Experiences, Challenges, and Perspectives of Adjunct Instructors
CENGAGE

Adjuncts, also known as contingent or part-time faculty, represent a majority of the academic workforce in higher education.¹ Cengage wanted to understand more about this prevalent group — their motivators, challenges, decision journeys, and experiences — at both 2-year and 4-year institutions.

ABOUT THE STUDY

Cengage partnered with Zeldis Research Associates in a three-phased multi-methods study. We explored a number of topics with adjuncts across institution types, collecting feedback via quantitative survey as well as opinions and feedback via online bulletin-board focus groups. A total of 417 adjunct instructors completed an online survey, while a total of 63 adjunct professors participated in one of two online bulletin-board sessions. All phases included a mix of adjuncts in 2-year and 4-year institutions. These instructors taught a range of courses: business (13%); psychology (11%); English composition (7%); and accounting, communication, mathematics, history, or sociology (5% each), among others.

Key Research Questions

- What are the goals and motivators for adjunct instructors?
- What does their workflow and decision-making process look like — from the job search and hiring process to course-based workflows and tool/resource decisions throughout the year?
- What value do adjuncts place on digital teaching materials and what effect do those resources have on their workflow?
- What are their pain points when it comes to selecting tools and resources for their courses? And what is their role in the selection of those course materials?
- How do adjuncts engage with their peers and partners in higher education?

ADJUNCTS’ DISTINCTION: REAL-WORLD EXPERIENCE

In some ways, adjuncts aren’t much different from full-time faculty. Their top priorities are to share knowledge (56%) and make a difference in the lives of their students (51%). They’re also just as likely to use digital course materials (about 50%) and take into consideration cost and ease of use when evaluating course materials.

As for their primary value-add in the classroom, 42% of adjunct faculty cite their professional/real-world experience. The majority (68%) had a career outside of education before they started teaching, and over half (55%) currently hold down another job in addition to teaching. In addition to their work backgrounds, nearly 80% have master’s degrees; 25% have PhDs. According to one adjunct instructor at a 4-year school, “An adjunct instructor who is also a working professional in their respective field brings to the classroom the hard and fast experience that a full-time instructor may not be able to bring. Nothing can replace that. In facilitating a classroom discussion, I can talk to a class about experiences that I had that very day.”

Top Three Most Positive Aspects of Being an Adjunct Instructor

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<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Four Year</th>
<th>Two Year/Tech</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sharing knowledge with students</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making a difference in students’ lives</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>55%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Helping students to pursue their future careers</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>36%</td>
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Top Three Reasons for Becoming an Adjunct Instructor

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Four Year</th>
<th>Two Year/Tech</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To supplement my income</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To bring my real-world experiences into the classroom</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To help college students reach their goals</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>38%</td>
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FEWER OPPORTUNITIES, LESS INFLUENCE THAN FULL-TIME FACULTY

Adjuncts feel disconnected and undervalued in a number of ways. About one-third of the adjuncts (at both 2- and 4-year schools) listed “feeling disrespected/less valued than full-time faculty” as one of their primary challenges. Inadequate compensation ranked even higher, identified by 54% of the respondents as their top challenge. They also believe they try harder because they feel they have more to prove than their full-time counterparts. Lack of office space, irregular assignments, limited opportunities to select class times or to expand their role, and lack of adequate communications and support from colleagues are other ways that adjuncts feel disrespected or unappreciated. One adjunct at a 4-year institution said, “The adjuncts are prohibited from participating in administrative activities. The college does not recognize that adjuncts exist. . . . We are not even listed as faculty on the departmental websites.”

The process of getting a teaching position can be a job in itself, and most adjunct instructors (72%) renew their contract every semester. Those at 4-year institutions are more likely to renew their contracts annually, and 19% of adjuncts at 2-year institutions say they don’t even have a formal contract. They also have limited influence on which courses they teach. Adjuncts have some input regarding course preferences and timing, but must often work within certain syllabi and course material requirements. While two in three can request specific courses, only 25% usually receive the courses requested. One adjunct said, “I always teach the same courses. I cannot request courses — they offer me courses that are available — nor can I develop my own courses.”

Some adjuncts say they could advocate for specific course materials, but qualitative feedback suggests that they need to feel strongly to do so. For example, an instructor at a 2-year college said, “I’m not part of the discussions that lead to the student learning outcomes in my department, so I don’t have any sense of what textbook would be best. . . . I don’t feel that I’m in a position to insert those thoughts into the discussions about which materials to adopt.”

Just over three-fourths of adjuncts (76%) feel pressed for time when preparing to teach a course, with instructors at 4-year schools more likely to feel time pressure (82%). On average, adjunct instructors have about nine weeks to prepare their courses, but ideally would like another two weeks. One instructor at a 4-year school recalled “. . . being hired for courses that start within a week — that can be stressful.”
A SAY IN COURSE MATERIAL DECISIONS

Selecting primary course materials is somewhat less of a pain point with adjunct faculty than the areas noted earlier, such as lack of control over the courses taught. Three-quarters say they have at least some influence in decisions about primary course materials. Instructors at 2-year institutions are more likely than those at 4-year institutions to say they have no influence or decision-making authority for primary materials. For supplemental course materials, the level of autonomy for selection goes up substantially, with an average of 73% of adjunct instructors saying they get to decide what to use for all of their courses.

Personal Level of Involvement in Making Course Material Decisions

**Primary Course Materials**

- Total: 28% (20% for NONE, 18% for SOME, 15% for MOST, 39% for ALL)
- Four Year: 20% (10% for NONE, 13% for SOME, 12% for MOST, 37% for ALL)
- Two Year/Tech: 36% (18% for NONE, 15% for SOME, 15% for MOST, 41% for ALL)

**Supplemental Course Materials**

- Total: 4% (1% for NONE, 15% for SOME, 7% for MOST, 73% for ALL)
- Four Year: 7% (5% for NONE, 14% for SOME, 74% for ALL)
- Two Year: 1% (13% for NONE, 13% for SOME, 72% for ALL)

I decided what to use...

- For NONE of my courses
- For SOME of my courses
- For MOST of my courses
- For ALL of my courses

USE OF DIGITAL SOLUTIONS

More than half of adjunct instructors (58%) say they are comfortable using technology in the classroom. When talking about digital learning solutions, adjuncts are more positive than negative, although some cite concerns about time constraints and ease of use. One instructor at a 4-year school posited, “It comes down to an issue of time to develop the skills to use this program, then the time to integrate it into the class.” Another adjunct instructor at a 4-year college appreciates the time savings that digital solutions can offer, saying that they’re “a good idea for providing learning resources and tools for students. Moreover, digital grading systems free up time to spend with students. This is a HUGE plus.”

“Each semester the chair sends out a form asking for our preferences. There is no guarantee you will get your preference. Individuals are placed according to seniority.”

Adjunct at a 2-year school
Adjuncts generally agree that it is important to “keep up” with technology in order to engage students and convey credibility. However, they can get frustrated when technology doesn’t work properly or isn’t user friendly. Similarly, some adjuncts are dissatisfied with the amount of training their institutions provide regarding the implementation and use of digital resources. Of the adjunct instructors surveyed, slightly more than half (54%) said they are using digital solutions. Of those, fewer than half had formal training from their institution for the product in use. Those who didn’t receive training would have liked to, and many who did were only moderately satisfied with the training they received.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT A PRIORITY

When it comes to professional development, 67% of adjuncts — the majority of whom say participation is optional — take part. Professional development is often provided in-person or through webinars, and most participants aren’t compensated for their participation. Professional development opportunities don’t always align with adjuncts’ schedules, so 70% of them said they have attended webinars, with many saying that the recording feature of webinars is a valuable asset.
Adjuncts value broader professional development opportunities related to pedagogy — including opportunities that help them understand how to better engage and connect with a diverse range of students through technology, digital course materials, and other strategies. The priority placed on these topics related in part to the recognized need to lengthen the span of students’ subject matter interest, and to keep up with millennials and the changing way in which students learn.

CONCLUSION

Adjuncts — who comprise a majority of the teaching population in 2- and 4-year higher education institutions — typically bring valuable real-world perspectives to their classrooms. Yet, they are poorly compensated, and many feel undervalued as compared to full-time faculty who receive more opportunities and have greater influence. While adjuncts have at least some influence on their use of course materials, they have limited say in which courses they teach and the times at which they teach them. Adjuncts use digital solutions at about the same rate as their full-time peers, and feel it’s important to keep up with technology despite the dearth of training available to many of them. Despite the time pressures and other challenges that they face, adjuncts actively participate in professional development to find ways to improve their students’ learning experience — and are dedicated to their work and to making a difference.

“I’m fairly comfortable, but there’s a learning curve and as an adjunct, I rarely get the training I need.”

Adjunct at a 2-year school