



ADJUNCT FACULTY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: ROLES, CHALLENGES, & OPPORTUNITIES

Joyce W. Funches¹, Nyaboke P. Omwega²

¹Associate With Habilitation in Management

Abstract

The growing reliance on adjunct faculty in higher education has transformed instructional practices and raised critical questions about evaluation and reappointment. Although adjuncts constitute over half of the U.S. college teaching workforce, evaluation processes remain inconsistent. This study examines how two historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in Mississippi evaluate and reappoint adjunct faculty, focusing on decision-making models and institutional practices. It explores the use of multiple evaluation measures—such as student evaluations, peer observations, teaching portfolios, and administrative reviews—and critiques the limitations of relying solely on student feedback. Findings from the literature reveal a lack of standardized evaluation criteria, resulting in uneven accountability and limited faculty development. The study argues for systematic, multi-source evaluation approaches that promote fairness, enhance instructional quality, and align with institutional goals, emphasizing the need for data-driven strategies to strengthen adjunct faculty assessment at HBCUs and across higher.

Keywords

Adjunct Faculty, Higher Education, HBCUs, Instructional Workforce

Introduction

Adjunct faculty constitute a vital component of the instructional workforce in higher education, representing over half of all teaching personnel in U.S. colleges and universities (Gomez, 2015). The terms *adjunct*, *contingent*, or *part-time faculty* are often used interchangeably to describe instructors employed on a temporary or non-tenure-track basis. Scholars such as Wickun and Stanley (2016) expand the definition of contingent faculty to include adjuncts, part-time instructors, graduate assistants, and other non-tenure-track educators. These faculty members provide essential teaching support and bring diverse professional expertise to academic institutions, yet their roles are often shaped by limited job security and institutional recognition. Accordingly, this study's literature review explores the role and evaluation of adjunct faculty through an examination of the historical context, current employment trends, evaluation practices, tools and processes of assessment, recommended strategies, and concluding reflections.

Historical Overview

From the colonial period through the late eighteenth century (1636–1789), the faculty workforce in U.S. higher education resembled today's adjunct system. Faculty often began as tutors who, as Anthony, Brown, Fynn, & Gadzekpo, (2020). noted, were few in number, poorly paid, and expected to perform multiple instructional and administrative duties outside of the Christian ministry training they originally received. By the 1930s, the practice of hiring part-time faculty became more formalized. At that time, between one-half and three-quarters of university

faculty were graduates of the same institutions in which they taught. Byers, & Onwuegbuzie, (2024), argue that a lack of trust toward faculty trained elsewhere contributed to this trend, leading universities to rely heavily on their own graduate students as part-time instructors, thereby establishing adjunct faculty as a fixture in American higher education.

The movement to employ part-time instructors intensified in the 1960s, particularly within community colleges. Expanding evening programs created a demand for instructors drawn from the professional community. In four-year colleges, the use of adjuncts accelerated in the mid-1980s as administrators and department chairs responded to budget shortfalls and growing instructional demands. What began as a temporary measure soon became a long-term strategy for filling faculty gaps (Wickun & Stanley, 2016).

Butters & Gann, (2022). emphasizes that academic labor markets have long been shaped by cycles of oversupply. As doctoral production increased in the mid-twentieth century, the market became saturated, giving presidents, provosts, and other administrators the leverage to hire highly qualified candidates while still relying on contingent labor to address faculty surpluses. Burleigh, Steele, & Gwitira, (2021), note that adjunct

hiring became a common solution to manage this “professional clogging.”

The State of the Adjunct Faculty

Adjunct faculty often balance multiple professional commitments, either maintaining primary employment elsewhere or teaching part-time across multiple institutions (Magness, 2016). While their presence provides flexibility for colleges and universities, research has consistently highlighted the difficult working conditions they face (Kezar, Scott, & Yang, (2018). These challenges include inadequate pay, lack of office space, limited access to benefits, job insecurity, and few opportunities for meaningful feedback or performance evaluation.

Adjuncts also experience systemic exclusion from professional development and institutional integration. Many are hired only days before classes begin, limiting their access to orientation sessions, training workshops, or mentoring opportunities (Magness, (2016) & Bousquet, 2014). This exclusion minimizes opportunities to share information, reduces professional growth, and ultimately affects teaching performance. Scholars argue that institutions should offer adjuncts the same orientation, training, and professional development opportunities available to full-time faculty in order to improve instructional quality and reduce turnover (Maxey & Kezar, 2015).

Hiring and recruitment practices represent another area of concern. The absence of standardized hiring criteria often leads to inconsistent and reactive appointments. This undermines both the legitimacy of adjunct appointments and the institutional ability to assess long-term effectiveness. Without transparent and consistent evaluation processes, institutions struggle to ensure quality instruction.

The literature is divided on the question of teaching effectiveness. While some studies suggest little difference between adjunct and full-time faculty performance (Nica, (2018), others argue that the lack of resources, professional development, and evaluation undermines adjuncts’ ability to maximize student learning outcomes. Redstone & Luo, (2021). stresses that given the dramatic growth of adjunct faculty employment, institutions must adopt systematic evaluation frameworks. Such frameworks would not only validate adjuncts’ contributions but also enable administrators to make informed decisions regarding their continued appointment.

Overall, the state of the adjunct faculty is characterized by rapid growth, persistent inequities, and inconsistent evaluation practices. Addressing these challenges requires deliberate investment in orientation, professional development, and fair evaluation processes that align adjunct roles with institutional missions and student success (Valle & Fuchs, (2015).

Gasman (2022), highlighted the importance of examining not only the methods used to evaluate adjuncts but also the frequency and purpose of such evaluations. Personnel departments often rely on formative evaluations, such as mid- and end-of-semester assessments, which support ongoing improvement and positively influence student learning (Yeager-Okosi, Hall, & Quaicoe, 2024). One effective alternative is the Small Group Instructional Diagnosis process, where a facilitator gathers mid-semester feedback directly from students and relays it to the instructor. This process has been shown to enhance teaching effectiveness, student learning, and final summative evaluations (Adachi, Tai & Dawson, 2018).

Adjunct Teaching Evaluation Tools

Faculty evaluation is a critical process in higher education, designed to assess both teaching effectiveness and student learning. Research indicates that using multiple sources of evaluation provides more reliable feedback on faculty strengths and weaknesses (Garrett, Legon, Fredericksen, & Simunich, 2020). For adjunct faculty in particular, three methods are most commonly employed: self-appraisal, peer observation, and student evaluations.

Self-Appraisal

Self-appraisal allows faculty to reflect on their own teaching effectiveness and identify areas for improvement. Anthony, Brown, Fynn, & Gadzekpo, (2020), found that self-appraisals often align closely with chairperson ratings, demonstrating high to moderate criterion-related validity. Faculty and administrators also report high levels of acceptance of self-appraisal outcomes. In a study of 70 faculty members, self-appraisal proved just as predictive as other psychological evaluation methods. Institutions such as Fountainview College use self-evaluation in combination with chairperson interviews to review adjunct faculty. Stroebe (2016), acknowledged the process can be tedious, he emphasized their value in fostering collegiality and generating useful feedback. Thus, self-appraisal is a meaningful tool that encourages faculty reflection and highlights both strengths and areas needing growth.

Peer Observation

Peer observation provides an external perspective on teaching effectiveness. Linse (2017) emphasized that using multiple sources of information strengthens the objectivity of evaluations, particularly for adjunct faculty who may not undergo the more comprehensive review processes applied to tenured professors. While not flawless, peer observation is widely recognized as a valid indicator of classroom performance (Linse, 2017). Interpreting and using student ratings data: Guidance for departments and administrators. However, observers must avoid using standardized “one-size-fits-all” checklists; instead, instruments should be tailored to the subject matter and the individual instructor’s context (Stroebe, 2016). Despite limitations, peer observation remains an important complementary method in evaluating adjunct teaching.

Student Evaluations

Student evaluation tools (SETs) are the most widely used method for assessing both adjunct and full-time faculty. At the end of each semester, students are given the opportunity to evaluate their instructors, effectively “grading” them just as faculty grade student work (Boring, Ottoboni, & Stark, 2016). Student ratings often influence promotion, tenure, pay decisions for full-time faculty, and reappointment decisions for adjuncts. Administrators value student input because it provides direct evidence of learning and classroom experience. Students typically evaluate faculty on factors such as preparedness, knowledge, enthusiasm, use of diverse strategies, clarity, and fairness. As Boring, Ottoboni, & Stark, (2016), concluded, students are uniquely positioned to provide valuable feedback about the learning process, making SETs a powerful—though not sufficient on their own—evaluation tool.

Recommended Practice

Maxey & Kezar, (2015), emphasized that regardless of the methods employed, all researchers agree that adjunct faculty, like all other faculty members in institutions of higher learning, must be evaluated. While it is important to understand the decision-making models’ administrators use, it is equally critical to examine the recommended processes and procedures for faculty evaluation. Best practices indicate that evaluation should be based on **multiple sources of information**, since multiple measures increase accuracy, strengthen validity, and enhance reliability of feedback. However, such approaches require significant time and resource commitments (Linse, (2017). Institutions are therefore encouraged to use systematic communication to involve faculty in evaluation design and to ensure that evaluation systems are understood before implementation.

Evaluation methods commonly include peer evaluation, self-appraisal, student evaluations, department chair reviews, supervisor appraisals, teaching portfolios, and focus group assessments. Ng, et al, (2016), recommend a **triad approach**, incorporating student input, peer evaluation, and faculty portfolios to create a comprehensive picture of teaching effectiveness. Similarly, Stanny & Arruda, (2017). found that while peer observation is not flawless, observation reports remain a valid and valuable component in deliberations about teaching performance.

However, the nature of adjunct employment poses challenges. Many adjuncts are not fully integrated into the institutional community and often lack the time or opportunity to build peer relationships necessary for peer evaluation. For this reason, Nica, (2018), argue that **teaching portfolios** provide a practical bridge into the evaluation process. By documenting teaching practices, course materials, and professional contributions, portfolios offer adjuncts a way to demonstrate effectiveness and provide evidence for evaluation (Adachi, et al. 2018).

Overall, the literature reveals a lack of uniformity or widely accepted protocols for evaluating adjunct faculty (Stroebe, (2016). Yet, evaluation remains an essential academic process, both to ensure accountability and to support professional growth. Recommended practices include using diverse tools, engaging adjuncts in feedback discussions, and applying evaluation results not only for reappointment decisions but also to enhance teaching effectiveness (Stanny & Arruda, (2017).

Thus, the recommended practice for institutions is to adopt a **balanced, multi-method evaluation framework** that incorporates self-assessment, peer or supervisor input, and student feedback. Such an approach not only strengthens the reliability of evaluations but also demonstrates an institutional commitment to fairness, accountability, and instructional quality.

Conclusion

Higher education has undergone a significant shift in teaching personnel. The traditional reliance on full-time, tenured, or tenure-track faculty has been steadily replaced by an increasing number of adjunct faculty. This change heightens the urgency of systematically evaluating teaching effectiveness across all instructional staff. Such evaluations are vital not only for institutional accountability but also for ensuring quality learning outcomes that matter to students, parents, administrators, and the broader community.

By examining and refining the practices used to evaluate adjunct faculty, institutions can make data-driven decisions about their most critical resource: their educators. Faculty remain central to the mission of higher education, and ensuring their effectiveness through robust and fair evaluation systems is imperative. Ultimately, a consistent and comprehensive approach to adjunct faculty evaluation not only strengthens institutional decision-making but also advances the broader goal of sustaining quality education in a changing academic landscape.

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