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Abstract

Using data from 8 academic departments and 361 courses taught during a semester, I examined differences between fulltime and parttime faculty in the areas of general demographic variables, student evaluation of teaching outcomes, and the distribution of grades earned. I expected fulltime 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 parttime and fulltime faculty. These results are discussed in the context of a growing national reliance on parttime faculty, and the potential implications of this trend.

Differences Between Fulltime and Parttime Instructional Faculty

It is undeniable that in the United States, higher education's reliance on adjunct/parttime faculty is growing. In examining the data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), in 1992 parttime faculty comprised 41.7% of the instructional faculty at degree-granting institutions; by 2003, 43.7% of the instructional faculty were parttime faculty. Not only are the ranks of parttime faculty growing larger (in proportion to all faculty ranks), but parttime faculty increases are occurring at an accelerated rate. From 1992 to 2003, there was a 29.2% increase in the number of fulltime faculty, but during the same time period, there was a 40.6% increase in the number of parttime faculty. My particular interest in this topic addresses pedagogical (e.g., grade distributions) and performance issues (e.g., student evaluations of teaching) of fulltime and parttime faculty.

Previous researchers address the areas in which fulltime and parttime faculty differ. For instance, Jaschik (2006) reported on that at community colleges, when graduation and completion rates are examined, institutions with higher rates of fulltime faculty members also have higher completion rates as compared to community colleges with lower rates of fulltime faculty members. In a study of the professional attitudes of community college faculty, Rifkin (1998) found that, compared to fulltime faculty, parttime faculty exhibit (a) less involvement in curriculum, instruction, and scholarship, (b) 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 fulltime and parttime 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 fulltime faculty scoring higher on instructor availability outside of class compared to parttime faculty. However, given the inherent differences between community colleges and 4-year institutions, it is difficult to generalize these results to other types of educational institutions.

Some work does exist concerning differences between fulltime and parttime faculty on student evaluations of teaching. Ghaffari-Samai, Davis, and De Filippis (1994) studied the differences between fulltime and parttime faculty over two years with respect to grading practices, learning outcomes as related to writing skills, and student ratings of teaching effectiveness. The only difference reported by Ghaffari-Samai et al. was that in one of the years studied, parttime faculty assigned a greater proportion of higher grades (specifically, As and Bs) than fulltime faculty. In a comparison of off-campus parttime faculty compared to on-campus fulltime faculty, Vitello, Newmyer, and Stivers (1985) found that although parttime faculty were rated significantly lower than fulltime faculty, parttime

faculty scored high, in the strong to outstanding range (fulltime faculty just scored exceptionally higher). In a study of instructional effectiveness by Wollert and West (2000), they found that in most cases, parttime instructors did not receive lower student ratings of instruction than the fulltime faculty.

Even though previous work has addressed the differences between fulltime and parttime 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 fulltime and parttime faculty in a broad fashion, utilizing multiple departments, faculty, and courses located within one college of a large, Western 4-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 fulltime and parttime 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, fulltime faculty will receive better ratings than parttime faculty. I also expect that parttime faculty will be more lenient in their grade distributions (higher course GPAs) compared to fulltime faculty due to 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 receiving relevant approvals at all levels (see Procedure), 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 8 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, we 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 fulltime or parttime), whether or not the instructor has an office on campus, whether or not the instructor has a University email 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, we contacted each Department Chair to solicit their participation in the project. Each of the 8 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 their 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 fulltime and parttime faculty with respect to overall differences on general/demographic variables; (2) examination of the teaching evaluation questions for differences between fulltime and parttime faculty; and (3) examination of grade distribution data for fulltime and parttime instructor differences.

Fulltime/Parttime Differences on Demographic/General Variables

Fulltime vs. parttime comparisons on variables measured using the nominal scale were analyzed using Chi-Square for each variable (type of instruction, campus office, campus email address, teaching lower or upper division

courses, and teaching on campus or not). There was not a significant association between faculty status (fulltime vs. parttime) and the instruction type (in person, Internet, or telecourse), χ^2 (2, N = 249) = 4.62, n.s. Fulltime faculty taught in person 95.9% of the time, whereas parttime faculty taught in person 95.1% of the time. There was a significant association between faculty status and whether or not the instructor has an office on campus, χ^2 (1, N = 261) = 111.05, $p < .001$. Whereas 78.8% of the courses taught by fulltime faculty have an office on campus, the corresponding number for parttime faculty is 21.2%. There is an association between faculty status and whether or not an instructor has an email address, χ^2 (1, N = 258) = 102.02, $p < .001$. From the course data, 76.1% of fulltime faculty have campus email addresses, whereas 23.9% of parttime faculty have campus email 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, χ^2 (1, N = 257) = 22.25, $p < .001$. Fulltime faculty divided their efforts by teaching 54.2% of their courses at the lower division and 45.8% of their courses at the upper division; correspondingly, parttime faculty divided their efforts by teaching 82.7% of their courses at the lower division, and 17.3% 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, χ^2 (1, N = 269) = 3.25, n.s. Fulltime faculty taught courses on campus 81.7% of the time, whereas parttime faculty taught on campus 72.4% of the time.

Fulltime vs. parttime 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 fulltime faculty (M = 2.70, SD = 0.8) and parttime 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 fulltime faculty (M = 1331.57, SD = 308.3) and parttime 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 fulltime faculty (M = 41.70, SD = 36.0) and parttime 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 fulltime faculty (M = 13.95, SD = 9.5) and parttime 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 fulltime faculty (M = 17.88, SD = 9.6) and parttime faculty (M = 9.62, SD = 7.3) in the average number of total years teaching experience, t(238) = -7.21, $p < .001$. There was a significant difference between fulltime faculty (M = 2.26, SD = 1.3) and parttime faculty (M = 1.84, SD = 0.8) in the average number of classes taught per semester, t(267) = -2.93, $p < .001$.

Fulltime/Parttime 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 fulltime and parttime faculty on any of the teaching evaluation items.

Fulltime/Parttime 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 fulltime faculty (M = 2.71, SD = 0.6) and parttime faculty (M = 2.86, SD = 0.4) on course GPA, t(211) = 1.80, n.s. Although parttime faculty had a slightly higher course GPA, this difference was not significant.

Conclusions

Given this data, it is remarkable what parttime faculty accomplish in light of the reduced resources available. Even though parttime faculty are less likely to have an office, a University email account, and teach a greater proportion of lower division students compared to fulltime faculty (and less experience teaching), I found no significant differences in students' evaluation of instruction nor in course grade distributions. This finding has both positive and negative consequences. As advocates for student learning, it is a positive outcome that our parttime faculty perform just as well as the fulltime faculty in regards 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 institutions 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 evaluations differences, fulltime faculty would perform better than parttime faculty—however, there were no significant differences (as presented in Table 1). I also expected that parttime 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, et al., 1994; Hellman, 1998; Wollert & West, 2000), even though some of these studies were conducted at community colleges. This study is unique in that the data come from 8 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 parttime faculty as compared to fulltime faculty, student course evaluation scores and course grade distributions did not differ significantly between fulltime and parttime faculty. These are important findings to consider in light of growing reliance nationwide on the utilization of parttime faculty. Those of us who are advocates for student learning can be reassured by these results, but care must be taken not to abuse parttime faculty and their remarkable ability to accomplish similar teaching and learning outcomes with reduced resources as compared to fulltime faculty.

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Author Notes

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Table 1

Differences Between Fulltime and Parttime Faculty on Teaching Evaluation Items

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

Notes. Items 1-10 were rated on a scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. However, means in this table are taken from mean scores calculated per class (that is, 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*.