
ARE THERE INSTRUCTIONAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FULL-TIME AND PART-TIME FACULTY?

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Abstract. Using data from eight academic departments and 361 courses taught during a semester, the author examined differences between full-time and part-time faculty in the areas of general demographic variables, student evaluation of teaching outcomes, and the distribution of grades earned. The author expected full-time faculty to exhibit higher teaching evaluations and less lenient grade distributions, yet neither hypothesis was supported. However, substantial differences exist in the support mechanisms provided to part-time and full-time faculty.

Keywords: *grade distributions, part-time/full-time faculty, student evaluations of teaching*

It is undeniable that in the United States, higher education's reliance on adjunct/part-time faculty is growing. According to the data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), in 1992 part-time faculty composed 41.7 percent of the instructional faculty at degree-granting institutions; by 2003, 43.7 percent of the instructional faculty were part-time fac-

ulty. Not only are the ranks of part-time faculty growing larger (in proportion to all faculty ranks), but part-time faculty increases are occurring at an accelerated rate. From 1992 to 2003, there was a 29.2 percent increase in the number of full-time faculty, but during the same time period, there was a 40.6 percent increase in the number of part-time faculty. My particular interest in this topic addresses pedagogical (e.g., grade distributions) and performance issues (e.g., student evaluations of teaching) of full-time and part-time faculty.

Previous researchers address the areas in which full-time and part-time faculty dif-

fer. For instance, Jaschik (2006) reported that at community colleges, when graduation and completion rates are examined, institutions with higher rates of full-time faculty members also have higher completion rates as compared to community colleges with lower rates of full-time faculty members. In a study of the professional attitudes of community college faculty, Rifkin (1998) found that, compared to full-time faculty, part-time faculty (a) exhibit less involvement in curriculum, instruction, and scholarship; (b) exhibit less autonomy from the institution; and (c) appear less responsible for institutional behavior (a variable that Rifkin refers to as integrity). In a comparison of full-time and part-time community college faculty, Hellman (1998) found no significant differences between the groups on student evaluation outcomes. Only one evaluative item even approached a significant difference, with full-time faculty scoring higher on instructor availability outside of class compared to part-time faculty. However, given the inherent differences between community colleges and four-year institutions, it is difficult to generalize these results to other types of educational institutions.

Some research does exist concerning differences between full-time and part-time faculty on student evaluations of teaching. Ghaffari-Samai, Davis, and De Filippis (1994) studied the differences between full-time and part-time faculty over two years with respect to grading practices, learning outcomes as related

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to writing skills, and student ratings of teaching effectiveness. The only difference reported by Ghaffari-Samai, Davis, and De Filippis was that in one of the years studied, part-time faculty assigned a greater proportion of higher grades (specifically, As and Bs) than full-time faculty. In a comparison of off-campus part-time faculty to on-campus full-time faculty, Vitello, Newmyer, and Stivers (1985) found that although part-time faculty were rated significantly lower than full-time faculty, part-time faculty scored high, in the strong to outstanding range (full-time faculty just scored exceptionally high). In a study of instructional effectiveness by Wollert and West (2000), they found that in most cases, part-time instructors did not receive lower student ratings of instruction than the full-time faculty.

Even though previous research has addressed the differences between full-time and part-time faculty, the present study attempted to simplify and focus the examination of these differences in three areas: demographic characteristics, student evaluation of instruction, and grade distribution. Other studies address some of these issues, but some were conducted at community colleges, whereas others examined differences between on- and off-campus instruction. My goal was to conduct a comparison of full-time and part-time faculty in a broad fashion, utilizing multiple departments, faculty, and courses located within one college of a large, western four-year comprehensive university. To my knowledge, no study has addressed these issues in such a manner. Using archival data, my goal was to examine differences between full-time and part-time faculty within the contexts of (a) demographic characteristics; (b) student evaluation of instruction; and (c) grade distributions. Given the previous literature, I expect that when differences do exist, full-time faculty will receive better ratings than part-time faculty. I also expect that part-time faculty will be more lenient in their grade distributions (higher course GPAs) compared to full-time faculty because of differences in prior teaching experience.

Method

Participants

The unit of analysis for this study was individual sections of undergraduate

courses taught in the College of Social Sciences and Public Affairs at Boise State University during the fall 2003 semester. After I received relevant approvals at all levels, all but two faculty members consented for their evaluation data to be included in the study (their data were deleted), yielding a sample frame of 361 courses taught in eight departments (number of courses in parentheses): Anthropology ($n = 34$), Criminal Justice Administration ($n = 38$), Communication ($n = 112$), History ($n = 64$), Political Science ($n = 34$), Psychology ($n = 32$), Sociology ($n = 30$), and Social Work ($n = 17$).

Materials

For each course taught during that fall 2003 semester, I sought the following data: department, course number (then recoded into lower division/upper division), number of credits, location where taught (on- or off-campus), type of instruction (in person, Internet, telecourse), course start time, student evaluation of instruction mean scores for each of 14 college-wide questions (for each course), distribution of grades allotted for each course, total course enrollment, course GPA (number of grade points earned by students in the course divided by the number of students enrolled), instructor rank (then recoded full-time or part-time), whether or not the instructor has an office on campus, whether or not the instructor has a university e-mail address, number of years at the university, number of years teaching, and number of classes taught per semester.

Procedure

After receiving project approvals from our Institutional Review Board and dean's office, I contacted each department chair to solicit their participation in the project. Each of the eight department chairs consented to participate by providing their departmental faculty evaluation data. Prior to use, however, we contacted each faculty member in the college (via the department chair) and asked permission to use their fall 2003 student evaluation of teaching data for each course section taught. Confidentiality was assured. Two faculty members objected to the use of their data, and it was deleted from the data set.

Results and Discussion

I present my analytical strategy in three sections: (1) examination of differences between full-time and part-time faculty with respect to overall differences on general/demographic variables; (2) examination of the teaching evaluation questions for differences between full-time and part-time faculty; and (3) examination of grade distribution data for full-time and part-time instructor differences.

Full-Time/Part-Time Differences on Demographic/General Variables

Full-time versus part-time comparisons on variables measured using the nominal scale were analyzed using chi-square for each variable (type of instruction, campus office, campus e-mail address, teaching lower- or upper-division courses, and teaching on campus or not). There was not a significant association between faculty status (full-time versus part-time) and the instruction type (in person, Internet, or telecourse), $\chi^2 (2, n = 249) = 4.62, n.s.$ Full-time faculty taught in person 95.9 percent of the time, whereas part-time faculty taught in person 95.1 percent of the time. There was a significant association between faculty status and whether or not the instructor has an office on campus, $\chi^2 (1, n = 261) = 111.05, p < .001$. Whereas 78.8 percent of full-time faculty have an office on campus, the corresponding number for part-time faculty is 21.2 percent. There is an association between faculty status and whether or not an instructor has an e-mail address, $\chi^2 (1, n = 258) = 102.02, p < .001$. From the course data, 76.1 percent of full-time faculty have campus e-mail addresses, whereas 23.9 percent of part-time faculty have campus e-mail addresses. Regarding the course level of classes taught, there was a significant association between faculty status and proportion of lower-division or upper-division classes taught, $\chi^2 (1, N = 257) = 22.25, p < .001$. Full-time faculty divided their efforts by teaching 54.2 percent of their courses at the lower division and 45.8 percent of their courses at the upper division; correspondingly, part-time faculty divided their efforts by teaching 82.7 percent of their courses at the lower division, and 17.3 percent of their courses at the upper-division level.

There is not a significant association between faculty status and whether or not the instruction was held on campus, $\chi^2(1, n = 269) = 3.25$, n.s. Full-time faculty taught courses on campus 81.7 percent of the time, whereas part-time faculty taught on campus 72.4 percent of the time.

Full-time versus part-time comparisons on variables measured using the interval/ratio scale were analyzed using a *t*-test for each variable (number of course credits, start time, total course enrollment, years at the university, years teaching, and number of classes taught per semester). There was not a significant difference between full-time faculty ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 0.8$) and part-time faculty ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 0.5$) in the number of credits per class, $t(243) = 1.84$, n.s. There was not a significant difference between full-time faculty ($M = 1331.57$, $SD = 308.3$) and part-time faculty ($M = 1362.50$, $SD = 396.9$) in the average start time of class, $t(232) = 0.67$, n.s. There was not a significant difference between full-time faculty ($M = 41.70$, $SD = 36.0$) and part-time faculty ($M = 40.55$, $SD = 33.8$) in the average number of students enrolled per class, $t(214) = -0.22$, n.s. There was a significant difference between full-time faculty ($M = 13.95$, $SD = 9.5$) and part-time faculty ($M = 7.84$, $SD = 6.4$) in the average number of years at the university, $t(264) = -5.70$, p

$< .001$. There was a significant difference between full-time faculty ($M = 17.88$, $SD = 9.6$) and part-time faculty ($M = 9.62$, $SD = 7.3$) in the average number of total years of teaching experience, $t(238) = -7.21$, $p < .001$. There was a significant difference between full-time faculty ($M = 2.26$, $SD = 1.3$) and part-time faculty ($M = 1.84$, $SD = 0.8$) in the average number of classes taught per semester, $t(267) = -2.93$, $p < .001$.

Full-Time/Part-Time Differences on Teaching Evaluation Items

The 14 items contained on the teaching evaluation form are presented in table 1, with corresponding means, standard deviations, and *t*-test scores. There were no statistically significant differences between full-time and part-time faculty on any of the teaching evaluation items.

Full-Time/Part-Time Differences in Grade Allocation

To detect any overall differences between faculty status and grade allocation, I conducted a *t*-test. There was not a significant difference between full-time faculty ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 0.6$) and part-time faculty ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 0.4$) on course GPA, $t(211) = 1.80$, n.s. Although part-time faculty had a slightly higher course GPA, this difference was not significant.

Conclusion

Given this data, it is remarkable what part-time faculty accomplish in light of the reduced resources available. Even though part-time faculty are less likely to have an office or a university e-mail account, and they teach a greater proportion of lower-division students compared to full-time faculty (and have less experience teaching), I found no significant differences in students' evaluation of instruction or in course grade distributions. This finding has both positive and negative consequences. For advocates for student learning, it is a positive outcome that part-time faculty perform just as well as the full-time faculty in regard to student evaluations of teaching and course grade distributions in this sample. However, adjunct faculty persevere in the face of diminished resources and support. In some instances, this may hasten an institution's reliance (or over-reliance) on adjunct faculty—it is not that the adjunct faculty do more with less, but it appears that they do the same with less.

My expectations prior to this study were not supported. I expected that when there were teaching evaluation differences, full-time faculty would perform better than part-time faculty—however, there were no significant differences (as presented in

TABLE 1. Differences Between Full-Time and Part-Time Faculty on Teaching Evaluation Items

Item	Full-time faculty		Part-time faculty		<i>t</i> -test	<i>df</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
1. Instructor's presentations increased my knowledge of the subject.	4.41	0.4	4.32	0.4	-1.26	187
2. Instructor's methods of evaluation were fair.	4.24	0.4	4.28	0.4	0.56	187
3. Instructor was available during office hours.	4.14	0.4	4.00	0.3	-2.39	187
4. I would recommend this instructor to another student.	4.24	0.6	4.19	0.6	-0.49	187
5. I felt free to participate (e.g., ask questions) in this class.	4.43	0.3	4.47	0.3	0.70	187
6. Instructor seemed well-prepared for class.	4.46	0.4	4.42	0.4	-0.63	187
7. Instructor expressed ideas clearly.	4.24	0.5	4.23	0.5	-0.13	187
8. Objectives of the course were met.	4.32	0.4	4.27	0.4	-0.75	187
9. Assignments and exam results were returned in a timely fashion.	4.35	0.4	4.34	0.4	-0.44	187
10. Assignments were of value to my learning.	4.27	0.4	4.17	0.4	-1.48	186
11. I expect to receive the grade of . . .	4.16	0.3	4.13	0.3	-0.44	186
12. Overall, I would rate this course . . .	3.37	0.4	3.33	0.4	-0.63	186
13. Compared to that of my classmates, the work I performed in this class was . . .	3.55	0.2	3.56	0.3	0.10	186
14. Overall, I would rate this instructor as . . .	3.49	0.4	3.43	0.4	-0.79	186

Note. Items 1–10 were rated on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Means in this table are taken from mean scores calculated per class, i.e., unweighted means. Items 11 and 13 were originally rated on a scale from 1 = F to 5 = A. Items 12 and 14 were originally rated on a scale from 1 (*poor*) to 4 (*excellent*). All items were nonsignificant.

table 1). I also expected that part-time faculty would be more lenient in their grade distributions; however, there was also no significant difference. Finding no difference in student evaluations of teaching is similar to other previous studies (Ghaffari-Samai, Davis, and De Filippis 1994; Hellman 1998; Wollert and West 2000), even though some of these studies were conducted at community colleges. This study is unique in that the data come from eight different departments and over 350 different course sections; this variability in the data helps external validity and the generalizability of these outcomes.

Although substantial differences were found with the degree of support provided to part-time faculty as compared to full-time faculty, student course evaluation scores and course grade distributions did not differ significantly between full-time and part-time faculty. These are important findings to consider in light of growing

reliance nationwide on part-time faculty. Those of us who are advocates for student learning can be reassured by these results, but care must be taken not to abuse part-time faculty and their remarkable ability to accomplish similar teaching and learning outcomes with reduced resources.

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