

# USE OF ALUMNI PERCEPTIONS TO EVALUATE INSTRUCTIONAL AND DEPARTMENTAL QUALITY

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We asked Boise State alumni about the quality of undergraduate instruction (comparing ratings of full-time and adjunct faculty), questions about departmental quality, and general demographic questions. Although alumni consistently reported higher instructional ratings for full-time faculty, the proportion of courses taught by adjunct faculty (as reported by each respondent) did not impact overall ratings of departmental quality. We present the predictors of departmental quality and discuss how alumni surveys can aid departments in assessment and decision-making.

Throughout the nation, Departments of Psychology are challenged to provide a quality undergraduate education to high numbers of students. One index of the popularity of psychology is evidenced by the number of psychology baccalaureates. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2006) for the latest year available (2003-2004), there were 82,098 bachelor's degrees in psychology awarded. Often, high enrollment is not accompanied by commensurate levels of departmental resources. This dissonant situation forces some departments to "do more with less" or perhaps "do more with the same." Departments have varied strategies for serving more students without commensurate increases in resources. For example, one method is to increase class size. One section of 200 students in a course is more efficient (from a resource perspective) than 5 sections of 40 students each. However, this class size may impact not only student learning but also perceptions of departmental quality. Another strategy for departments is to add more class sections, but adding sections often results in adding sections taught by adjunct

faculty. This strategy may help to keep class sizes low, but adjunct faculty may have less expertise and training than full-time faculty. One of our goals was to examine indicators of departmental quality via an alumni survey, with a particular focus on how strategic decisions (such as a growing reliance on adjunct faculty) may or may not impact alumni perceptions.

The need for departmental evaluation and outcomes assessment is well-established. Halpern (1988; Halpern et al., 1993) wrote that the motivations for outcomes assessment include mandated external reviews for accreditation purposes, accountability reports provided to legislative entities and governing trustees, and internal uses of outcomes assessment data, such as for program expansion or curricular change. Halpern and others (e.g., Sheehan, 1994) have suggested multiple data sources be used in the outcomes assessment process, with frequent mention of alumni surveys as one valuable source of departmental feedback. In fact, the use of alumni surveys in assessing departmental performance is frequent (Sheehan & Granrud, 1995; Wise,

Hengstler, & Braskamp, 1981). Researchers (e.g., McGovern & Carr, 1989; Quereshi, 1988) studied alumni surveys, with 5 common themes emerging: usefulness of the major, alumni satisfaction, gender differences, evaluation of curriculum and faculty, and value in enhancing career options (Quereshi, 1988). Although alumni surveys are available publicly (e.g., Dawson & Skinkle, 1996; Willemsen, Pardini, Andersen, Shirasu, & Barroga, 1999), we chose to design our own alumni survey to specifically address these questions: (a) what instructional effectiveness differences do alumni perceive between full-time and adjunct faculty, and (b) what are the overall predictors of alumni satisfaction regarding departmental performance?

Examining the differences between full-time and adjunct faculty is not a new idea. Fischer (2005) reported that an increased use of adjunct faculty is related to declining graduation rates, and Kezim, Pariseau, and Quinn (2005) found that increasing proportions of adjunct faculty were related to increased grade inflation. Whereas the need for adjunct faculty clearly exists (e.g., Haeger, 1998), it is unknown what impact such reliance on adjunct faculty has on alumni perceptions and departmental performance. In addition to examining the adjunct/full-time issue, another goal was to gain an overall understanding of the predictors of departmental quality from the perspective of our alumni.

### Method

#### *Participants*

We mailed surveys to one-third of all Boise State University Department of Psy-

chology alumni (randomly selected) with addresses on record ( $N = 306$ ). Using first-class mail, 8 undeliverable surveys were returned, yielding a valid sample of 298 respondents. We received 113 usable responses (response rate = 37.9%). Participants ranged in age from 22 to 78 years old ( $M = 38.0$ ,  $SD = 11.3$ ), with 25.4% men and 74.6% women (4 respondents did not indicate gender). The vast majority of respondents were White/Caucasian (93.1%). Eleven participants were enrolled in a graduate program in psychology at the time they completed the survey. Forty-nine participants were employed in a position related to the field of psychology.

#### *Materials*

We developed an alumni survey to collect information about the differences between part-time and full-time faculty. The survey consisted of 87 questions. We asked questions that would help further our understanding of the quality of our undergraduate program, examining instructional quality (instructor type: full-time vs. adjunct) and overall perceptions of departmental quality.

#### *Procedure*

We mailed the survey instrument, a cover letter, and a self-addressed business-reply envelope via first-class mail. We mailed packets in February 2005 and asked for responses within 1 month.

### Results

We address three distinct issues: (a) the general characteristics of alumni in this sample; (b) differences, if any, between alumni perceptions of adjunct and full-

time faculty and how these instructional differences may relate to perceptions of departmental quality; and (c) overall perceptions of departmental quality (including significant predictors).

#### *Characteristics of Alumni Respondents*

Survey items answered using an interval/ratio scale appear in Table 1 with means and standard deviations. When asked about high school grade point average, the modal response was 3.6 to 4.0 (35.1%), and when asked about college GPA at graduation, the modal response was 3.0 to 3.5 (44.3%). We asked alumni about their first full-time job offer after graduation, and 31.4% (the modal response) indicated that they were already employed and continued that job after graduation. We asked alumni from which source they learned the most while an undergraduate, and 16.8% responded textbooks, 54.2% lectures, 15.0% assignments, and 14.0% doing research.

#### *Relation Between Instructor Type and Perception of Instructional Quality*

A key goal of this research was to determine the precise nature of instructional differences between adjunct and full-time faculty as perceived by alumni. Eighteen instructional dimensions were used; respondents were asked to rate both adjunct faculty and full-time faculty using an agreement scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Means, standard deviations, and paired samples *t* test results appear in Table 2. Due to 18 *t* tests administered, we used a Bonferroni correction and rejected the null hypothesis only if  $p < .003$ . Additionally, we asked (on a scale from 1 = *poor* to 4 = *excellent*) respondents to rate their overall impression of classroom teaching by full-time faculty members ( $M = 3.23, SD = 0.6$ ) and adjunct/part-time faculty members ( $M = 2.93, SD = 0.5$ ); there was a significant difference,  $t(94) = 4.53, p < .001$ .

To better understand the relationship between instructor type (full-time vs.

Table 1  
*Demographic Characteristics of Alumni Respondents (Means and Standard Deviations)*

Survey Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
What was your approximate annual income during undergraduate study?	13,261.32	12,554.45
What is your approximate annual income now?	54,908.65	63,666.56
On average, how many credits did you enroll in each semester while at Boise State?	14.34	2.57
At the end of your undergraduate career, on average how many hours did you spend per week studying?	14.48	10.75
Using your best estimate, what percentage of all your classes taken at Boise State were taught by adjunct/part-time instructors?	20.43	15.60
Using your best estimate, what percentage of psychology classes taken at Boise State were taught by adjunct/part-time instructors?	14.54	13.53

Table 2  
*Instructional Differences between Adjunct and Full-time Faculty*

Instructional Dimension	Adjunct Faculty <i>M (SD)</i>	Full-time Faculty <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t</i>
Cared about my welfare	3.63 (.80)	4.02 (.75)	-4.16*
Cared if I learned anything	3.80 (.71)	4.13 (.61)	-4.48*
Graded fairly	3.82 (.72)	4.10 (.58)	-3.56*
Knowledgeable regarding subject material	4.04 (.77)	4.43 (.56)	-4.96*
Effective instructor	3.84 (.72)	4.09 (.59)	-3.07
On time	3.97 (.70)	4.22 (.55)	-3.83*
Prepared	3.96 (.65)	4.29 (.52)	-5.25*
Increased my knowledge	4.02 (.62)	4.27 (.55)	-4.09*
Helped me with difficulties	3.44 (.77)	3.79 (.73)	-4.07*
Available when needed	3.28 (.95)	3.89 (.73)	-6.08*
Gave challenging exams	3.72 (.82)	4.14 (.63)	-4.64*
Gave challenging assignments	3.70 (.79)	4.11 (.64)	-5.12*
Were interesting to listen to	3.92 (.69)	4.00 (.66)	-0.98
Seemed interested in the subject	4.15 (.69)	4.28 (.66)	-1.68
Prepared me to further my education	3.59 (.80)	3.93 (.82)	-4.52*
Were available to help with out-of-class concerns	3.21 (.80)	3.60 (.85)	-3.77*
Helped me perform to my potential	3.38 (.79)	3.72 (.87)	-4.29*
Provided encouragement	3.68 (.83)	3.89 (.87)	-2.18

Notes: Respondents rated each item using 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Because not all respondents answered both instructional item for adjunct and full-time faculty, degrees of freedom range from 88 to 91. \*Indicated a significant different using the Bonferroni correction,  $p < .003$ .

Table 3  
*Correlations of Quality of Instruction with Proportion of Instruction Provided by Adjuncts*

Items / Proportions	What percentage of ALL your classes taken at Boise State were taught by adjunct instructors?	What percentage of PSYCHOLOGY classes taken at Boise State were taught by adjunct instructors?
1. Boise State gave me the skills and abilities needed to gain employment in the psychological field.	-0.15	-0.07
2. Psychology courses at BSU improved my knowledge of the material.	-0.19	-0.08
3. Psychology courses were of value to my learning.	-0.06	-0.09
4. What is your overall impression of the BSU psychology department?	0.05	0.01

*Notes.* None of these correlations were statistically significant. For questions across the top, respondents indicated a percentage. For items 1-3, respondents rated each using 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Item 4 was answered using a scale from 1 = *poor* to 4 = *excellent*. Degrees of freedom range from 84 to 92.

adjunct), we correlated alumni estimates of proportion of all classes and psychology classes taken from adjuncts with various items that can be considered indicators of department quality. These correlations appear in Table 3.

#### *Overall Perceptions of Departmental Quality*

Indicators of departmental quality and alumni satisfaction can be elicited in a variety of ways. By simply examining descriptive statistics from key questions, we can begin to understand alumni perceptions. For instance, 46.3% agreed or strongly agreed that 'Boise State gave me the skills and abilities needed to gain employment in the psychological field.' Additionally, 82.7% agreed or strongly

agreed that 'psychology faculty were interested in student welfare.' Similar patterns emerge when examining the percentage of agree or strongly agree responses for the following items: 'psychology courses at BSU improved my knowledge of the material' (96.6%) and 'psychology courses were of value to my learning' (95.6%). When asked about their overall impression of the BSU psychology department, 26.7% of alumni responded with excellent, 58.6% good, 12.9% fair, and 1.7% poor.

Another method of ascertaining what is important in influencing departmental quality is to examine which items are statistical predictors of departmental quality. We used the item "what is your overall

impression of the BSU psychology department" as the criterion variable. Using a stepwise regression and replacing missing scores with mean values, four predictors emerged from the linear equation,  $F(4,113) = 21.13, p < .001$ : 'outside of class lectures, I was able to use faculty members as an informational source regarding graduate school and careers' ( $B = .217, SE B = .055, \beta = .357, p < .001$ ), 'psychology faculty members were interested in student welfare' ( $B = .302, SE B = .079, \beta = .346, p < .001$ ), 'how old are you' ( $B = -.011, SE B = .004, \beta = -.186, p < .05$ ), and 'how often did you skip class lectures at Boise State?' ( $B = -.218, SE B = .095, \beta = -.168, p < .05$ ).

### Discussion

Although alumni consistently rated the quality of instruction as higher for full-time faculty compared to adjuncts, these differences did not significantly impact alumni perceptions of overall department quality. Using both broad comparisons of full-time and adjunct faculty as well as specific instructional behaviors (see Table 2), our alumni reported a clear preference for full-time faculty. However, when we asked alumni to estimate the proportion of instruction provided by adjunct faculty and correlated that estimate with indicators of department quality, near zero or slightly negative correlations emerged, none significant (see Table 3). If instructor type impacted perceptions of departmental quality, we expected to find significant negative correlations.

Alumni surveys have clear benefits to departments (McGovern & Carr, 1989; Quereshi, 1988; Willemsen et al., 1999)

regardless of the outcomes. For instance, we were intrigued to learn that after graduation, almost a third of our graduates were already employed and continued in the same job after graduation. Our alumni averaged over 14 credits per semester when enrolled in school, and the mean salary was just under \$55,000 per year. It is important to note that these data came from a sample of all our alumni, and not just recent alumni (our first bachelor's degree was awarded in 1969). Understanding the career path and perceptions of our alumni help to shape the current direction of the department, as well as tell our students about opportunities available after graduation.

In addition to understanding the impact of instructor differences and a general snapshot of our alumni, we also wanted to better understand the predictors of departmental quality from the perspective of our alumni. Interestingly, the single-most powerful predictor of departmental quality was the extent to which faculty provided help outside of class regarding graduate school and career paths. From the alumni perspective in this sample, the career advising occurring outside of class was a more powerful predictor of quality than anything occurring inside the classroom!

This finding reinforces the need to continue to strengthen advising services provided to students, which is a challenge in the face of growing enrollments (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). Alumni who agreed more that psychology faculty were interested in student welfare also tended to rate departmental quality higher. This encourages us to continue to be active participants in our

students' academic lives, providing advising services, serving as club advisors, supervising students in research and teaching assistantships, providing internship opportunities, and other activities.

Two items were inversely related to departmental quality: age and the frequency with which alumni skipped classes while students. Younger respondents tended to rate departmental quality higher than older respondents. This finding could be due to a number of reasons. Speculatively, it may be that older alumni have a different life perspective and can better appreciate what their undergraduate education did or did not provide to them, or alternatively, it could be our department has improved in more recent years, and that is reflected in our younger graduates being more positive. From these data, a definitive explanation is not possible. Alumni reporting that they skipped classes infrequently also tended to rate departmental quality higher. Although no cause-and-effect conclusion is possible here, encouraging our students to attend class may help in improving ratings of departmental quality.

One clear constraint of this study is that it is limited to a single institution. Clearly, a more representative sample of psychology alumni from around the nation would be a preferable approach, but no known mechanism exists for such data collection on a national scale. Whereas the results of a survey of our alumni are interesting, their explanatory power and generalizability are limited.

We sometimes worry about how our curricular and strategic decisions may impact our students and ultimately our

alumni. Larger sections may lead to reductions in student learning, or greater reliance on adjunct faculty may have negative effects. In this study, although alumni clearly rated the instructional performance of full-time faculty as superior to adjunct faculty, this perception did not appear to impact ratings of departmental quality. Alumni surveys may also provide other benefits in the context of services provided to students, such as advising services. Perhaps our mentoring of students outside the classroom is as important to our future graduates as the instruction provided inside the classroom.

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