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Studies Link Use of Part-Time Instructors to Lower Student Success

By [PETER SCHMIDT](#)

At a time when colleges are under increasing financial pressure to rely more on part-time faculty, three new studies suggest that doing so erodes the quality of education many students receive.

Part-timers' inability or unwillingness to devote more time to students outside the classroom, the research suggests, results in the denial of important support services to many students—including, often, those who need the most help.

And in a finding that breaks new ground, one of the studies concludes that heavy reliance on part-timers can actually hurt the performance of full-time, tenure-track faculty members. One possible explanation: Full-timers feel less secure at institutions that might replace them with part-time instructors and lecturers, said that study's author, Paul D. Umbach, an associate professor of adult and higher education at North Carolina State University.

Part-timers are not the ones to blame, Mr. Umbach said: "We are not treating these faculties in a way that they are feeling valued."

Faculty members who work part time—who are usually given adjunct-faculty status—are divided on the accuracy of the studies' portrayal of their dedication and the obstacles they face.

Nancy McMahon, who works as a part-time English instructor at Madison Area Technical College, in Wisconsin, said she feels very much under the gun.

"You find it very hard to put in the kind of time you would like to because you have to do other things to make a living," she said.

When she takes into account all of the time her college expects her to spend preparing for class, grading papers, and meeting with students in an office space she shares with other professors, the money she gets per course "comes out to minimum wage."

But Barbara Houchen, a former college administrator and full-time professor of business who now works as a part-time instructor at several Maryland colleges, said she regularly interacts with students outside of class because doing so is expected and makes her effective. "You understand that it is part of your teaching obligation," she said. "If you accept teaching for X number of dollars, then you accept that."

Cary Nelson, president of the American Association of University Professors, said, "We have had our heads in the sand about this problem for many years, and the problem is getting worse."

Most part-time faculty members are deeply committed to their work, Mr. Nelson said, but many are “just frazzled” as a result of the pressures placed on them, and “the students are paying a price for it.”

Vulnerable Populations

About 46 percent of the nation’s college faculty members are part time, up from 22 percent back in 1970, according to the most recent Education Department data on them, from 2003. Part-timers are especially prevalent at community colleges, accounting for about 67 percent of their teaching staffs, up about 40 percentage points from 1970 levels.

The National Education Association estimates, based on federal data, that part-time faculty members with teaching duties spend 91 percent of their time delivering instruction, compared with about 61 percent for full-time faculty members. Across all institutions of higher education, such part-time faculty members generally spend six to nine hours per week teaching for-credit classes and are paid just over a fourth as much, per course, as their full-time counterparts.

Of particular concern to some education researchers is the tendency of colleges to use part-timers to teach lower-level courses, as well as courses offered at night, when part-time students are most likely to be coming to their campuses.

“The reality is that both part-time faculty and part-time students are less engaged with the college,” said Kay M. McClenney, director of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin.

In night classes, she said, “those realities collide,” undermining students’ chances of succeeding. She expects the situation to get worse in the current economic downturn, as people who cannot find jobs enroll at public colleges to learn new skills, and the colleges, facing tight budgets, turn to part-time instructors to meet rising demand.

Considering that students from low-income backgrounds are most likely to attend community colleges, and that low-income students and college freshmen are the most likely to need advising and other support outside the classroom, Ernst Benjamin, a former director of research at the AAUP, said the recent results reinforce his concern that “the students who need help the most are not getting it.”

“A lot of this is budget driven,” acknowledged Mr. Benjamin, who is now the association’s general secretary. But, he said, “it is all contrary to the whole movement toward wanting to have better teaching and learning.”

Hurt Prospects

The findings of the three new studies on part-time faculty members are scheduled to be presented this week at the annual conference of the Association for the Study of Higher Education.

Two of the studies, focusing on the academic success of community-college students with part-time instructors, were jointly conducted by Audrey J. Jaeger, an associate professor of higher education at North Carolina State University, and M. Kevin Eagan Jr., a graduate student at the University of California at Los Angeles.

In a previous study, presented at a conference last spring ([*The Chronicle*](#), April 4), Ms. Jaeger and Mr. Eagan examined the transcripts of 30,000 students at four public four-year universities in a Southeastern state and concluded that those students who were taught “gatekeeper” courses by part-time adjuncts, lecturers, or postdoctoral fellows were less likely to return for their sophomore years.

For their latest studies, the researchers analyzed data from California’s community-college system to try to determine whether being taught by part-timers influenced students’ prospects of reaching certain academic goals. In one of the studies, the findings of which were published last month in *Research in Higher Education*, Ms. Jaeger and Mr. Eagan examined the transcripts of about 25,000 first-time students whose course-taking behavior suggested they intended to transfer to four-year institutions.

The two researchers found that the likelihood of students continuing on to four-year institutions dropped by 2 percent for every increase of 10 percentage points in their credits earned with part-time faculty members. That remained true even after accounting for differences in the community colleges and in students’ backgrounds.

For the average student, the trend translates into an 8-percent drop in the likelihood of transferring. That is because the average student in the study earned almost 40 percent of credits from part-time faculty members.

In their other study, the researchers used similar methodology to examine the transcripts of about 179,000 students who, when enrolling, had stated a desire to earn an associate degree and then demonstrated their seriousness by completing at least nine credit hours by the end of their first year. The researchers found that each increase of 10 percentage points in overall exposure to part-time faculty members was correlated with a reduction of 1 percentage point in such students’ likelihood of earning associate degrees.

The researchers said both studies have important limitations, such as their inability to account for differences in students’ remedial class-taking behavior or out-of-class experiences.

Nancy B. Shulock, executive director of the Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy at California State University at Sacramento, said the study examining student transfers may have understated students’ success by tracking them over just five years. But, she said, “there is no disputing that having students be able connect on a personal and sustained basis with faculty is important.”

Commitment Gap

In Mr. Umbach's study of the effects of part-timers on full-time faculty members, he analyzed 2001 survey data gathered by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles from about 21,000 faculty members at 148 two- and four-year colleges. He found that, compared with full-time faculty members, part-timers advised students less frequently, used active teaching techniques less often, spent less time preparing for class, and were less likely to participate in teaching workshops.

The most striking finding, Mr. Umbach said, is that when part-timers accounted for a substantial share of the instructors on a campus, its full-timers devoted substantially fewer hours than full-timers elsewhere to preparing for class or advising students.

Mr. Umbach speculated that full-time faculty members at colleges that employ large numbers of contingent faculty members feel they could be easily replaced, and are thus less committed to their institutions.

But other experts on labor in higher education have a different explanation for the effect. They note that, as the ranks of full-time faculty members dwindle, those remaining find themselves shouldering an ever-larger share of the burden for outreach, curriculum development, and student assessment and advising.

John S. Levin, director of the California Community College Collaborative, a policy-research center based at the University of California at Riverside, said that at colleges heavily staffed by part-timers, "it is difficult to have a coherent academic culture" where people within academic departments work together.

Making Do

Keith Hoeller, chairman of the adjunct-faculty committee of the Washington State affiliate of the AAUP, took issue with any suggestion that part-time faculty members were inferior to their full-time counterparts. What Mr. Umbach's study is measuring, he said, "is not really part-timers versus full-timers, but institutional support."

Mr. Umbach said he was sympathetic to part-timers, who, he said, are "treated like crap" and then faulted for not being more effective. "From an economist's perspective, we are not giving them the rewards or incentives to do a good job," he said.

A similar assessment was offered by Gwendolyn Bradley, who specializes in contingent-faculty issues as a senior program officer at the AAUP. She complained that, along with not being adequately compensated for time spent with students outside the classroom, many part-time faculty members are recruited by colleges at the last minute, hired with little scrutiny, and not permitted to select their own books.

Most of the faculty experts interviewed for this article said that because colleges are not likely to stop relying on part-time faculty members anytime soon, the key question raised by the latest research is how to make the best of the situation.

Several said the solution is offering part-timers contracts that reward them for giving more time to their jobs outside the classroom. They pointed to contracts in place at the City University of New York, the University of Michigan's campuses, and Vancouver Community College, in British Columbia, as models of how to provide part-timers with incentives to improve the educational outcomes of their students (see a [related article](#)).

Ms. Jaeger, co-author of two of the studies focusing on community-college students, said part of the solution may be rethinking what classes part-timers are assigned to teach, and having them work with populations, such as full-time and upper-level students, who are least likely to need help outside the classroom.