

Bullying of Adjunct Faculty at Community Colleges
and Steps toward Resolution

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Abstract

Adjunct instructors benefit community colleges through their flexibility, diversity, innovation and contributions to student success; however, their part-time status can result in friction with full-time/tenured faculty, a problem that can lead to bullying. In an effort to determine what forms bullying of adjunct faculty take and how these instructors respond to such treatment from full-time/tenured faculty, a survey that covered incidence, response, and resolution measures was emailed to part-time and adjunct faculty at public community colleges throughout the United States. Results indicate that bullying took the form of denial of advancement, harassment, offensive comments, and social exclusion, and that most instructors who were bullied made no effort to report it. Results also show that respondents who were bullied were less likely to perceive that their institutions had a clear process for reporting workplace harassment and less likely to agree that such conflicts can be resolved within the institution. To promote a more equitable workplace and improve relationships between adjuncts and full-time/tenured faculty, community colleges should develop a definition of bullying that applies more directly to higher education, create better processes for reporting and handling complaints about hostile work environments, implement a more transparent system for resolving instances of bullying, and promote a culture that values the contributions of adjuncts.

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According to the American Association of Community Colleges, community colleges employ a combination of full- and part-time faculty “to offer the broadest array of courses to meet varying student curricular and scheduling demands” (cited in Fain, 2014). However, it is increasingly the case that the “blend” includes more part-timers. A report from the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2014) estimated that part-time faculty teach more than half (53%) of students at two-year colleges. Many adjuncts (a designation which here will include all part-time instructors) bring a considerable number of valuable skills to the job, and their diverse experience often makes them effective with students with a wide variety of backgrounds.

Despite the fact that the system relies on them, adjuncts must deal with less-than-ideal working conditions. These conditions can include challenges like lack of office space and limitations on their curriculums to problems like low wages; last-minute, short-term contracts; lack of opportunity for promotion or advancement, and “denial of basic faculty rights and freedoms” (Fruscione, 2014). To stay financially afloat, many adjuncts have to work at two or three other jobs.

In many instances, these difficulties build flexibility and character, and enhance the drive to succeed. Because they are frequently associated with multiple colleges, adjuncts are familiar with a variety of student body cultures throughout local—and often national—educational institutions. They are inclined to keep up with their professional development as offered through a variety of educational networks, a practice which fosters in them a holistic point of view. With each new course they teach, adjuncts become more versed in the elements of the higher education system in America and the vital role each of these elements plays in student

achievement. However, while these difficulties might produce well-rounded and capable instructors, they don't provide a model for rewarding employment.

Moreover, given the poor conditions and lack of job security awarded to adjunct faculty, it is not surprising that relationships between adjuncts and full-time/tenured faculty are often strained. *Merriam-Webster's* simple definition of "adjunct" is "something that is joined or added to another thing but is not an essential part of it" ("Adjunct," 2015), and this is how many adjunct faculty are perceived: as non-essential. The power imbalance between these two types of instructors can lead to systematic harassment—including bullying—of those with less standing. In its most general sense, workplace bullying refers to unreasonable, repeated conduct intended to intimidate, degrade or undermine an employee, but in higher education, bullying frequently takes a more passive-aggressive or "indirect (as opposed to direct)" form than it does in other workplace environments (Keashly & Neuman, 2010).

Method

To determine more about the forms bullying of adjunct faculty takes and how it is dealt with, a survey on this topic was emailed to part-time and adjunct faculty at public community colleges throughout the United States from September 15, 2015, to November 15, 2015. The survey purposely excluded private colleges, the entire state of Washington, and any institution where the author is or has been employed.

For the purposes of this survey, the definition of academic workplace bullying extended the original definition cited in Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, and Cooper (2011):

Bullying at work means harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work tasks. . . . It has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g., weekly) and over a period of time (e.g., at least six months). Bullying is an

escalating process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position through denial of advancement or promotion, and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts. (p. 22)

The outcome of this process results in professional isolation and/or discrimination.

Results

Of the 171 respondents, 10% reported they were bullied and 14% indicated that they had witnessed bullying. The most commonly reported form of bullying (as reported by those who were bullied) were a denial of advancement or promotion (82%), harassment (63%), offensive comments (63%), and social exclusion (56%). When asked to elaborate, respondents frequently referred to their frustration with hiring practices. Some focused on their personal experiences. One adjunct faculty member wrote, “Despite applying several times, I never even got an interview for any full-time position at my school—even after being there ten years.” Others took a broader view of what they saw happening at their institutions: another adjunct faculty member wrote, “I have seen that part-time faculty do not get full-time jobs and that even if they teach part time at a campus for decades, preference is not given to them.”

Other respondents commented on what they felt to be the marginalization of adjuncts: “As long as the department’s scheduling and peer-review processes are controlled by full-time faculty, the potential—and therefore statistically, the eventuality—of systematic exclusion of part-time faculty will continue.”

While many respondents appeared frustrated, many did not take any steps to report the problem. Of those who indicated that they were bullied, 87% did nothing. The remaining 13% of adjunct faculty who were bullied went to either a dean or vice president of instruction. Those who witnessed bullying of other adjuncts were similarly reluctant to report it: 82% did nothing.

The most common reason for the lack of reporting—based on the written responses—was that the adjunct faculty felt they had no standing. One wrote, “Based on this definition of bullying, the accepted treatment of part-time faculty at my institution is a culture of bullying. Complaining would mean I do not get to teach anymore.” Another put it more concisely: “As an adjunct, I have NO expectations from the institution.”

Another factor which might explain the lack of reporting had to do with the perception of the reporting process. When asked “Does your institution have a clear process or policy for resolving complaints about hostile work environments?” 65% of those who were bullied reported that their institution had no such policy in place compared to 26% of all respondents.

Also, reporting was frequently perceived as ineffective. When instances of bullying were reported, they were directed towards administration, to the dean or vice-president of instruction. However, the resolution rates were low: only 20% of those who reported bullying to the administration said they were satisfied with the response, and in 80% of the cases, the matter remained unresolved. The written responses suggested that one of the reasons for the low-resolution rate had to do with the fact that adjunct faculty perceived that administrators were often more invested in full-time/tenured faculty and saw administration as part of the problem:

As things stand . . . full-time faculty and administrators (even though they are nominally on different sides) have in fact formed a duopoly, where they agree to each other's demands—and do so on the backs of the part-timers, who have become, in effect, a species of academic sharecroppers.

Another respondent put it this way:

These entities [the dean and vice principal of instruction] are not objective, and in most cases, their members will do the utmost to close their eyes or perform a whitewash; only

the most egregious cases that are filed will receive a hearing. And probably only a fraction of abuses are even reported, because part-time faculty rightly fear retribution. Not surprisingly, while 55% of all respondents indicated that they thought instances of bullying could be resolved within the institution, only 30% of those who had been bullied thought so. The remaining 70% said that it could not (35%) or that they did not know (35%). Follow-up comments suggested that it was too easy to dispose of adjunct faculty for complaints to be resolved fairly: “With the dramatic difference in power between full-time and part-time employees, I do not see how this process can be made fairer. It is simply too easy to use up and throw away part-time faculty members and look for another one to step in.”

Discussion

Given that problems are rarely reported and the perceived lack of satisfactory outcomes when they are, it is understandable that many adjunct faculty feel disregarded or ostracized. Since “a return to a largely tenure-track faculty model is highly unlikely...” (Kezar, Maxey & Holcombe, 2015), higher education will continue to be dependent on adjunct faculty, and, in the interests of all parties—including students—steps must be taken to improve their working conditions, a process which must include building stronger relationships between adjunct faculty, full-time/tenured faculty, and administration.

While the solution is a complex one, two of the most immediate steps might include creating a better process for reporting complaints about hostile work environments, including a clear definition of bullying, and developing a fair and transparent system for resolving them. It is significant that lack of reporting instances of bullying was correlated with a negative perception of the clarity of the process or policy for taking action on such claims. Moreover, the low

resolution rate suggests that once instances of bullying are reported, the procedure for settling them is perceived by adjuncts as prejudicial in favor of full-time/tenured faculty.

More important, though, is fundamentally changing higher education's view of adjunct faculty and subsequently, adjunct faculty's perceptions of themselves. The survey suggests that adjuncts perceive themselves as expendable and without standing, and this is reinforced—by among other things—the ineffectiveness of system in place to deal with instances of bullying by full-time faculty. To improve conditions for part-time faculty, is it important for instructors and administrators to rethink their definition of adjuncts as non-essential personnel—as suggested in *Merriam-Webster's* simple definition—to something closer to that described in the *Online Etymology Dictionary*: something that is “closely connected, joined, united . . . a characteristic, essential attribute” (Harper, 2016).

Conclusion

The most practical steps for resolving instances of bullying directed at adjunct faculty involve adopting a clear definition of workplace bullying that is more directly relevant to higher education, including it in institutional policy manuals, and creating a more efficient and effective complaint process for those who have experienced such behavior. Even more critical to the process, however, is to reject the view of adjunct faculty “as something that is joined or added to another thing” (“Adjunct,” 2015), and adopt Harper's (2016) “essential attribute” definition.

Because adjuncts are crucial to the higher education system, it is important to develop a culture of appreciation for them, not just through periodic achievement awards, but through the recognition that they are valued faculty. This includes acceptance, inclusion, and the opportunity to compete for full-time/tenured positions by the institutions which employ them. In addition institutions of higher education should consider educating full-time/tenured faculty and

administrators on the many benefits adjunct instructors bring to the college, including their flexibility, diversity, innovation and contributions to student success. This will help foster an atmosphere that helps minimize those conditions that lead to hostile work environments, allows for reporting of such grievances, and provides for fair and effective resolutions.

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