

## **The Significance of Declining Full-Time Faculty Status for Community College Student Retention and Graduation: A Correlational Study with a Keynesian Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

*In response to fluctuating budgets and enrollments, higher education has come to depend less on a full-time faculty and to rely increasingly on less expensive part-time faculty. Further, the House Committee (2014) reports that adjuncts are the majority of faculty across all sectors of higher education. Specifically, only 31.3% of public 2-year faculty members are full-time (Kezar & Maxey, 2013). Concurrently, the Obama administration recommended that 60% of Americans hold a degree by 2020; in turn, with less institutional commitment to full-time faculty, adjuncts are the central teaching resource in the midst of achieving this national standard. Within this context, this study's central question is "What is the significance of full-time faculty for community college student retention/graduation?" Individual bivariate correlation tests revealed a weak relationship yet no statistical significance between the percentage of full-time faculty and community college student retention and graduation.*

### **Introduction**

The Center for Budget and Policy Priorities reports that, nationwide, higher education is spending 28% less per student in 2014 than pre-recession levels (Mitchell, 2014). Further, "37 states have cut funding per student by more than 20%; nine states have cut funding per student by more than one-third" (para. 15). This occurs as local and state governments fund close to 53% of higher education. College Board reports that public 2-year colleges experienced a 28% tuition increase between the 2004–5 year and 2014-15 (College Board, 2014, p. 22). Concurrently, the Obama administration has recommended a 60% rate of national degree completion for American citizens by 2020 (Department of Education, 2011). Considering the national directive in the midst of a recovering economy, community colleges, which educate close to 52% of all publically educated college students (NCES, 2013), shoulder most of the burden of educating the majority of America on a shoestring budget.

As the economy continues its slow recovery, many colleges and universities are minimizing the use of full-time faculty members and instead increasing focus on adjunct or contingent faculty to provide instruction. However, several studies report that colleges do not truly support the adjunct faculty members in their task to provide instruction (Fulton, 2000; Lydic, 2009; McLaughlin, 2005; Roueche, 1995; Tobin, 2002). Further, Monks (2009) reports that only 35% of part-time faculty members were actually satisfied with their part-time status; nonetheless, part-time instructors comprise 75.5% of instructional staff (House Committee, 2014). Additionally, though adjuncts have the task of educating the majority of college students, adjuncts are also continuously subjected to last minute schedule changes, low wages, and minimal job security. Many studies reflect on the conditions for adjuncts (Roueche, 1995) with limited resources, limited support, and limited guidance.

Conversely, full-time faculty members presumably have stability, health benefits, and resources. As full-time faculty members do not scramble between multiple job responsibilities, they have time to connect with students through advising, student activities, and tutoring. Student development theory (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 1988) confirms that students' connection to the institution increases student retention. Astin (1999) specifically notes that faculty involvement remains a compelling element for student engagement and connecting students to the subject matter; yet this engagement cannot occur if the faculty member is running to a second teaching assignment across town. Therefore, in the post-recession environment with a federal mandate to offer more post-secondary education, administrators are left considering both the cost and the quality of education.

## ***Literature Review***

Some studies consider the effectiveness of full-time faculty. “Full-time faculty members indicated more frequent use of rigorous standards in assigning both grades during the course and final grades” (Schutz, Drake & Lesser, 2013, p. 68). However, no disparity was reported regarding higher grades. In short, adjuncts may be less rigorous in standards, but did not perceive themselves to inflate grades more than full-time peers.

Another study examined outcomes for part-time faculty in an online setting. Despite adjuncts’ financial stress, a study of online adjuncts considered the possibility that differential student outcomes are not a function of the individual faculty members. Instead, the difference exists as a by-product of the working conditions unique to online adjunct faculty (Mueller, 2013).

Regardless of the financial rationale for limiting dependence on full-time faculty, full-time faculty members have been allocated the resources to develop a more conscious lesson plan. Full-time faculty members typically belong to an academic community delivering instruction. Their commitment to the department and students is embedded in curricular development and policy discussions. This community reflects on student academic success and achievement within academic majors and programs, activities typically not part of the adjunct experience. In short, full-time faculty members are more engaged in academic instruction (Umbach, 2007).

In contrast, part-time faculty members do not have such insight about student success within the curriculum. By definition, part-time faculty members often teach in a vacuum and leave campus. As noted by Mueller (2013), adjuncts are often over-burdened with extensive commuting and limited resources, which can have an impact on instruction. Many adjuncts hold office hours in the hallways, copy rooms, shared cubby spaces, or on the fly as they dash to another commitment. Adjuncts’ time is divided among competing interests of multiple schools, and can result in unpaid work hours when an assigned course may be cancelled due to low enrollment or full-time faculty preferences (House Committee, 2014). While the administrator has prevailed by finding a qualified instructor for the class, often the adjunct and the students of the class do not have an optimal educational experience.

Considering any college’s financial pinch, a post-recession study confirms that “the best way to reduce direct instructional costs in community colleges” is to increase the percentage of contingent or adjunct faculty (Seybert & Rossol, 2010, p. 44). Contingent staffing aligns with market trends: as enrollment increases, so does the need for more faculty. At the community college, however, classes can form even during the late days of summer, unlike the 4-year model of having the incoming class solidified in June of the previous school year. Consequently, the need for the last minute appointments “Can stack up in the fall and slack off in spring” (McLaughlin, 2005, p. 186).

With consistent pay and a commitment to one institution, full-time faculty members are in a better position to support students who may need support during stressful points in the academic term. The full-time faculty members’ experience is in contrast to the part-time faculty members’ experience with low pay and multiple commitments to multiple institutions (Ethan & Seidel, 2013).

Anecdotally, urban students and students in highly specialized fields may have a greater need for faculty empathy and support. However, declining institutional commitment to full-time faculty compromises students’ access to consistent and supportive faculty. In contrast, part-time faculty members who potentially have competing interests with multiple institutions simply may not have the time for supportive student engagement. A study of 347 community colleges confirmed that urban community colleges rely on contingent faculty more extensively, and specified disciplines in health and technical fields have higher demand for contingent faculty (Charlier & Williams, 2011). However, researchers recognize that because contingent or adjunct faculty members are torn over their several teaching assignments, they may not have the same time or commitment to support students as their full-time colleagues (Rouéche, 1995).

Full-time faculty members would be in a better position to support students who attend community college. As more students with remedial needs attend community colleges, such students need more support. Faculty can be those critical advisors and role models who guide students academically (McArthur, 2005). Typically, those with full-time contracts are the ones in the best position to provide such support.

As community college students are also more likely to commute to class and dispense with other activities such as clubs and athletics, they rely on their academic experience and interaction with the faculty for their connection with the college. This perspective provides additional rationale for maintaining a stable full-time faculty as community college faculty members because student-faculty interaction is a more critical element for student engagement (Miller, Pope, & Steinmann 2005).

### ***Theoretical Frame***

The literature confirms that full-time faculty members have more time and resources to support and engage students. They have the security to make these commitments, as they are not typically struggling to make a living wage. However, in a struggling economy, the financial concerns of the staff pale in comparison to the financial solvency of the entire institution, thus producing the dependence on contingent staff to balance the budget.

Unlike full-time professors, adjunct instructors rarely receive benefits from their institutions. Only 22.6% of adjunct respondents said they had access to health benefits through their academic employer (House Committee, 2014, p.16). Unfortunately, for part-time teaching staff that represents the majority of instructional staff in higher education, the lower costs in benefits and pay is the aim of any college or university recovering from the 2007-2008 recession. Reliance on contingent staff is evident in all employment sectors striving to cut costs, leaving close to seven million Americans settling for part-time employment (Timorous, 2014).

Keynesian economic theory considers the cost and demand for services as directly affecting employment. When the demand for goods and services declines, any organization will adjust to market trends by cutting costs, including increasing reliance on contingent workers. Canada experienced such heavy reliance on contingency workers in the early 1990s when Canadian companies focused on contingent workers to cut costs, leaving one-third of Canadian workers relegated to part-time work (McGillivray, 1994).

Other elements of Keynesian theory reflect investments that potentially affected higher education. During the recession, more schools faced declining endowments (Johan et al., 2014). While 4-year schools that depended on endowments to support operational budgets may have borne the brunt of such declines, these same 4-year schools furloughed many faculty and administrators who held earned doctorates and masters degrees. When highly trained faculty and administrators were laid off from traditional 4-year schools, their expertise entered the labor market. Hence, a surplus of highly trained instructors was seeking any employment, including adjunct work at the 2-year level. With educational staff demanding more work after such layoffs, and the cost of education rising in response to state and local budget cuts, the supply of contingency labor increased in all educational sectors.

Further, Keynesian theory also considers a decline in demand for services - this case, enrollment. The American public initially reacted to the recession through increased enrollment, going from 13.5 million to 15.1 million in all public institutions between 2007 and 2010 (NCES, 2014). These data may represent adults returning to college for retraining, as many industries eliminated a number of manufacturing jobs. However, in 2012 and 2013, enrollments experienced a downward trend, which could potentially exacerbate the instability in instructional demand and strengthen the rationale for contingent faculty. As the downward trend in enrollment continues, the market adjustment may continue to turn from full-time faculty to contingent faculty. The market response to the economy focuses on a delicate bottom line, and in turn the quality of education may be made secondary to the concern with balancing the institutional budget.

### ***Research Questions***

The aforementioned studies considered quality of instruction, support to students and financial considerations. This post-recession analysis considers the relationship between the percentage of full-time faculty and community college retention and graduation. Considering the post-recession market trends, this study considered further the impact of the full-time faculty pool on community college student retention and graduation. Community college retention and graduation are terms used by NCES and applied to this study to maintain consistency. The following research questions were devised.

**R1: What is the relationship between the percentage of full-time faculty and community college student retention?**

H<sub>1</sub> There is a statistically significant relationship between the percentage of full-time faculty and community college student retention.

$H_0$  There is not a statistically significant relationship between the percentage of full-time faculty and community college student retention.

**R2: What is the relationship between the percentage of full-time faculty and community college student graduation?**

$H_1$  There is a statistically significant relationship between the percentage of full-time faculty and community college student graduation.

$H_0$  There is not a statistically significant relationship between the percentage of full-time faculty and community college student graduation.

The research questions were tested in separate simple correlation/bivariate correlation tests, with the percentage of full-time faculty on staff serving as the independent variable and student retention rates and student graduate rates respectively serving as the dependent variable.

**Research Method and Procedures**

The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) fall 2013 data were used to examine the percentage of full-time instructional faculty at community colleges in 50 of the largest cities in the United States. As reported by NCES 2013, the schools in this study comprise 54,628 full-time and part-time faculty members. Also, 1,078,893 full-time and part-time students were represented. Note the statistical test only included 49 community colleges, as the 50<sup>th</sup> community college in the sample employs 100% full-time faculty and is an anomaly in this sample.

The large urban centers were chosen to establish some consistency with the struggles facing community college students. Urban centers, unfortunately, tend to have the weakest public school systems. These urban high schools consistently have higher dropout rates and lower socio-economic indexes. This consistent lack in secondary education provides an unfortunate commonality for urban community college students.

Data on full-time faculty, part-time faculty, full-time student retention, part-time student retention and student graduation rates were extracted from the NCES database. These labels of full-time, part-time, student retention and graduation are consistent with the terms used by NCES. The data analysis regarding part-time and full-time students was also consistent with the NCES dataset.

The percentage of full-time faculty at each of the 49 community colleges was derived by dividing the number of full-time faculty into the sum of all faculties on campus (for example, full-time faculty 534+ part-time faculty 914=1448 total, 534 full-time/1448 total= 37%). This percentage of full-time faculty served as the independent variable. This independent variable is used in a simple correlation/bivariate test with the percentage of retention rates and graduation rates as reported by NCES 2013 serving as the dependent variables. IBM SPSS was used to tabulate the scores.

In regard to the first research question, “What is the relationship between percentage of full-time faculty and community college student retention?” the bivariate test did not reveal statistical significance; therefore, the hypothesis is rejected and the null hypothesis is accepted (See Tables 1 and 2). It is important to note that, while all three tests reveal a weak yet positive relationship, there was no statistically significant relationship between percentage of full-time faculty and full-time student retention ( $r=.230$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Further, there was no statistically significant relationship between percentage of full-time faculty and part-time student retention ( $r= .267$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

**Table 1: Correlations: Full-Time Faculty and Full-Time Student Retention**

		FTFAC	PTret
FTFAC	Pearson Correlation	1	.230
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.112
	N	49	49
PTret	Pearson Correlation	.230	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.112	
	N	49	49

**Table 2: Correlations: Full-Time Faculty and Part-Time Student Retention**

		FTFAC	PTret
FTFAC	Pearson Correlation	1	.267
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.063
	N	49	49
PTret	Pearson Correlation	.267	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.063	
	N	49	49

In regard to the second research question, “What is the relationship between percentage of full-time faculty and student graduation?” no statistically significant relationship was found between percentage of full-time faculty and graduation rates ( $r=.150$ ,  $p > .05$ ); therefore, the respective hypotheses are rejected and the null is accepted (SeeTable 3).

**Table 3: Correlations: Full-Time Faculty and Graduation Rates**

		FTFAC	grad
FTFAC	Pearson Correlation	1	.150
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.302
	N	49	49
grad	Pearson Correlation	.150	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.302	
	N	49	49

### **Discussion and Recommendations**

In a 2006 study on the topic considered here, Jacoby found “that increases in the ratio of part-time faculty at community college have a highly significant and negative impact on graduation rates” (2006, p. 1092). Further, a study of a mid-western university confirmed that first-year students were not as likely to progress to degree completion when their course selection reflected more part-time faculty instruction (Harrington & Schibik, 2001). However, as time lapsed, the great recession has rolled through the campus community slashing positions, cutting jobs, and stifling careers. This 2014 examination only confirms a weak and positive association between full-time faculty and community college graduation rates.

Discussions on free tuition similar to the Tennessee Promise (Shear & Perez-Pena, 2015) may not only bridge the financial gap for needy students, but a regular influx of tuition dollars may create a market in which community college can make stronger commitments to full-time faculty members. If the budget is secured, administrators can focus more on the quality of education by providing stability to the faculty who provide academic and social support to some of the nation’s most at-risk college students.

Regardless of market rationale or impact on the quality of the student experience, some realities that may emerge from the aforementioned market tensions are identified. The following are considerations regarding adjuncts in a struggling post-recession economy.

- 1) As the demand for part-time faculty continues to increase, this group will strive to defend themselves and achieve economic stability in an unstable economic environment. Labor unions, employee bills of rights, and equal pay rights may emerge to combat the plight of adjuncts in community colleges.
- 2) Less full-time faculty yields less service to students. Full-time faculty members have more time to support students and scholarship, in contrast with part-time faculty who must commit to inconsistent schedules and extensive commuting.
- 3) Given the Keynesian perspective, the trend of institutions relying on contingent workers when demand for goods and services (education in this case) declines or is unpredictable may deepen.
- 4) Consistent with Keynesian theory, the demand for services and goods would need to expand to justify the need for full-time faculty. Corporate or civic partnerships through workforce development could cultivate increasing and consistent enrollments to justify increased commitments to full-time faculty.

### **Recommendations for Practice and Future Study**

- 1) The recession has presented market conditions in which an organization turns to contingent workers. A future study by state could encompass the local and regional trends that had an impact on enrollment as different regions of the country experienced different economic recovery patterns.
- 2) If budgets remain precarious, administrators can strive to hire full-time faculty for developmental and remedial courses. Student retention theories (Tinto, 1988) state that students leave college in the third academic term. If the college must rely on contingent workers, consider assigning more engaged full-time faculty to the most at-risk students in developmental and remedial education.
- 3) Analyze classes that have the highest dropout rates. Consider how full-time faculty members might be a better fit to develop student engagement in those critical courses.
- 4) Create hybrid positions in faculty and staff. If 12.0 instructional hours are not available to create full-time faculty positions, community colleges could create positions that are half student services and half instruction to provide stability for the faculty/staff member and the students served.

### **Conclusion**

Concluding remarks emerge from a dual perspective. Administrators certainly need to keep the doors open and the lights on. Community colleges continue to face budget cuts and wavering enrollments, which have a direct impact on the budget. In response to post-recession market conditions, any administrator would strive to cut costs. Nonetheless, studies show that full-time faculty members are often in a better position to provide support to students. This study, however, shows a decline in numbers of full-time faculty and a weakening relationship between full-time faculty status and student retention; such decline may be related to the proliferation of part-time faculty members in the classroom.

A seemingly bi-partisan focus on free tuition at the community college is an opportunity to rethink how administrators staff the classrooms. Alleviating the financial strain for both students and community college administrators can consider both perspective of economics and engaged faculty for students. Further, studies on faculty status in this struggling economy would assist in making such decisions to offer quality instruction within fluctuating market trends.

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