

# **The Adjunct Model as an Equity Crisis in Higher Education: A Qualitative Inquiry into the Lived Experience of “Part-Time” Community College Faculty in Northern California**

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*The purpose of this study was to qualitatively examine the lived workplace experiences of adjunct community college faculty in Northern California. The problem is adjunct faculty may experience an institutionalized employment system that marginalizes contingent teachers. Using the theoretical framework of institutionalization theory and phenomenological design, interviews were conducted with 22 adjunct instructors. Findings suggest adjunct faculty are a heterogeneous population motivated by a passion for teaching, but the positive attributes associated with their occupation are circumscribed by marginalizing factors. This study concludes with several recommendations for policy changes, implications for leadership, and suggestions for future research.*

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Higher education institutions (HEIs) in the United States rely on adjunct faculty as the primary educational workforce (Kezar & Gehrke, 2016; Kimmel & Fairchild, 2017; Pyram & Roth, 2018). This dependence on adjunct faculty, also commonly referred to as contingent or part-time faculty, is more pervasive at the community college level (CCCSE, 2014; Kater, 2017; Morest, 2015; Ran & Xu, 2017; Thirolf & Woods, 2018; Wagoner, 2019; Yu, Campbell & Mendoza, 2015). The increasing reliance upon contingent faculty denoted throughout this paper as the adjunct model has emerged with numerous employment issues that threaten the occupational well-being of adjunct faculty. Studies indicate adjunct faculty are often marginalized and experience workplace inequities (Bickerstaff & Chavarin, 2018; CCCSE, 2014; Eagan, Jaeger, & Grantham, 2015; Franczyk, 2014; Kezar & Bernstein-Sierra, 2016; Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2015; Maxey & Kezar, 2015; Pons, Burnett, Williams, & Paredes, 2017; Pyram & Roth, 2018; Wagoner, 2019; Yakoboski, 2016).

Studies have indicated the growing reliance on adjunct faculty has resulted in many occupational and employment issues such as insufficient institutional support (Kezar & Bernstein-Sierra, 2016; Maxey & Kezar, 2015), inadequate compensation and lack of benefits (CCCSE, 2014; Kezar & Sam, 2013; Pons et al., 2017; Tierney, 2014), feelings of exclusion or segregation (Eagan et al., 2015; Kezar, 2013; Kezar & Sam, 2013; Pons et al., 2017), and generalized marginalization (Franczyk, 2014; Kezar & Sam, 2013; Moorehead, Russell, & Pula, 2015). The adjunct model has become an isomorphic phenomenon and institutionalized feature among most HEIs at all levels of postsecondary education (Morest 2015: Rhoades, 2017). The research of notable scholars and findings of this study lends credence to the belief that a hierarchical system of *haves* and *have-nots* may exist at some institutions of higher learning.

### **Statement of Problem**

The problem is adjunct faculty who are employed as HEI educators may experience an institutionalized employment system, which compromises their occupational well-being. The background of the problem is well documented in the literature. Researchers have indicated adjunct faculty are frequently marginalized and experience occupational inequities at all levels of higher education (Bickerstaff & Chavarin, 2018; CCCSE, 2014; Eagan et al., 2015; Franczyk, 2014; Kezar & Bernstein-Sierra, 2016; Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2015; Maxey & Kezar, 2015; Pons et al., 2017; Pyram & Roth, 2018; Wagoner, 2019; Yakoboski, 2016). Adjunct faculty, students, and HEIs alike are negatively impacted by the problem (Maxey & Kezar, 2015).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to qualitatively examine the lived workplace experiences of adjunct community college faculty in the northern San Francisco Bay Area region of California (Zitko, 2019). The study made an original contribution in three distinct ways. First, research was focused on adjunct community college faculty in a geographical region, which has not been adequately addressed in the literature. Second, the qualitative research method of phenomenology formed the basis for the study. Lastly, the study utilized the theoretical framework of institutionalization theory, which is not evident in similarly situated studies.

## **Significance of the Study**

The study made original contributions by advancing knowledge in a burgeoning field of research, which has not been thoroughly examined in the literature. The findings of this study may assist HEI leadership to assess institutional relationships with adjunct faculty and provide an informed platform for adopting proactive employment policies, which address the needs of contingent instructors. Findings can be used to provide a pathway for change that holistically improves employment conditions for adjunct faculty, enhances student learning, and aligns HEIs with the normative mission of providing an environment of equity and inclusion for all persons.

## **Research Questions**

Two primary research questions guided this study. The first research question pertains to the overarching experience of contingent faculty. The second research question relates to the meaning adjunct instructors ascribe to existing employment policies.

Research Question 1: What is the lived experience of adjunct community college faculty in Northern California?

Research Question 2: What is the meaning of adjunct faculty employment policies for contingent teachers at Northern California community colleges?

## **Theoretical Framework**

Institutionalization theory, as described by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), shaped the theoretical framework of the study. Institutionalization theory was appropriate because it theoretically explains the adjunct model and provides an informed pathway for productive change. Institutionalization theory suggests that policies within an organization become an integral part of the institutional structure when specific practices and norms have become entrenched in the ethos of an institution (Kezar & Sam, 2013). Institutionalization theory does not predict whether organizational policies are good or harmful (Manning, 2018). Instead, institutionalization theory suggests that longstanding policies are difficult to change (Kezar, 2018). Institutionalization is profoundly related to the existing values, rules, and culture within an organization and informs why organizational change among HEIs is often a slow and difficult process (Kezar, 2018).

Institutionalization theory is a vital lens to view the relationship between contingent faculty and the HEIs that employ adjunct instructors. Institutionalization theory is a useful tool for clarifying the nature of organizational relationships and the forces that encumber change (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Kezar, 2018). Using institutionalization theory as a theoretical framework is a valuable tool for assessing prevailing norms and uncovering factors that may prohibit change (Kezar, 2018).

The pervasive norm of dependency on adjunct faculty as the primary workforce among HEIs has created an isomorphic culture of reliance, which is deeply embedded in the institutional composition of HEIs in the United States. When HEIs increasingly conform to extensively accepted norms, like the adjunct model, institutional policies become intensely institutionalized, leading to organizational isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). For this reason, institutionalization theory is a valuable explanatory model when assessing the lived experience of contingent community college faculty.

## **A Brief Review of the Literature**

An investigation of the literature pertaining to employment practices, working conditions, and workplace experiences of adjunct HEI faculty resulted in several recurring themes. In total, 173 themes and subthemes initially arose from the literature and thematic analysis. This was a substantial number of concepts, and many were subsequently conjoined with related points. Consequently, the literature review resulted in several overarching categories as primary topics:

- The adjunct model is widely used by HEIs at all levels of higher education.
- Adjunct faculty are used more extensively by community colleges.
- The adjunct model has negative costs for contingent faculty, students, and HEIs.
- Adjunct faculty are not a homogeneous population.
- Counterarguments to claims about the negative impact of the adjunct model.
- Inherent contradictions within the adjunct model.

### **The Proliferation of the Adjunct Model in Higher Education**

Since the late 1970s, there has been a paradigmatic shift in the employment model used by colleges and universities in the United States (Brennan & Magness, 2018a; Magruder, 2019; Maxey & Kezar, 2015). Today, most HEIs rely on adjunct faculty as the principal academic workforce (ASATF, 2017; Curtis, Mahabir & Vitullo, 2016; Eagan et al., 2015; Hurlburt & McGarrah, 2016; Kezar et al., 2015; Kimmel & Fairchild, 2017; Rhoades, 2017). Consequently, as contingent employment increases, the number of available full-time positions has decreased significantly (Caruth & Caruth, 2013; Kezar & Sam, 2013; Yakoboski, 2016).

There are several hypothesized reasons for the shift among HEIs toward the adjunct model. The most common argument is the adjunct model is a rational fiscal decision to reduce costs (Eagan et al., 2015; Garcia, McNaughtan & Nehls, 2017; Hurlburt & McGarrah, 2016). Adjunct faculty are typically paid less than full-time faculty and receive few benefits (Bickerstaff & Chavarin, 2018; Curtis et al., 2016; Eagan et al., 2015; Kezar & Bernstein-Sierra, 2016; Moorehead et al., 2015; Yakoboski, 2016). Simply put, adjunct faculty are hired on a contingency basis as cheap labor.

A significant but somewhat less common reasoning for the adjunct model is it allows greater flexibility for HEI administrators (ASATF, 2017; Eagan et al., 2015; Kimmel & Fairchild, 2017; Maxey & Kezar, 2015). School administrators can use adjunct faculty to fill gaps in course schedules and easily dismiss contingent instructors when student enrollment declines (Caruth & Caruth, 2013; Yakoboski, 2016). Adjunct faculty can likewise be used to quickly replace full-time faculty who take sabbaticals or retire (Yakoboski, 2016).

### **The Adjunct Model and Community Colleges**

When compared to universities and four-year institutions, the adjunct model is used more extensively by community colleges (Curtis et al., 2016; Eagan et al., 2015; Morest, 2015; Thirolf & Woods, 2017). Recent data suggest adjunct community college faculty comprise nearly 70% of all instructional staff (Bickerstaff & Chavarin, 2018; Eagan et al., 2015; Morest, 2015; Thirolf & Woods, 2017; Wagoner, 2019). The reasoning for the high rate of adjunct faculty utilization among community colleges is similar to that of other HEIs, most notably, cost savings.

## The Negative Consequences of the Adjunct Model

Several interrelated themes related to the negative consequences of the adjunct model emerged from the literature. General employment issues were widely cited in the literature. A predominant factor was the trifold problem of job security, advancement, and expendability. Adjunct faculty work on a contingency basis. In other words, adjunct instructors are viewed by the institution as temporary or part-time help (CCCSE, 2014; Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2015). This is a significant issue for involuntary part-time faculty who seek full-time employment but are unable to attain a secure full-time faculty position (Bickerstaff & Chavarin, 2018; Eagan et al., 2015; Kezar & Bernstein-Sierra, 2016; Pyram & Roth, 2018). Moreover, adjunct faculty typically lack job security, making their employment status tenuous and unpredictable (ASATF, 2017; Bickerstaff & Chavarin, 2018; Curtis et al., 2016; Kezar & Bernstein-Sierra, 2016; Kimmel & Fairchild, 2017; Maxey & Kezar, 2015; Moorehead et al., 2015; Pons et al., 2017; Rhoades, 2017; Savage, 2017). In many instances, adjunct faculty teach heavy course loads at multiple institutions to compensate for their part-time status at individual schools (Curtis et al., 2016; Eagan et al., 2015; Kimmel & Fairchild, 2017; Morest, 2015; Pyram & Roth, 2018).

The most common negative consequence of the adjunct model is inadequate compensation and lack of benefits (ASATF, 2017; Bickerstaff & Chavarin, 2018; CCCSE, 2014; Curtis et al., 2016; Eagan et al., 2015; Hurlburt & McGarrah, 2016; Kezar & Bernstein-Sierra, 2016; Kezar et al., 2015; Kimmel & Fairchild, 2017; Maxey & Kezar, 2015; Moorehead et al., 2015; Morest, 2015; Pyram & Roth, 2018; Savage, 2017; Thirolf & Woods, 2017; Wagoner, 2019). Adjunct faculty typically earn far less than full-time faculty (Brennan & Magness, 2018b; Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2015; Pons et al., 2017; Rhoades, 2017). A study by Caruth and Caruth (2013) concluded contingent faculty frequently earn about one-third of what full-time faculty receive.

Lack of resources and support was another theme suggestive of poor working conditions for adjunct faculty (ASATF, 2017; Kezar & Bernstein-Sierra, 2016; Kezar et al., 2015; Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2015; Maxey & Kezar, 2015; Pyram & Roth, 2018; Savage, 2017). Poor working conditions stems, in part, from the lack of resources and support provided by the institution to contingent instructors. According to Kezar and Sam (2013), the failure of HEIs to provide much-needed support to part-time faculty has led to an overall negative work environment for contingent instructors.

The exigency of the problem and inherent contradictions regarding HEI policies toward adjunct faculty, particularly at the community college level, is best summed up in the 2014 report by the CCCSE, which warns,

Institutions' interactions with part-time faculty result in a profound incongruity: Colleges depend on part-time faculty to educate more than half of their students, yet they do not fully embrace these faculty members. Because of this disconnect, contingency can have consequences that negatively affect student engagement and learning. (p. 3)

These findings are quite concerning. The lack of resources and support may not only impact the lives of contingent faculty but students as well (ASATF, 2017; Curtis et al., 2016; Eagan et al., 2015; Kezar et al., 2015; Kezar & Sam, 2013; Rhoades, 2017; Yakoboski, 2016).

In addition to structural or policy issues which marginalize adjunct faculty, studies have found that contingent instructors frequently have perceptions of isolation or disconnection from their institutions (Bickerstaff & Chavarin, 2018; Franczyk, 2014; Kimmel & Fairchild, 2017; Pons et al., 2017; Pyram & Roth, 2018). In some instances, adjunct faculty feel undervalued or underappreciated (Bickerstaff & Chavarin, 2018; Caruth & Caruth, 2013; Curtis et al., 2016; Eagan

et al., 2015; Franczyk, 2014; Pons et al., 2017; Savage, 2017). Several studies found that adjunct faculty feel invisible on campus (ASATF, 2017; Kezar & Sam, 2013; Moorehead et al., 2015; Pyram & Roth, 2018). The alleged problem has led some scholars to intimate a caste system is evident among some HEIs, and adjunct faculty are subordinated to second-class status (ASATF, 2017; Eagan et al., 2015; Franczyk, 2014).

A significant, but less prominent issue for adjunct faculty pertains to adversarial relations between full-time faculty and contingent faculty. Several studies have revealed tension and contention between full-time faculty and adjunct faculty (ASATF, 2017; Eagan et al., 2015; Kezar & Sam, 2013; Maxey & Kezar, 2015; Moorehead et al., 2015; Rhoades, 2017). The institutional culture at some HEIs may be a significant barrier for adjunct faculty and promote feelings of isolation, exclusion, expendability, marginalization, or second-class status among contingent teachers.

### **Adjunct Faculty Heterogeneity**

The adjunct model does not impact all adjunct faculty equally. This is due, in part, to the heterogeneity of contingent faculty (Bickerstaff & Chavarin, 2018; Curtis et al., 2016; Eagan et al., 2015; Kezar & Bernstein-Sierra, 2016; Thirolf & Woods, 2017; Wagoner, 2019; Yakoboski, 2016). Adjunct faculty are a diverse group, and the perceptions which part-time instructors have regarding employment circumstances are influenced by individual characteristics (Bickerstaff & Chavarin, 2018; Kezar & Bernstein-Sierra, 2016). A distinction made in several studies is to separate contingent faculty into voluntary versus involuntary status (Curtis et al., 2016; Kezar & Bernstein-Sierra, 2016). Involuntary part-time faculty are those who seek full-time employment but are unable to procure a full-time job. Involuntary part-time faculty are less satisfied with their overall employment status when compared to voluntary part-time faculty (Eagan et al., 2015; Kezar & Bernstein-Sierra, 2016). Many voluntary part-time teachers have other jobs, are retired, desire the flexibility of teaching part-time, or teach classes for personal satisfaction (Thirolf & Woods, 2017). Part-time faculty who do not depend on teaching as a primary source of income tend to have a higher degree of job satisfaction (Yakoboski, 2016).

### **Counterarguments to Claims of Adjunct Model Marginalization**

Arguments supporting the adjunct model were not prevalent in the literature. Nonetheless, Brennan and Magness (2018a) argued adjunct faculty are not as unhappy or dissatisfied as some scholarly studies and popular rhetoric has concluded. Brennan and Magness (2018a) likewise argued adjunct faculty are not exploited and conclude adjunct faculty are acceptably remunerated for their services. In a second article, Brennan and Magness (2018b) suggest adjunct faculty are part-time by choice. In each instance, the conclusions drawn by Brennan and Magness (2018a, 2018b) are inconsistent with the findings of this current study and a preponderance of the literature.

### **Contradictions Within the Adjunct Model**

The HEI academic workforce has shifted to the adjunct model. Yet, as Eagan et al. (2015) concluded, the shift has not taken place with corresponding policies supporting the adjunct workforce. Kimmel and Fairchild (2017) found this to be paradoxical because the increased reliance on adjunct faculty by HEIs is incongruent with the negative working environment

experienced by many contingent instructors. Likewise, Savage (2017) acknowledged HEI policymakers understand that inadequate employment conditions negatively impact performance, but few changes have been made to improve employment conditions for adjunct faculty. Similarly, Lengermann and Niebrugge (2015) assert adjunct faculty are paid less than full-time faculty, yet students do not receive a discount for courses taught by part-time instructors.

The adjunct model may be antithetical to the norms of higher education. The adjunct model is inherently hierarchical and separates faculty into a bifurcated system of haves and have-nots (Caruth & Caruth, 2013; Pons et al., 2017). To provide an equal opportunity for students, HEIs promote an open-door policy, while simultaneously marginalizing adjunct faculty. (Caruth & Caruth, 2013). Colleges and universities rely upon adjunct faculty, though in many cases, they are perceived to be provisional or disposable (Pons et al., 2017). This contradiction is antithetical to the prevailing norms of equity and inclusiveness HEIs seek to achieve.

### **Methodology and Research Procedures**

The qualitative research design of phenomenology was the methodology used for this study. Phenomenology is the study of human experiences and how people perceive these experiences (Sokolowski, 2008). Given the research questions in this study focused on exploring the lived experience of adjunct community college faculty, phenomenology was an appropriate mode of inquiry to answer the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldana & Omasta, 2018; van Manen, 2016). Results were analyzed using phenomenological design and evaluated from the perspective of institutionalization theory.

### **Population and Sample Selection**

The target population were adjunct faculty who are employed by Northern California community colleges. The study included 22 adjunct faculty members who were selected as participants via purposeful sampling. Saturation occurred after the 18th interview, though four additional interviews were conducted to ensure saturation had been sufficiently achieved.

Adjunct faculty who teach courses at California community colleges in the northern San Francisco Bay Area regions were approached for participation via institutional email. The requests for participation explained the purpose of the study. Respondents to the initial request for participation were subsequently contacted by the researcher. Each participant signed an informed consent form prior to being interviewed. The sampling strategy was purposive, which is appropriate for phenomenological research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015; Saldana & Omasta, 2018).

### **Instrumentation and Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews of 22 adjunct faculty members from Northern California community colleges. Interviews took place in private and comfortable locations at the participating institutions and satellite locations as chosen by participants. Interviews were the primary data collection instrument. The nature of the inquiries was open-ended, allowing participants the opportunity of expressing personal experiences without being influenced by the interviewer. Interviews were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed by the researcher.

Interviews were followed up by a transcript evaluation by participants. The second consultation with participants was done to confirm the accuracy of the interview transcriptions and assist with thematic analysis. The follow-up consultations were conducted primarily via email, although two meetings were done by telephone. During the follow-up consultations, minor adjustments were made to the initial transcriptions. In four instances, participants recommended small clarifications to the transcriptions, which were accommodated by the researcher. Two participants failed to participate in the transcription review. Positive responses to the 20 transcriptions which were reviewed support the overall accuracy of transcriptions. Follow-up interviews represented the final stage of contributions to the study by participants.

### **Data Analysis and Coding Procedures**

The initial procedure for examining data consisted of reading interview transcripts and conducting a preliminary data assessment by writing a summary of each interview. This preliminary phase was followed by establishing codes, considering major themes, recognizing patterns, and creating nascent thematic categories. Examination of data continued with each interview and established the framework for more robust coding and thematic analysis, which took place after interviews were completed.

#### ***Coding Procedures***

Codes were derived from interview transcripts and interviewer observations. Initial coding focused on individual themes, which were later condensed into general themes as patterns emerged from the collective interviews. Coding ultimately created a thematic linkage of the phenomenon as experienced by participants (Saldana, 2016). The study utilized first-cycle and second-cycle coding. First-cycle coding in the study was an inductive process beginning with *descriptive coding* followed by *in vivo coding* and *emotion coding*. Second-cycle *pattern coding* involved the redistribution of first-cycle codes into fewer categories and recurring themes. During second-cycle coding, the researcher analyzed codes identified in first-cycle coding and arranged initial codes into conceptual categories.

### **Alignment of Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this study was institutionalization theory, which was valuable in assessing the adjunct model as experienced by contingent community college faculty who participated in the study. Using the qualitative research method of phenomenology, the results of this study were evaluated from the perspective of institutionalization theory. As a theoretical framework, institutionalization theory was a critical component of this study, which addressed adjunct employment from both a phenomenological and organizational perspective. Institutionalization theory provided a lens by which to assess entrenched organizational issues arising from the data (Kezar, 2018; Kezar & Sam, 2013).

### **Research Findings**

Results generally indicated a common shared reality among the participants. In some instances, the lived experience of participants diverged quite significantly. To maintain participant



anonymity, subjects were identified as P1-P22. Primary themes included *motivation, positive attributes, negative attributes, and desired policy changes*.

### **Theme 1: Motivation**

Participants were motivated by the occupation of teaching, helping students, sharing life experiences, and the feeling of contributing to others. Factors that inspire adjunct faculty to work in this capacity had a near-universal altruistic component. Adjunct faculty are motivated by teaching and working with students. Comments such as “I really love working with students” (P2), “I do it for the students” (P1), and “It’s always been a privilege for me to teach young people” (P16) were quite common. Almost universally, teaching was a motivating factor that superseded the negative aspects of being a contingent employee.

### **Theme 2: Positive Attributes**

Participants expressed several different positive attributes in their role as adjunct faculty. Autonomy and flexibility were a subtheme that garnered near consensus among the participants ( $n = 19, 86\%$ ). For some participants, the freedom from ancillary duties like serving on committees or becoming involved in campus politics were factors that contributed to a positive experience. As one participant explained, “Adjuncts get to focus on our subject” (P13). Another participant said, “One positive thing is that you don’t have to serve on the committees. You don’t have to go to a lot of meetings. You don’t have to get involved in campus politics” (P14). “Because you are on the periphery,” voiced another participant, “you don’t have to be involved in the politics... you’re sort of isolated” (P18). Comments such as these suggest some adjunct faculty see themselves as teachers first and find solace in circumventing non-teaching roles. For many participants, the freedom of being an adjunct teacher is a liberating experience.

Not surprisingly, when considering Theme 1, most of the participants conveyed a predilection toward student-centeredness. Satisfaction from connecting with students was articulated by 19 of the 22 participants. One venerable participant explained, “I absolutely love teaching and interacting with students” (P14). Remarks such as “It is so fulfilling, and so satisfying working with those students” (P3), “I love the fact that they want to learn” (P8), and “I feel like I’m giving back what was given to me” (P4) were frequently expressed by participants.

A small number of participants suggested teaching as an adjunct had situational appeal ( $n = 8, 36\%$ ). Five of these subjects had no desire for full-time employment and enjoyed part-time work as an adjunct because it complemented their current profession or income earning potential. The remaining three were interested in obtaining a full-time position but were tentatively satisfied in their role as adjunct faculty. Viewpoints of situational appeal are critical because employment positionality impacts perceptions of workplace satisfaction and the meaning attributed to adjunct faculty employment policies.

### **Theme 3: Negative Attributes**

Of the four themes derived from the study, negative attributes were the most highly cited with 639 individual references (Table 1). Table 1 is not intended to suggest negative attributes are more significant than other themes. Instead, negative attributes are indicative of a more complex theme, which is not easily reduceable to an isolated explanatory construct.

Most of the participants ( $n = 19$ , 86%) expressed viewpoints related to the adjunct model as an institutionalized employment system, which results in the marginalization of adjunct faculty. One participant described the adjunct model as “exploitation from highly educated people” (P2). Subjects explained, “There’s no job security” (P14), “Definitely no guarantee of work from semester to semester” (P17). “Adjuncts are really committed to teaching, but we don’t get any sort of support,” voiced another participant, “we don’t get anything from praise to remuneration” (P11). The adjunct model, from the viewpoint of several participants, is not promoting adjunct justice or HEI equity norms, innate to the values and mission of HEIs. As one participant commented, “It’s not like I’m working in some Gilded Age or Rockefeller’s Standard Oil kind of scenario, I’m in academia. You would think if any group of people could fully recognize equality, it would be academia” (P1).

**Table 1**

*Theme References*

Theme	Number of individual references
Motivation	106
Positive attributes	249
Negative attributes	639
Desired policy changes	96

A large number of participants explicitly ( $n = 9$ , 41%) and implicitly ( $n = 17$ , 77%) expressed feelings of expendability. One participant remarked, “I don’t think adjunct faculty are much recognized for their important role on campus. They are considered to be expendable resources” (P14). The view was restated by another adjunct instructor who said, “The system is designed to make sure that we are replaceable” (P17). A third participant ominously declared, “They don’t care. We’re disposable to these colleges, and it’s sick. Absolutely sick. There’s no security whatsoever” (P20). These viewpoints exemplified the frustration and stress many participants conveyed during the interviews.

Stress and feelings of being overworked relative to pay were common among subjects. A young adjunct instructor expressed feelings of frustration and stress, “I feel older than I am because of the stress of the job. There is no maternity leave for part-timers. There’s no pay. The districts don’t care. I’m replaceable” (P17). The frustration and stress expressed by several participants are exacerbated by the perceived lack of resources and support. An instructor who has been working exclusively as an adjunct declared, “there has been definite frustrations. Where you realize the lack of support, not only for the faculty but for the people that are supposed to be helping you” (P12). Some participants indicated not having office hours to meet with students but conducted ad hoc office hours on their own time. As one adjunct instructor confessed, “I just did it on my own. I volunteer” (P13).

Many participants expressed feelings, which suggested a lack of respect by the institution or full-time faculty. “It’s very degrading,” said one interviewee, “We’re not taken seriously. I feel like we’re in the industrial revolution, we’re the people that are interchangeable parts. We’re sort of one with the machine” (P11). This community college instructor went on to ask a poignant question, “At what point do you stop abusing your part-timers? I’m willing to work, I’m willing to be a part, but I want to be respected. I don’t feel like I’m respected.”

Views such as these were standard among many participants. Some subjects suggested an ethos of disrespect emanating from full-time faculty. A longstanding adjunct instructor asserted, “I think there’s definitely a prejudice among faculty members towards part-timers. Somehow, we’re not as good, or we would have a full-time job. We’re just not taken seriously, and there’s a lack of collegiality” (P11). The sentiment was repeated by another participant who recalled, “For a long time, I thought I wasn’t being treated very collegially. Sometimes I would say hello to the full-timers, and they just didn’t even respond, which is kind of bizarre” (P14).

A recurring theme among many participants was job insecurity ( $n = 17$ , 77%). For many subjects, employment insecurity impeded career objectives and negatively impacted personal well-being. In addition, numerous participants conveyed feelings of detachment and isolation as contingent faculty ( $n = 15$ , 68%). One participant stated, “I’m absolutely on the outside and not taken seriously a lot of the time. It’s really insulting and infuriating. I’m not part of the team” (P11). Another subject mentioned, adjunct faculty “feel like they’re independent contractors, not a part of the institution” (P12). “An adjunct instructor is sort of a different animal,” voiced one participant, “Like not a member of the community at the college. We’re all doing the same work, but there’s an invisible curtain between the faculty and the adjuncts” (P13).

Several participants harbored feelings of being exploited and oppressed ( $n = 10$ , 45%). One subject commented, “The college takes advantage of the fact that there are adjuncts like me who are just doing it to teach because we want to help young people get started in life” (P13). An adjunct instructor who travels between several colleges said, “You feel like a serf, like it’s a feudal system” (P17). “It’s just not exploitation in a coal mine,” expressed a participant, “It’s exploitation from highly educated people” (P2). The alleged exploitation of adjunct faculty, as expressed by several participants, was that of being marginalized by an inequitable employment model. As one subject suggested, “This has come to be a system that perpetuates all kinds of inequalities and inequities” (P6).

Perceptions of marginalization were expressed by subjects in a variety of permutations. Some participants ( $n = 16$ , 73%) were distressed by the lack of upward mobility. “I definitely pursued full-time positions,” said one adjunct instructor, “It’s been brutal. It’s absolutely been brutal. It’s just been a nightmare” (P11). After 30 years as an adjunct, this participant has ruled out the possibility of attaining a full-time position, stating, “I’ve totally given up.”

Several interviewees ( $n = 12$ , 55%) harbored perceptions of an institutionalized caste or class system as a byproduct of the adjunct employment practices. “We’re treated as second-class citizens,” remarked one interviewee (P11). Indeed, four participants referred to their situation as being that of “second-class citizens” (P4, P6, P11, P13). Comments such as “caste system,” “prejudice among faculty members towards part-timers,” “them versus us mentality,” “sharecropping for academia,” “demoralizing,” “feudal system,” “haves and have nots,” “division in classes,” “class system,” “treated differently than the full-time faculty,” and “two-tiered,” give credence to the premise many participants felt a caste or class system is systemic at the subjects’ places of employment.

Low pay and lack of benefits were significant marginalizing factors for most subjects. All but one participant ( $n = 21$ , 95%) felt relegated due to inadequate remuneration. One long-time adjunct instructor said, “What I’m earning here is really a pittance to try and live on” (P11). “It is a struggle financially,” declared another participant (P12). While many of the participants demonstrated anger and frustration because of low wages, others begrudgingly accepted being paid significantly less than full-time faculty. As one participant admitted, “What I’m getting at the community college, it feels like volunteer work. The disparity is just huge” (P19). Subjects

articulated numerous expressions of inadequate remuneration:

P1: There's certainly no sense of doing it for the money.

P3: They're paying me less than half of what I'm worth.

P4: The work is becoming overwhelming; the pay is underwhelming.

P9: We're not compensated at all, to any level of what our full-time colleagues get.

P10: I couldn't survive just on the teaching.

P13: I don't think that the pay that they're giving is adequate to get really good teachers.

P14: The pay, when all things are considered, is not nearly what the full-timers get.

P15: I don't know if you could support a family on just adjunct teaching.

P17: I know that I get paid less for the same work.

P19: I think we're all paid too low [and] that's absolutely wrong.

Uncompensated time ( $n = 8, 36\%$ ) and administrative marginalization ( $n = 20, 91\%$ ) were additional factors which contributed to overall perceptions of adjunct marginalization. In many instances ( $n = 11, 50\%$ ), participants cited course load restrictions as contributing to financial hardships. A majority of the interviewees ( $n = 13, 59\%$ ) expressed feelings of being exposed to some form of discrimination or bias. "It is a really political environment," said one participant, "your kind of at the bottom of the power hierarchy" (P19). "It's just the institutional bias," voiced another subject (P6). A number of participants ( $n = 13, 59\%$ ) harbored feelings of not being appreciated or valued by their schools or full-time faculty. "I think there should be some way in which we're treated with more respect," concluded one subject (P11). "Sometimes, you just feel a little devalued," proclaimed another participant (P18).

Lastly, participants held viewpoints of conflict between full-time and part-time faculty. A significant number of interviewees ( $n = 18, 82\%$ ) expressed perceptions of marginalization due to a bifurcated employment system, which prioritizes the well-being of full-time faculty over adjunct faculty. One participant explained, "You usually have a them versus us mentality" (P12). "We do exactly the same job," declared another interviewee; "It's definitely a second- or third-class kind of gig. It's almost like an adversarial relationship" (P13). Still, another interviewee proclaimed, "As an adjunct faculty member, there is a division in [social] classes between full-time and adjunct faculty. You're treated differently by the full-time faculty" (P4).

#### **Theme 4: Desired Policy Changes**

Participants indicated a desire for three overarching policy changes, increased *equity* ( $n = 15, 73\%$ ), a *pathway to full-time employment* ( $n = 9, 41\%$ ), and improved *remuneration* ( $n = 18, 82\%$ ). When taken together, these three areas of desired policy change suggest a want for better pay, job security, and an opportunity to fully partake in teaching as a viable career. Several participants suggested the "two-tiered system" should be abolished. As one subject articulated, "I would recommend that there be more equity in pay. I don't think there should be two tiers" (P11). "We need to have some job security," voiced another participant, "You should be able to count on a certain number of classes so that you can actually make a living" (P21). Additionally, some interviewees recommended the removal of course load restrictions ( $n = 9, 41\%$ ), incorporating tenure or rehire rights for adjunct faculty ( $n = 8, 36\%$ ), and providing benefits to adjunct faculty ( $n = 10, 45\%$ ). Notwithstanding, better monetary compensation was a primary concern for involuntary part-time faculty. Participant responses like "I think we're all paid too low" (P18), "Our salaries need to be more equitable with what full-timers earn" (P11), and "We need to reach parity...real parity" (P10), were quite common.

## Discussion

A significant finding in the study was that adjunct faculty are not a homogeneous group, nor can the collective experience of adjunct instructors be categorized as exclusively good or bad. All 22 participants shared both positive and negative experiences as adjunct college faculty. Participants were all motivated by a passion for teaching and serving students. The degree to which many of the participants sacrificed personal welfare to continue teaching in a part-time capacity was revealing. There was an altruistic component, which was nearly universal among participants. While not surprising, this finding demonstrated the extent to which adjunct faculty are committed to their profession irrespective of working in a frequently uncertain employment environment. Motivational factors may be stronger predictors of remaining in a part-time role than negative factors are of influencing an adjunct to pursue a different career.

Adjunct faculty are rewarded by the autonomy and flexibility enjoyed as educators ( $n = 19$ , 86%), productive interaction with students ( $n = 19$ , 86%), and the characteristics of working at a community college ( $n = 16$ , 73%). However, findings also suggest adjunct faculty are negatively impacted by the adjunct model ( $n = 21$ , 95%). The vast majority of participants conveyed perceptions of marginalization in some form as a byproduct of employment status and institutional policies. Only one participant, a retired school teacher, did not articulate any negative perceptions regarding employment as an adjunct instructor. Marginalizing factors and participant response ratios to specific themes are listed in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
*Marginalizing Factors of the Adjunct Model*

Theme	Response Rate
Low pay	( $n = 21$ , 95%)
Full-time versus part-time conflict	( $n = 18$ , 82%)
Job insecurity	( $n = 17$ , 77%)
Limited upward mobility	( $n = 16$ , 73%)
Detachment and isolation	( $n = 15$ , 68%)
Exploitation and oppression	( $n = 15$ , 68%)
Need to work at multiple institutions	( $n = 14$ , 64%)
Unequal treatment	( $n = 14$ , 64%)
Few or no benefits	( $n = 13$ , 59%)
Discrimination or bias	( $n = 13$ , 59%)
Lack of appreciation or being undervalued	( $n = 13$ , 59%)
Frustration and stress	( $n = 12$ , 55%)
Caste or class system	( $n = 12$ , 55%)
Lack of resources provided to adjunct faculty	( $n = 11$ , 50%)
Course load restrictions	( $n = 11$ , 50%)
Negatively impacts teaching	( $n = 10$ , 45%)
Uncompensated time	( $n = 8$ , 36%)
Underemployment	( $n = 8$ , 36%)

Data from Table 2 are consistent with the premise that adjunct faculty have perceptions of marginalization, feel as though they are poorly compensated, and are subject to an inequitable employment model. When the data are viewed holistically, the lived experience of adjunct faculty may be one of marginalization within the adjunct model, school policies, and institutionalized norms. Albeit, when participants are compared by employment objectives, voluntary part-time faculty were less inclined than involuntary part-time faculty to exhibit strong negative viewpoints of marginalization. These findings support the *adjunct heterogeneity hypothesis*, which may be a predictor of dissatisfaction and perceptions of marginalization.

### **The Adjunct Heterogeneity Hypothesis**

An important takeaway is what is referred to in this study as the *adjunct heterogeneity hypothesis* (AHH). Adjunct faculty are a heterogeneous group, which can be characterized as voluntary and involuntary part-time employees. The AHH suggests, adjunct faculty who are involuntary part-time employees tend to have a more negative view of existing employment policies when compared to HEI instructors who are voluntary part-time employees. Voluntary part-time faculty generally experience a moderate degree of marginalization, whereas involuntary part-time faculty expressed greater exposure to marginalizing factors and held more negative perceptions of their part-time status.

Voluntary part-time faculty find consolation in the situational appeal of having an opportunity to teach on a contingency basis. In contrast, involuntary part-time faculty find relegation to contingent status as a harmful byproduct of the adjunct model. Involuntary part-time faculty were far more insecure with their employment status and advancement opportunities than voluntary part-time faculty. Moreover, involuntary part-time faculty were more adamant than voluntary part-time faculty with regard to establishing reformative policies leading to greater equitable conditions for contingent instructors.

### **Institutionalization Theory and the Adjunct Model**

Institutionalization theory as an explanatory mechanism for the adjunct model impacts adjunct community college faculty differently. For voluntary part-time faculty, the adjunct model ensures there will be more part-time positions available. In contrast, the adjunct model safeguards the continuing reliance on contingent instructors in lieu of more available full-time positions. For those adjunct instructors who are seeking a full-time teaching position, the institutionalization of the adjunct model has created a situation by which there is less opportunity to attain permanent employment at an HEI. Debilitating adjunct faculty related factors, such as those described in Table 2, may be institutionalized to the point HEIs take these features for granted. Furthermore, the isomorphic nature of the adjunct model may impede change by supporting the continuance of an employment system that marginalizes adjunct faculty.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This study was confined to adjunct community college faculty in a small geographic region of Northern California. Findings are circumscribed by location and the boundaries of phenomenological inquiry. Notwithstanding, the findings of this study are compelling and can be

used as a basis for future research across a broader spectrum of institutions to better evaluate the adjunct model and its impact on contingent faculty. Future research can help determine whether employment objectives, longevity in the field, and age are factors that contribute to the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of HEI faculty. Research should be conducted to evaluate the adjunct heterogeneity hypothesis as described in this study and the influence occupational preferences have on the adjunct model. Future studies should include both quantitative and qualitative inquiry as a means of providing insight into the lived experience of adjunct faculty and substantive data, which can be used to formulate new employment policies.

### **Leadership Implications**

The findings of this study suggest adjunct college faculty are fervent educators. Nonetheless, these contingent instructors, to varying degrees, are marginalized by an isomorphic employment system, which has been referred to throughout this article as the adjunct model. The findings from this study and the literature suggest changes to the adjunct model may have a beneficial social impact on adjunct faculty, students, and HEIs (Curtis et al., 2016; Maxey & Kezar, 2015; Yu et al., 2015). Adopting new policies is a multilevel leadership challenge which includes adjunct faculty, full-time faculty, and school administration. The impetus for change begins with adjunct faculty leadership, who should establish a plan for implementing new policies that challenge the adjunct model status quo. Adjunct faculty leadership should find common ground and coalesce with full-time faculty leadership as a necessary step toward implementing change. Likewise, gaining the support of institutional leadership is vital to the establishment and institutionalization of new employment policies. Developing a rapport with institutional leaders may assist adjunct faculty leadership in gaining widespread support for innovative policies. This is vital because institutional leaders are well-positioned to act as intermediaries between the various HEI stakeholders. The implementation and maintenance of reformative policies take place at the institutional level. Innovating new employment policies and practices to create equitable conditions for adjunct HEI faculty is a multilevel leadership challenge.

### **Conclusion**

There is little doubt adjunct faculty are vital to HEIs. The findings of this study suggest adjunct college faculty are passionate and devoted teachers. Many of these dedicated educators choose to work at multiple institutions as a means of earning a modest living in pursuit of their chosen career. Still, other part-time faculty demonstrate a commitment to teaching by working as college educators aside from other full-time employment. Adjunct faculty are, first and foremost, teachers who derive great satisfaction from helping students achieve academic and life goals.

For many adjunct college instructors, the dreams of becoming full-time faculty are impeded by the adjunct model and institutional practices, which largely preclude contingent instructors from attaining desired career objectives. The data suggests many part-time faculty feel marginalized in their role as contingent instructors and desire innovative policy changes, which would reduce the debilitating impact of the adjunct model. Respect, recognition, job security, equity, inclusion, appreciation, and perhaps most importantly, the opportunity to earn a living in their chosen profession, are but a few of the rational requests made by numerous participants in this study. Many desires of adjunct faculty who participated in the study are easily resolved at the institutional level and require little funding—just a genuine effort by the institutions to accept these essential

instructors into the fabric of the institution.

The findings of this study are not intended to insinuate all adjunct faculty are marginalized, or all colleges treat contingent educators poorly. Indeed, there was some evidence to the contrary. The findings do suggest it may be in the best interest of HEIs to embrace adjunct faculty, and to a modest degree, improvement has been accomplished at some institutions. Isomorphism, which is inherent in the adjunct model, may have resulted in the unintentional marginalization of a highly dedicated academic workforce.

This study examined the lived experience of 22 devoted adjunct community college faculty in Northern California. The research included a small sample of the thousands of hardworking and enthusiastic contingent instructors who routinely travel the roads and highways as *freeway flyers*. The title of this paper began with, *The Adjunct Model as an Equity Crisis in Higher Education*. This title is provocative and salient because the impact of the adjunct model and the formation of proactive HEI employment systems is an unresolved issue. Adjunct HEI faculty are a large group of potentially marginalized individuals who work in an occupation by which they have little functional voice or decision-making capability. The author of this paper is hopeful community college leaders will examine this study, reflect on the words of the participants, contemplate the findings, and consider how higher learning institutions can adopt new policies to improve the well-being of adjunct college faculty.



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