Executive Summary:

What the Empirical Research Really Says About Adjunct Teaching

And Why You Should Care

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This summary presupposes that you have looked at the included annotated bibliography and that you understand that it represents the best and most complete empirical evidence available, not just someone’s opinions on the topic of part-time faculty and student outcomes. There are other less complete synopses available, most notably from the Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success at the Pullias Center for Higher Education at the University of Southern California (http://www.thechangingfaculty.org/). Their bibliography only takes into account research that supports their hypothesis that part-time faculty have a negative impact on student outcomes. It does not cover the substantial portion of the empirical literature which disconfirms this hypothesis.

There is a widely believed narrative about the effectiveness of part-time faculty. It says that part-time faculty are bad for student outcomes. Ask any part-timer you know if they have heard this one, and they will tell you yes. It is an integral belief in modern faculty culture, particularly in full-time tenure-track faculty culture. This is a negative and destructive idea for many reasons. If all it remains is merely a belief, an opinion, that is bad enough. The worst part of the narrative is that many faculty, both full- and part-time, believe the research shows this to be true.

When you actually look at the research on this topic, you find a quite different conclusion. The difficult part is that there is far more opinion, even some masquerading as empirical work, than there is actual research. The majority of faculty who have read up on this topic have not looked at the research itself, and that is a shame. The best and most complete accounting of the empirical research does not support the contention that part-time faculty are bad for student outcomes.
The table below is a summary of the results of the annotated bibliography that accompanied a presentation from the 2017 AAUP Annual Meeting. That bibliography is included in the packet with this summary. The most relevant row to examine in this table is the second row, student outcomes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measured outcomes</th>
<th>Part-time status associated with negative outcomes</th>
<th>Mixed; some associations with negative outcomes</th>
<th>No association or positive association</th>
<th>Number of studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student outcomes (e.g., persistence, retention, graduation and transfer rates, taking future classes)</td>
<td>12 / 11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty outcomes (e.g., class hours, out-of-class hours, availability outside of class, use of “high impact” and “student centered” techniques)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of studies</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You can see that the number of studies showing a negative association between faculty status (full- vs. part-time) and student outcomes (n=12) is quite close to the number showing no association or a positive one (n=10). Only one study showed a positive association, which is why it is grouped with the no association studies. One of the twelve studies showing the negative associations is the Pannapacker (2000) piece. It was included because it has often been cited in the discussions on this issue as an authoritative study. A glance at the summary, the article title, and the article itself show it to actually be an opinion piece. So, the number of empirical studies showing a negative association really ought to be eleven. The four studies in
the mixed column do not show a consistent pattern of associations across the measured outcomes. Some outcomes show a negative association and some show no association at all.

Taken as a whole, the evidence is pretty evenly divided into a group of studies showing a negative relationship between faculty status and student outcomes and another group that does not demonstrate such a relationship. Then what conclusion do we draw? There is insufficient empirical evidence that part-time faculty are bad for student outcomes. The research does not support this hypothesis. The research stands in contrast to much of the opinion on this topic.

Even if the majority of the evidence showed a relationship between part-time faculty status and student outcomes, there would still be an issue. The studies are observational, and not experimental. This means that the results from these studies are correlational, and as every undergraduate has heard, correlation does not infer causation. The statement that part time faculty are bad for student outcomes is indeed a causal one. The observational nature of the studies cannot support such a conclusion. The figure below should illustrate that there are other plausible kinds of relationships that may be at play. It is interesting to note that the Delphi Project does suggest the alternative relationship in the lower half of the figure in some of its materials. An equally likely explanation of the statistical relationship between part-time faculty status and student outcomes is that both are determined by a third factor, and are not themselves causally related. Lower amounts of resources dedicated to instruction seem to lead to both higher numbers of part-time faculty and poorer student outcomes. This alternative seems more in line with the actual research reported in the annotated bibliography. Yet Delphi also makes the causal claim in the upper half of the figure, sometimes in the same document as the causal claim.
Both the bibliography and the table separate the literature into student outcomes and faculty outcomes. While it is reasonable to assume that they will be at least somewhat related, an example will illustrate why these sets of outcomes should be examined separately. The Benjamin (2000) study found that part-time faculty had fewer classroom instructional hours, fewer non-classroom instruction hours, and fewer refereed publications than full-time faculty. This is hardly surprising. Part-time faculty do teach fewer classes, by definition, so they ought to spend fewer hours in all instructional activities. Most part-time faculty are not supported for research or creative activity, so they ought to do less of it. Neither of these findings tell us how the quality of part-time faculty instruction is affected. Faculty outcomes are a different issue, not necessarily as relevant to student outcomes as might be supposed. For that reason, they will not be discussed further here.
We are left with the question of why this myth that part-time faculty are bad for student outcomes is so widely believed. We have seen that a complete look at all the empirical research, and not just that which confirms the myth, tells another story. Why do some organizations such as the *Delphi Project*, and until recently, the *AAUP*, perpetuate this negative belief?

The *Delphi Project*, for example, exists for the purported objective of supporting the part-time and contingent faculty majority. Yet, they have an incomplete and misleading research review on their webpage (look in the FAQ section, [www.thechangingfaculty.org/faqs.html](http://www.thechangingfaculty.org/faqs.html)). In many of the opinion pieces on this topic, they are cited as a definitive source. As can be seen above, a full accounting of the research tells a different story.

There are many questions we should be asking about this negative belief that part-time faculty are worse for student outcomes than full-time faculty. Some of these are:

1. Do both full- and part-time accept that the research does not support his myth, or do we hold fast to our beliefs to the contrary? Do the facts matter?
2. Does believing and repeating this myth help our part-time colleagues, or does it make their difficult and tenuous working conditions worse? Does it in fact harm part-time faculty by perpetuating the disparaging and disrespectful treatment they often receive?
3. Has this myth led to better support and more resources for our part-time colleagues?
4. Has this perpetuation of this myth improved student outcomes?
5. Has this myth improved collegiality or helped bridge the rift that exists between full- and part-time faculty?
6. Does the propagation of this myth improve union solidarity?
In the end, how we answer these questions is rather important. Why does the myth persist? Does it serve to promote positive change, or does it serve to maintain the status quo and keep the part-time faculty “in their place?”

In sum, there is a discrepancy between two narratives at play here. On the one hand, there is the belief that part-time faculty are bad for student outcomes. This belief is bolstered by the claim that the “research” supports it. We have seen that this claim is based on an incomplete review of the empirical literature. On the other hand, a systematic review of the best available empirical work does not provide sufficient support for this belief. Which narrative do we choose to believe? How do we go forward from here?