaching” faculty, in addition to traditional tenure-track faculty members. All of these modifiers come with “ranks,” typically defined as assistant, associate, and full ranks.

Another element to the use of faculty, as well as institutional cost considerations, is that of hiring part-time faculty, also called “adjunct,” “contract,” and even “contingent” faculty. These individuals have the academic qualifications required to teach a particular class offered by the institution and are employed for the express purpose of teaching some specific course or overseeing some specific activity. These individuals are typically compensated at a considerably lower rate than full-time faculty, thus reducing the costs of offering instruction and subsequently increasing the profitability of a particular course. Higher education institutions have increased their reliance on part-time faculty since the 1970s (Danaei, 2019) and teach about half of all college classes and nearly 60% of classes in community colleges (AAUP, 2017).

The fear among many in the academic community is that as institutions become increasingly business-oriented, they will view the use of adjunct faculty as a tool to benefit the institution financially at the expense of the student experience. And although there are multiple anecdotal reports and comments about the quality of the educational experience using adjunct or part-time faculty, there are few scientific studies that have linked student performance with faculty employment status and further research into the use of part-time faculty is needed (Meixner, Kruck, & Madden, 2010). Therefore, the purpose for conducting the current study was to identify the correlations of part-time faculty use by an institution and student success. Student success was measured, for the current study, as retention, cost, graduation rate, and post-college earnings. These measures of success were objective data points that were utilized due to their availability and notably, success in the current study did not measure learning, student development, or the other out-of-class outcomes that might be linked to attending college.

## 2. Background of the Study

### 2.1 Advantages of Part-Time Faculty Work

Alsunaydi (2020) provided an analysis of different considerations for the use of part-time faculty, particularly noting that they are increasingly used to off-set permanent financial obligations. This analysis and literature review provided a broad consideration of part-time faculty, particularly noting impacts on shared governance and academic freedom, and suggests that the use of these faculty is not the primary problem, but rather, institutional mechanisms to engage and properly on-board part-time faculty results in an institutionally-disconnected workforce that might minimize the benefits that these faculty can bring to the classroom.

Anthony, et al. (2020) provided a synthesis of thinking about part-time faculty, highlighting some of the positive aspects that they bring to their institutions. In addition to disciplinary expertise, these individuals broaden the range of faculty to whom students are exposed, allows institutions not only greater financial flexibility, but a better chance at diversifying thinking and expertise without long-term commitments. These part-time, adjunct faculty can add greatly to a student's curricular experience in that they bring different ways of thinking and different approaches to content application than might otherwise be possible. Similarly, their hiring allows academic units to be more flexible and experimental in making short-term hires to test and try-out different content.

Guthrie et. al (2019) outlined steps for institutions to undertake to better support part-time, adjunct faculty members, noting that they have the potential to greatly impact the performance and success of students. They specifically noted that hiring adjunct faculty can greatly enhance the flexibility of the faculty labor pool and that these individuals also bring real-world experiences to the classroom. They noted that part of the reason for negative reports of adjunct faculty engagement has been noted is the institution's inability or lack of knowledge about how to work with these part-time faculty members. Using a case study report, they outlined specific ways to engage part-time faculty to better integrate them into the life of the institution and to better serve student success.

## 2.2 Dis-Advantages of Part-Time Faculty Work

Ran and Sanders (2020) examined data from six community colleges over a two-year period. They identified negative effects for the use of part-time faculty teaching developmental math courses and subsequent enrollment in future academic terms. Unable to control for instructional quality, they identified through survey research that part-time faculty were less knowledgeable about institutional support services, such as tutoring centers, resulting in their inability to adequately refer students to help.

Malone and Johnson (2023) conducted an institution-specific qualitative study with 23 adjunct, part-time faculty members. They identified that those in their study felt pressured to 'please' those for whom they worked, including both the institution and the students enrolled in their classes. They perceived that if there were student complaints or problems with courses that they would not be rehired to teach, thus feeling a failure to please would result in no employment. The authors

concluded that institutions needed to do a better job of providing training to part-time faculty and also institutional supports to aid in their work.

Meixner, Kruck, and Madden (2010) used qualitative data from a single comprehensive university to explore the experiences of part-time faculty, identifying findings very similar to Malone and Johnson even though the two studies were conducted over a decade apart. They identified a number of challenges for part-time faculty, particularly their integration into the institution and a lack of uniform, consistent communication and interaction with part-time faculty by the institution. Their findings also identified that part-time faculty felt that they lacked many institutional supports, including mentoring and opportunities to develop their own skill-sets as faculty members.

Jaeger and Hinz (2008) observed that part-time, adjunct faculty can play an important role in bringing diverse and real-world perspectives to the classroom. Their single-institution study found, however, that part-time faculty use had an effect of decreased student retention. They proposed that the reason for this lower retention rate was that part-time faculty are less engaged on campus, less available to students, and might be less knowledgeable of campus resources to which they might refer students.

### 3. Research Procedures

Data for the study were identified from four sources. The list of institutions to be included in the sample were pulled from the Association of Public Land Grant Universities (APLU). This list was then compared to the Carnegie Foundations listing of Research 1 and 2 universities. Institutions that appeared on both lists were selected for inclusion in the study. This listing was intended to create a sample with common characteristics which would in turn make comparisons more reliable. The APLU list included 247 members of which 219 were institutions (the study excluded university system offices) and the Carnegie Foundation listing included 326 institutions (187 Research 1 and 139 Research 2 institutions). When cross listed for similar institutions, the result was the identification of 164 institutions to be included in the sample.

The primary data source was Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). This data set provides user-input and certified information on multiple aspects of an institution. For the current study, the following data points were identified for each sample institution: number of full-time faculty, number of part-time faculty, retention and graduation rates, and cost of attendance. The total number of faculty members was created by combining the full- and part-time faculty reported number and then creating an overall percentage of faculty who were employed part-time. There are two important limitations to the data based on this calculation.

The first is that only 'instructional' faculty were used in creating the percentage of part-time faculty and 'research and public service' faculty were not included in the study based on the assumption that student interaction by faculty was the most important element being considered.

The second limitation was that the number of part-time and full-time faculty does not represent the actual percentage of instruction offered by full- or part-time faculty members, and instead, the study uses this as a proxy for instructional interaction by faculty members and students.

The IPEDS data set was also used to identify the six-year graduation rate and first-to-second year retention rate for each institution in the sample.

Data for the college earnings for graduates were taken from US Department of Education's College Scorecard (2024). These data were collected by the USDOE by linking college graduates and their "de-identified tax records and reported back at the aggregate, institutional level" (p. 29).

The study addressed four hypotheses:

*HO1: The higher the percentage of part-time faculty, the lower the first-to-second year retention rate.*

This hypothesis was based on the assumption that full-time faculty members represent a greater opportunity for engagement with first-year students and that by being exposed to them in the classroom, undergraduate students are more likely to be retained into their second (sophomore) year.

*HO2: The higher the percentage of part-time faculty, the lower the graduation rate.*

The hypothesis is based on the assumption that full-time faculty provide some sort of stronger or more engaging environment for students and that as a result of their presence and activity, students are more likely to persist to graduation.

*HO3: The higher the percentage of part-time faculty, the lower the cost of attendance.*

The hypothesis is based on the assumption that part-time faculty are less expensive to employ and therefore, allow the institution to be less expensive for enrollment, thus reporting a lower overall cost of attendance.

*HO4: The higher the percentage of part-time faculty, the higher the average earnings post graduation.*

The assumption is based on the assumption that part-time faculty bring real-world experience into the classroom and that the manifestation of that is a more employable, and better compensated, graduating student.

#### 4. Findings

On average (see Table 1), institutions in the sample employed 2,042 faculty members with, on average, 1,533 being full-time and 509 being part-time. These part-time faculty composed over a quarter of all faculty (27.21%) with a range of part-time faculty composing 1% of the overall faculty body to 67% of the faculty. Institutions had an average cost of attendance of \$31,74, a 6-

year graduation rate of 66.36%, and a first-to-second year retention rate of 83%. And post-graduate earnings ranged from \$12,946 to \$104,043 with an average of \$61,723.

*HO1: The higher the percentage of part-time faculty, the lower the first-to-second year retention rate.*

Institutions in the sample had as many as 2,751 part-time faculty and as few as 10, representing a maximum of 66.9% of the entire faculty and as low as 1% of the faculty. The mean first-to-second year retention rate for full-time students for the sample institutions was 83%, with a high of 98% and a low of 60%. The correlation between part-time faculty use and first-to-second year retention -.45, meaning that as the number of part-time faculty increased there was a slight decrease in the retention rate.

*HO2: The higher the percentage of part-time faculty, the lower the graduation rate.*

The percentage of first-to-second year retention rates ranged from a low of 63% to a high of 98%, with an overall average of 83% of students at these institutions enrolling on a full-time basis in their second year after completing their first year on campus. These retention percentages were correlated with the percentages of part-time faculty employed by the institutions and the correlation coefficient was .2426, meaning that there was a slight positive correlation between the high use of part-time faculty and the likelihood of students not returning for their second year of college at that institution.

*HO3: The higher the percentage of part-time faculty, the lower the cost of attendance.*

The average cost of attendance for the sample of institutions was \$31,741, with a range of \$8,233 to \$88,140. The identified correlation between this cost of attendance and percentage of part-time faculty use was -.045 meaning that there was a small negative relationship between part-time faculty use and the cost of attendance.

*HO4: The higher the percentage of part-time faculty, the higher the average earnings post graduation.*

The average postgraduate earnings for the set of sample institutions was \$61,723. The identified correlation between the percentage of part-time faculty and postgraduate earnings was -.29, meaning that there was a slight negative correlation between part-time faculty use and how much students made after graduation.

## 5. Discussion

Data from the current study reflect that the use of part-time faculty is not positive for students in terms of what they pay, their retention and graduation rate, and their post-graduation earnings. All correlations were all small, and future research should include regression analysis to determine the extent of the effect that part-time faculty have on each variable.

Additional areas for research on the use, function, and advantages and disadvantages of using part-time faculty might also include variables such as (1) the geographic setting of an institution, as large cities and small rural communities might approach part-time faculty use differently, (2) institutional programs offered, as some applied programs may make more sense than others to use part-time faculty who are full-time employees in the field that they are teaching, and (3) the size of the institution and its fiscal health, as some institutions that are growing might find part-time faculty use important in scaling programs.

Findings did seem to confirm that the economic value of part-time faculty use might well be the most convincing argument for their use. Through short-term contracts, low salaries, and a fluidity in their use, they represent a part of the higher education workforce that can allow institutions to maximize tuition revenue to be used for other endeavors. The issue institutional leaders must confront is the extent of this part-time faculty use and what trade-offs they are willing to make. Additionally, though, there are elements of part-time faculty use that might be beneficial if managed correctly and thoughtfully. In applied areas of study such as business, nursing, health care, teacher preparation, etc., part-time faculty who are thoughtfully embedded into the faculty can provide a real-world orientation to the educational experience that is truly value-added. To do so, however, academic leaders must be prepared to provide appropriate supports, orientations, and an incorporation strategy to assure that these part-time faculty represent the values and ideals of the institution and can effectively teach students.

Objective research on the use of part-time faculty is needed, particularly scholarship that might highlight best practices for the use and capitalization of these faculty members. Specifically, institutions that do a good job of incorporating part-time faculty into the networks and life of an institution is needed as are studies that might demonstrate how the real-world aspects of their teaching might positively impact student post-graduation success. And, as part-time faculty are used frequently at comprehensive universities and community colleges, scholarship situated within those contexts could provide an important comparison to the research universities included in this study.

## **6. Conclusion**

Based on the data reviewed for the current study, the findings point to the conclusion that the use of part-time faculty at research-focused institutions does not positively correlate with student performance or outcome.

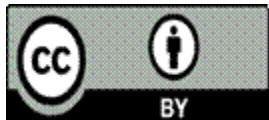
## **7. Acknowledgement**

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