

How Departments Support Part-Time Faculty

By Gina L. Sheeks and Philo A. Hutcheson

Despite the increasing number of part-time faculty teaching courses in the nation's colleges and universities and the sharp debate this phenomenon has provoked, there is little information about the part-time workforce.

What data there is comes from national or federal databases. This kind of information provides overviews on part-time faculty but does not necessarily reflect substantial institutional conditions.

Questions of how administrators and full-time faculty engage and integrate part-timers in their institutions have received scant attention in the literature.

This article reports on a study of part-time faculty and department chairs conducted during the spring of 1997 at a state-sponsored university.¹ In the study, we take a close-up look at how department chairs work with, or fail to work with, part-time professors.

What we begin to see, through

the comments of our colleagues at "Public University," is that departmental policies and the attitudes of faculty go a long way in defining the work experience of part-time faculty.

"Public University" mirrors many national trends in part-time employment, such as the number of hours taught by part-time instructors and their percentage of the teaching load. Like its counterparts, Public University has little information on the demographics, educational background, or work experience of its part-time faculty.²

Data for the study came from personal interviews and nonparticipant observation of 20 part-time faculty members from six departments. Informants answered 14 interview questions and provided additional information regarding their positions as part-time faculty.

The interviews addressed three general areas: (a) job responsibilities and institutional support, (b) hiring, orientation, and evaluation

Gina L. Sheeks is an assistant professor of communications at Columbus State University. She holds a M.A. in speech communication and is currently a doctoral candidate in the higher education program at Georgia State University. **Philo A. Hutcheson** is an assistant professor of educational policy studies at Georgia State University. His most recent publication is "McCarthyism and the Professoriate: A Historiographic Nightmare" in *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, 1997.

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processes, and, (c) socialization and enculturation experiences.

To better understand the relationship between the perceptions of part-time faculty and their administrators, interviews were conducted with three department chairpersons responsible for the hiring and socialization of part-time faculty.

This department chair interview schedule addressed the following general themes: (a) policies and procedures for hiring part-time faculty, and (b) supervision, evaluation, and socialization processes involving part-time faculty.

Each instructor and administrator participated in multiple-in-depth interviews over a six-week period. Additional data were obtained from a comprehensive literature review, conversations with other faculty and administrators in each department, and the review of departmental memorandums, announcements of events, and university publications.

The faculty participants in this study were similar to part-time faculty described in national studies in terms of demographics and degrees earned.³

There was a higher percentage of female part-time faculty than male, and participants were primarily white non-Hispanic. The average part-time faculty participant had been employed at the

Public University five years. Eighty percent held a master's degree as the terminal degree.

The institutional anonymity of these faculty members also reflects national reports on part-time professors. Only two of the six departments represented in this study provide part-time faculty with copies of departmental memorandums and announcements.

University publications failed to mention any part-time faculty. Neither were part-time faculty on the mailing list for these publications.⁸ A review of the university catalog and phone directory found a listing for only one of the 20 part-time faculty members.

For these faculty members, the primary interaction with the institution is at the departmental level, and the departmental support for their work as well as their interview responses have tremendous variation.

Four of the six departments in this study provided office space for part-time faculty members. Three of those departments required part-time faculty to share office space; only one department provided private offices for part-time faculty. The remaining departments required part-time faculty to use the departmental office for office space.

Two percent of the part-time faculty informants had personal

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computers. All had access to a phone, and 60 percent had secretarial support. All informants had an individual mailbox in their respective departments.

The unevenness of departmental support is even more apparent in terms of preparation and evaluation. As one professor noted:

The worst part of this is the lack of notice. I receive a call a day or so before my class begins, and I'm expected to have textbooks and lecture materials ready.

In contrast, another faculty member reported:

My chair gave all of the part-time instructors an orientation session before the quarter began. It was very helpful.

In terms of evaluation, one professor noted, "I asked my chair once if I could have yearly feedback on my teaching, and he said no."

A professor in another department offered a different perspective:

My chair sat in one of my two hour and twenty minute classes once. He provided me with written feedback several days later.

The range of departmental

experience in preparation and evaluation: literally, from nothing to all.

In the area of salaries and benefits, part-time professors' comments tended to be uniform.

Notes one faculty member:

Once, the department combined two of my courses, increasing the enrollment from 25 to 50 students. My pay was not increased to reflect the increase in workload. They didn't want to have to pay me for two courses, so they just combined the two into one. They knew I needed the job, so what was I to do?

Comments on socialization issues varied from department to department. Said one professor:

When I was hired, I was told by a full-time department member that there was no reason to attend department or university meetings. He told me not to bring it up.

Another part-timer reflected the desire of many part-timers:

Institutions should realize that part-time faculty want to be included in the institution. I, for one, would love to feel more a part of this university.

But an instructor in another department noted:

Financial considerations repeatedly emerged as primary reasons for employing part-time faculty.

The part-time faculty in our department receive strong support from the department chair. He tries to get us together once a quarter to thank us for the work we do.

Once again, inconsistencies abound from department to department within the same institution. And, as document analyses and interview responses indicate, it is not only institutional, but also departmental issues that concern part-time professors.

For the three department chairs, financial considerations repeatedly emerged as primary reasons for using part-time faculty.

According to these administrators, using part-timers allows departments to respond to changing conditions. Recruiting part-time faculty is seldom necessary, as a pool of qualified candidates can be easily established from current faculty and other sources.

But there were inconsistencies in hiring, orientation, and evaluation practices and procedures, as well as perceptions of what part-time faculty want. One department chairperson said:

I hire most of my part-time faculty over the phone, and the last one I met ten minutes before his first class. I don't think they

need or want an orientation session. In fact, I get the impression that they don't usually want to be bothered with additional responsibilities.

Another chairperson places a different emphasis on the importance of hiring and orientation procedures:

I ask the potential part-time faculty member to provide me with a vita, and I ask that they meet with me prior to the beginning of the quarter. I try to give them an overview of our departmental mission and the courses we teach, identify department members, and show them where office support services are. I feel it's important to maintain communication.

In terms of evaluation, one chairperson noted:

I don't evaluate part-time faculty. I have enough evaluations to do with full-time faculty, and simply don't have time. I've never had a part-timer ask to be evaluated, and since they only teach the basic course, I don't really think it's necessary.

Another chairperson offered a different perspective:

I try to do at least one class visit per quarter for each of my

'I don't believe that part-timers want to attend meetings or do anything more than teach their courses.'

part-time faculty. It provides me with a lot of insight regarding their teaching styles, personality, relationship with our students, and course content.

The variation in departmental support is even more problematic in terms of inclusion and socialization practices among departments. One department chair said:

I have told our secretaries to provide our part-time faculty with any information they feel is important, but part-timers are not asked to attend meetings and such. I don't have any reason to believe that they would want to attend meetings or do anything more than teach their course.

In contrast, another chairperson reported:

Once a quarter, I try to plan a luncheon for our full-time and part-time faculty. We talk about issues that affect us in the classroom and share ideas regarding teaching, our majors, and things we all have in common.

As the responses illustrate, the interaction between departments and their part-timers ranges from indifference and exploitation to apparently full engagement.

Such inconsistency among departments sends an institutional message to part-time and full-time

faculty that part-time appointments are less than a legitimate feature of higher education.

Research suggests that part-time faculty want to teach, and colleges and universities want them to teach, within limits. If the trend of using part-time instructors continues to grow—and all indications are that it will—colleges and universities must work toward a united faculty of full-time and part-time employees.

For example, administrators and full-time faculty should establish committees on part-time faculty that include part-time faculty membership. Administrators should be certain that handbooks include information on part-time faculty members' responsibilities and benefits and that information about faculty members includes reports on activity by both full-time and part-time professors.

Full-time professors should keep their part-time colleagues abreast of changes in academic programs and engage in conversation regarding advances in their fields.

Perhaps most important, department chairs need to accept responsibility for part-time faculty as members of the department and find ways to maximize the talents of this workforce rather than ignore or disdain it.

National studies have presented

various taxonomies on the characteristics of part-time professors, suggesting that aspirations and employment elsewhere are key issues.⁴ But we need to remember also that the department is thought by many to be the building block of the university.

Taxonomies of part-time faculty

members are a useful way of understanding who constitutes the part-time work force in academe, but questions about how departments work with part-time professors, or fail to work with them, we hope, provide another analytical framework for exploring these important issues. ■

Endnotes

¹ For a copy of the study contact Gina Sheeks at Columbus State University, Columbus, Georgia.

² Anonymous Interview, 1997.

³ National Center for Education Statistics, 1994.

⁴ Gappa and Leslie, 1993.

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