Modern Adjunct Faculty: Constraints and Solutions

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By Marian Willeke
Director, Adaptive Learning
Introduction

The dramatic changes accompanying the information revolution of the last thirty years have completely changed the challenges surrounding higher learning. No longer do students face challenges accessing knowledge, but rather these informed consumers demand immediate, relevant learning when it fits their lives. Higher learning institutions are compelled to adapt to these new models, and are discovering they need to access a new workforce in the form of adjunct faculty to meet these demands. Unfortunately, while these adjunct faculty are highly skilled in their area of expertise and provide a highly authentic experience, they frequently lack the skills required for providing the teaching excellence that modern adult students expect.

This white paper begins by elaborating the context driving urgency around adjunct faculty through an explanation of the constraints institutions face as well as the benefits and nature of adjunct faculty. It then explores the problems and solutions surrounding two major challenges faced by institutions: adjunct faculty satisfaction and adjunct faculty effectiveness. Improving adjunct faculty satisfaction requires administration to address five major areas: feeling involved, feeling valued, feeling secure, professional development, and fair compensation. At the same time, administration must ensure adjunct faculty effectiveness through three major methods: intentional training and tacit knowledge sharing. These areas ensure excellent adjunct faculty as shown in Figure #1.
Constraints
Community colleges can expect significantly increased enrollments across all student age groups over the next decade with as many as five million students expected to graduate by 2020 if the $12 billion government infusion goes well. However, in the same timeframe, over 40% of full time faculty may retire in the next decade while a 20 year trend shows only 27% being added to the ranks of full time faculty\(^1\). Combining this with falling graduation rates\(^2\) demonstrates several urgent challenges faced by institutions:

- retaining and motivating students;
- addressing academic preparation gaps;
- respecting the mental demands of students’ lives; and
- providing the relationships demanded by students.

Institutions have leveraged a model that relies on adjunct faculty to fill the growing pressure of providing students relevant and authentic learning experiences. In the same time period that full time faculty grew 27%, the adjunct faculty ranks shot up 91%\(^3\). However, given the growth of student enrollment, and the reduction in full time faculty, ever more expectations are falling on adjunct faculty. As such, it is essential that we better understand, train, and motivate our adjunct faculty\(^4\).

Benefits of Adjunct Faculty
The adjunct faculty member brings competency and practicality associated with applying concepts to real life as a result of already working daily in the same field of the courses being taught\(^5\). Adult learners especially value adjunct faculty’s problem-centered, experience driven, and highly relevant approaches\(^6\).
There are economic advantages to the model of relying on adjunct faculty as well. Adjunct faculty are contracted by course or by a group of courses with the agreement of no penalty cancelation, creating the option to cancel classes due to low registration, combine classes for a more robust group, and change classes to different terms based on demand. This provides the flexibility and scalability required to achieve much lower overhead costs, especially for online education.

This model encourages institutions to create common policy at the program level, define shared assessment standards, and centralize or outsource courseware development. As a result, adjunct faculty are freed to focus entirely on the student’s learning experience, ensuring the fulfillment of course by course contracts.

**Nature of Adjunct Faculty**

Taking a closer look at the nature of a typical adjunct faculty member, we find that a majority of adjunct faculty consider themselves specialists in their field and are actively employed in that same field. This exposes students to highly relevant learning in their field through problem-based, experiential learning. However, many adjunct faculty lack experience in guiding the learning process at the collegiate level and are challenged in working with students who have academic gaps outside of the faculty member’s expertise. Leveraging quality of content, policy, assessment, and even professional multimedia supplements allows colleges to minimize the impact of those risks, but student performance results are still consistently better for those under full time faculty.

As the growth rate of adjunct faculty are consistently higher than full time faculty, we must address the training necessary for adjunct faculty gaining experience in collegiate level instruction.

**Adjunct Faculty Satisfaction**

The frustrations that adjunct faculty experience have a direct effect on student satisfaction and retention. The most common complaints found in literature concern communication and expectations from educational leadership, low remuneration, and the sense of being a second class
citizen in the higher educational community. The reality for adjunct faculty is that they are already intrinsically motivated and rewarded through the experience of teaching and the sense of sharing, but the extrinsic de-motivators listed above suppress the inherent joy of teaching.

Educational leadership naturally assumes that spending more money will eliminate complaints, yet finds this infeasible due to cost constraints. However, recognizing the drivers to intrinsic motivation exposes low cost alternatives to support adjunct faculty. The most important aspects are shown in Figure #2.

The concept of involvement specifically revolves around having a voice in governance and policy setting. The act of teaching gives adjunct faculty a compelling recognition of the ambiguity and gaps in centralized processes. Additionally, adjunct faculty face the same balancing concerns between career, family, and learning as their students. They also frequently experience the same fears as their students. As such, giving adjunct faculty a voice on governance committees such as curriculum, policy, and services results in better service for the students and further motivates adjunct faculty.

Feeling valued and having security overlap to some degree because individuals will feel secure in their role when they perceive that they are
valued. Adjunct faculty are more motivated when they have a strong sense of belonging and cultural connection to the institution, resulting in reciprocal trust. Reducing this sense of isolation increases retention and ensures the experience and knowledge associated with excellent adjunct faculty. **Fair compensation** is important, but addressing the other four frustrations identified by adjunct faculty can lower the urgency of higher compensation.

The need for **professional development** especially revolves around addressing the lack of tacit knowledge found between full time faculty and adjunct faculty for successful collegiate learning. Furthermore, adjunct faculty recognize the gaps in their capabilities around teaching and show a strong desire for training and mentoring to help close those gaps. Adjunct faculty who have been trained on adult learning theory develop the ability to personalize the learning process and provide a learner-centered experience.

**Understanding adult learning theory** is critical for adjunct faculty to truly appreciate the institutional context, curriculum approach, and achieve deeper student understanding. These tools will improve an adjunct faculty member's capability of creating authentic learning experiences. **Figure #3** depicts essential adult learning concepts and theory that should be modeled by the adjunct faculty member to maximize student learning.

![Figure 3](image)
A few key theories of especial importance include andragogy, self-directed learning, and transformative learning. Knowles'\textsuperscript{21} androgogical framework of adult learning provides the basis of understanding adult students. Houle's\textsuperscript{22} and Tough's\textsuperscript{23} theory of self-directed adult learning helps instructors understand their motivations and methods. Within the concepts of self-direct learning lay Mezirow's\textsuperscript{24} transformative learning theory that provides a mindset and approach that is essential for any instructor working with adult learners.

**Adjunct Faculty Effectiveness**

Acquiring secondary skills is learning those skills that are outside a practitioner's core area of expertise. The skills necessary for adjunct faculty to guide the learning process are clearly outside their core expertise but are needed to effectively facilitate. However, effective facilitation and learning strategies are missing for many adjunct faculty despite that faculty development and course design is critical to student retention\textsuperscript{25}. A major reason is a lack of understanding the “why” of curriculum content, returning to the issue of training adjunct faculty for curriculum approaches and understanding students\textsuperscript{26}. This also leads into the issue of evaluating adjunct faculty's performance effectively. There has been both an absence of feedback loops from intentional training and there has also been an absence of accepted protocols in evaluation\textsuperscript{27}. We find solutions by looking at the $100 billion per year learning and development business industry for some methods to ensure effective practices. The techniques surrounding intentional training and tacit knowledge sharing have proven successful in business environments, but have been found lacking in colleges across the United States\textsuperscript{28}.

**Intentional Training**

From the perspective of leadership, whether in a corporate or educational environment, there are nine components for an effective training program shown in Figure #4 that additionally allow easy evaluation of the training if implemented well\textsuperscript{29}. 
Many of these components have obvious implications for a trainer, but three of them are more abstract and deserve explanation: Why, Outcomes, Assess. Providing a clear articulation of “why” the training is occurring allows students to achieve a state of play and optimize their own learning rather than inflicting a PowerPoint driven information glut. From this we move to creating focused objectives that increase knowledge, skills, or change attitudes. Also, when the training session reaches the assessment component, we must understand that this can be achieved through informal or formal assessment. The assessment should be authentic and relevant whether it is simply the faculty member taking the pulse of the class through Socratic questioning or if it is an artifact that the learners should create.

Beyond these particular components, there is also a set of techniques that support the instructor’s mindset of ensuring student’s learning instead of just covering content as shown in Figure #5.
These tools provide the components for building an excellent training experience and inform the appropriate mindset for teaching, coaching, or instructing. However, effective measurement is needed to achieve the feedback loops that connect training effectiveness and performance.

Kirkpatrick\textsuperscript{33} presented a training evaluation model that addressed the needs of a workforce developing secondary skills. The four measurements of this model involve reaction, learning, behavior, and results, as shown in Figure #6.

The focus of the reaction level is to ensure the participant’s perceptions are captured. This ensures that the correct issues are being evaluated for participant satisfaction. The mindset for this level should be to implement the measurement of those perceptions in whatever method that fits the culture of the organization or college.

The second level of measuring the learning is critical since reaction to the learning experience does not equate to effective learning. This is measured through the fulfillment of learning objectives classified through knowledge, skill, or attitude change.
Unfortunately many training programs end without validating participant’s changes in behaviors. The stakeholders responsible for this measurement level are the trainers and leaders. Trainers, instructors, or coaches frequently consider their job done with learning measurement while leadership frequently only wants the impact analysis, leaving the rest to the trainers\textsuperscript{34}. Despite the time and energy that behavior measurements take, filling this gap ensures that training is leveraged effectively.

The results measurement, or analysis, is essential for leadership because it can result in morale and retention improvement, better customer services, and reduced waste\textsuperscript{35}. The measurements can feel monumental to trainers, but in reality, the data is not difficult to access. It is the correlation of the data to the overall results that is essential.

It is disturbing that the only common evaluations of adjunct faculty that fulfill any of the measurement levels are the student evaluations, peer reviews, and direct observation\textsuperscript{36}. Interestingly,
all three of those fall in the behavior measurement, which is the one measurement that the business industry generally lacks. However, higher education would greatly benefit from adopting the entirety of the model to ensure clear feedback loops.

**Tacit Knowledge Sharing**

Although intentional training programs are essential, another feature of learning that is widely missing for adjunct faculty is tacit knowledge sharing\(^{37}\). Scholarly literature contains two very clear methods for developing sustainable systems of tacit learning that enable the adjunct faculty member to achieve personal growth and learning. These two methods involve strong mentoring programs and learning community programs\(^{38}\) as shown in **Figure #7**.

![Figure 7](image)

**Mentorship** requires patience, time, effort, and the ability to be present. These are not easy qualifications to find in what is otherwise an economically lean environment for adjunct faculty. However, it is an excellent method for ensuring tacit knowledge sharing and a superior experience for the students\(^{39}\). As a transmitter of wisdom\(^{40}\), the mentor is essentially an embodiment of tacit knowledge, and it is very much needed for adjunct faculty\(^{41}\).

It is important to distinguish mentoring from evaluation in this context. Evaluation ensures a transfer of learning to performance through measurement, while mentoring provides a sense of empowerment through increased confidence\(^{42}\).

Lessons we can learn from existing mentoring programs include the MacEwan College in Canada\(^{43}\) and Ivy Tech Community College in Indiana\(^{44}\). Intentional feedback loops were created between educational
leadership, the mentor, and the mentee. Frameworks were developed with an intentional goal and process. An essential element was that mentees self-selected into the mentoring programs. This allowed an incremental rollout based on demand, and only attracted the individuals with the motivation and self-awareness to experience the opportunity.

Features of the mentoring framework necessary for success included the following.

- Small teams were created called “teaching teams”
- Application to participate on a teaching team was required
- A mixture of experience was present in each team
- Teaching team leaders had their class time requirements reduced to offset the leadership responsibility

Establishing **communities of practice** is another method of transmitting and sharing tacit knowledge. There are three major characteristics valuable for communities\(^{45}\) as shown in **Figure #8**.

![Figure 8](image)

There are three primary ways to implement a community of practice or learning community. The first method is a structured long term community dedicated for on-going sharing and learning\(^{46}\). The second method is a short term one-time only community used as a platform for gathering feedback and collaborating over a specific innovation or implementation\(^{47}\). The third method is a community set for a period of time targeting a domain or specific competency\(^{48}\).

Communities are a social learning system that are effective whether individuals actively participate or not. The focus is about providing opportunity to a larger group of people instead of engaging each
individual⁴⁹. The intended outcome is to create a self-sustaining healthy space for sharing information and problem-solving.

Features of community frameworks necessary for success included the following.

- Individuals are permitted to self-select into the community
- External support is necessary for successful outcomes and participation
- Comfort with only 25% of the membership being active
- Experiential sharing is the priority, not assessment, validity, or creation of content
- Clarity of the type of community is provided

**Summary**

This white paper identifies the two essential aspects to addressing the urgency of ensuring both adjunct faculty satisfaction and adjunct faculty effectiveness. Specific actions and the implications of not performing those actions were discussed for achieving adjunct faculty satisfaction. A training evaluation model was presented for ensuring intentional training while two specific methods were also presented for ensuring tacit knowledge sharing; both of which aid in fulfilling adjunct faculty effectiveness.

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**ABOUT MARIAN**

Marian Willeke provides leadership in the development and design of learning systems in both academic and corporate environments. She has led the successful start-up online platform of the fastest growing university in Ohio, including governance, faculty development, and curriculum design systems. She is also in the process of providing architecture for the learning experience and curriculum development of several more start-up online platforms in various states. Additionally, Marian has advised for multiple organizations and universities on the concepts of lean and agile as applied to training and instructional design in both public and private sectors. Her passion is for individual self-awareness and transformation through both formal and informal learning environments.
Actions Worksheet

Industry Facts

Growth rate for adjunct faculty at 91% as higher education turn to adjuncts to fulfill needs.

Adjunct faculty now needing to meet the growing lack of academic preparedness for the increasing vulnerable population needs.

Adjunct faculty face the same balancing needs as do adult students.

Adjunct faculty face many of the same fears as do adult students but have a driving intrinsic reward when appreciated.

1 Langen, 2009
2 Royai & Downey, 2010
3 Reilly, Vandenhouten, et al., 2010
4 Reilly, et al., 2010; Shiffman, 2009; Tipple, 2014

Research states...

ACTION ITEMS...
Top needs reported by adjunct faculty include feeling involved, valued, secure, development opportunities, and fair compensation.

BECAUSE...
Top complaints for adjunct faculty included lack of communication from leadership except for problems, low pay, and low respect.

IF YOU DON'T...
Ignoring faculty needs impact motivation, trust, and satisfaction, also impacting student satisfaction.

1 Binder & James, 2011; Dolan, 2011; Hoyt, 2012; Mueller, Mandernach, & Sanderson, 2013; Tipple, 2014
2 Binder & James, 2011; Dobbins, 2011; Dolan, 2011; Hoyt, 2012
3 Cummings, Heek, & Huysman, 2008

Your Institution’s Adjunct Faculty

Feeling Involved...

Feeling Valued....

Feeling Secure...

Development opportunities...

Fair compensation...

Prepared by Marian Willeke
1 James & Binder, 2011; Lederman, 2007
2 Rovai & Downey, 2010
3 Langen, 2009
4 James & Binder, 2011; Hoyt, 2012; Mueller, Mandernach, & Sanderson, 2013; Tipple, 2014
5 Langen, 2009; Mueller, Mandernach, & Sanderson, 2013; Tipple, 2014
6 Knowles, 1980
7 Mueller, Mandernach, & Sanderson, 2013
8 Shiffman, 2009; Tipple, 2014
9 Mueller, Mandernach, & Sanderson, 2013
10 Cummings, Heek, & Huysman, 2008; Dolan, 2011; Rovai & Downey, 2010
11 Binder & James, 2011; Dobbins, 2011; Dolan, 2011; Hoyt, 2012
12 Tipple, 2014
13 Maguire, 2008
14 Reilly, Vandenhouwen, Gallagher-Lepak, & Ralston-Berg, 2012; Shiffman, 2009; Tipple, 2014
15 Dolan, 2011
16 Fouche, 2006
17 Guzzo, 2013
18 Binder & James, 2011; Hoyt, 2012; Langen, 2009; Mueller, Mandernach, & Sanderson, 2013; Reilly, et al., 2012; Tipple, 2014
19 Tipple, 2014
20 Smith and Wright, 2000
21 Knowles, 1980
22 Houle, 1961
23 Tough, 1971
24 Mezirow, 2000
25 Rovai & Downey, 2010
26 Smith and Wright, 2000
27 Langen, 2009
28 Guzzo, 2013; Hoyt, 2012
29 Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick, 2007
30 Wesch, 2014
31 Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2007
32 Clark, 2010
33 Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2007
34 Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2007
35 Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2007
36 Langen, 2009; Stoops, 2000
37 Guzzo, 2013
39 Daloz, 1999; Guzzo, 2013
40 Daloz, 1999
41 Silliman, 2007; Zutter, 2007
42 Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2007; Zutter, 2007
43 Zutter, 2007
44 Silliman, 2007
45 Reilly et al., 2012
46 Hlapanis & Dimitracopoulous, 2007
47 Furco & Moely, 2012
48 Messina, 2011
49 Thomas, Fried, Johnson, & Stilwell, 2010

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