How can Community Colleges Support Adjunct Faculty to Improve Learning Outcomes and Promote Academic Success?

Minyan Gao, Teachers College, Columbia University

The Current Community College Situation

In recent years, the American Association of Community Colleges has identified a decline in overall enrollment at American two-year institutions. These numbers, the organization has suggested, make clear that the schools are facing new challenges, which are in evident need of resolution (AACC, 2022). Community colleges, however, are far from the only institutions experiencing difficulties. According to a 2023 Gallup Poll, only 36 percent of the American population is confident in higher education in general (Gallup, 2023). The Gallup Poll's surveys have shown a continuous decline in this number since 2018, and the downward trend affects all post-secondary institutions - including community colleges, which have a unique position and role in the overall system. Today, institutions of higher education will often place an overemphasis on improving their rankings, frequently focusing on social-impact metrics, career placement rates, and other factors unrelated to academics. Amid this industry-wide fixation on rankings, community colleges are often overlooked and undervalued within the wider higher education framework. At the same time, these institutions are uniquely positioned and tasked with supporting a very broad student population (Sommo et al., 2023). These include such diverse groups as first-generation college students, adult learners, nontraditional students, underrepresented students, international students, immigrants, and those seeking vocational training or a career change. The responsibility that community colleges have to serve such an unusual student population can influence how they are evaluated, and how their student

outcomes are recognized.

Community college faculty members have job responsibilities that are unlike those of their counterparts at other types of higher education institutions. They teach in different environments and are exposed to a more diverse population of students with a wider range of ages. With their student outcomes in mind, community colleges need to teach, mentor, and engage their students effectively. For their part, faculty members are responsible for teaching students in-depth knowledge and critical thinking skills as they study and practice pedagogy (Pallas & Neumann, 2019). Some faculty can use transferable skills for teaching more with worldly. But as higher education scholars continue to research the impact of faculty's diversity and professionalism on improving student outcomes, they would benefit from paying more attention to community colleges, especially considering these institutions' importance in today's higher education environment. In this paper, I will summarize some of the previous research on the ways in which community college faculty can engage students to promote learning and academic success.

In this literature review, I utilize case studies and qualitative research analyzing the current community college situation, including issues relating to faculty members and career development, and the role that faculty members play in engaging students and improving student outcomes. I conclude with recommendations and a description of programs that policymakers, community college leaders, and others working in higher education may find useful.

Articulation of the Problem

Common Issues with Community College Faculty

Faculty instability has been an ongoing challenge for community colleges, and the reasons why are complex and multifaceted. These issues are also closely related to the broader labor market, impacted by market fluctuations, government policies, and workforce trends. Typically, the teaching staff of a community college will include both full-time and part-time faculty (also called adjunct faculty). With that in mind, three factors in particular directly affect the career development of individual community college faculty members, along with the academic success of their students.

First, research has shown that community colleges tend to over-rely on adjunct faculty. When instructor vacancies occur at community colleges, adjuncts have the advantage of being able to readily fill in as substitutes, helping schools efficiently meet basic staffing requirements while controlling costs. However, in the context of long-term academic success, such short-term substitute teaching typically fails to meet student needs, and may reduce the institution's impact in their communities (NPEC, 2006). The temporary nature of adjunct faculty positions also increases uncertainty for instructors and decreases their likelihood of teaching their students in the long term. This situation directly impacts student performance on academic assessments and learning outcomes. Further, adjunct faculty are often simultaneously employed at multiple institutions, which can cause scheduling conflicts, a lack of instructional continuity, and an inability to deeply understand individual student learning needs. These instructors need ongoing support, including when it comes to issues of equity and access, but schools often lack the time and resources to fulfill these needs in their part-time faculty.

Second, community college faculty often communicate with students and collaborate with them on student-affairs issues, but this may inadvertently cause confusion with schools. Researcher Bryan Bates Manning found that community college instructional data, faculty decisions, and academic advisor guidance will often conflict with each other, which affects student progress and planning (Manning, 2022). Thus, faculty and student success are closely linked and the influencing factors warrant in-depth study. This study follows the "Guided Pathway" model, in hopes of better understanding the factors influencing students' major choices and the cultural barriers of collaboration between faculty and student support offices (Davis et al., 2021). For these two groups to work together, and for them to help improve their students' success, strong communication and collaboration from both parties is required.

Third, and finally, community college faculty tend to experience high rates of psychological stress. In one study, 46 percent of instructors surveyed reported mental stress and negative emotions while teaching, some of which came from having to support emotionally disturbed students in their classes (Vyletel et al., 2023). Once these uncertain students are encountered, faculty need to spend extra time dealing with student issues and their own psychological stress. Adjunct faculty are unable to have a direct connection with each department staff, and counseling office to help students. This is coupled with the fact that they work in the schools for short periods of time and cannot follow up on the status of the student long enough to report back to the counselor. Taken together, there is a clear and current need to focus on alleviating these triggers of stress for community college faculty.

Review of Relevant Literature and Policies

Professional Support for Adjunct Faculty

As previous researchers have found, community college administrators need to provide more support and resources to their adjunct faculty, and must collaborate more closely with them to help students complete their degrees. One study, "Early Academic Outcomes for Students of Part-Time Faculty at Community Colleges: How and Why Does Instructors' Employment Status Influence Student Success?," examined the relationship between faculty characteristics and student outcomes (Ran & Sanders, 2019). Analyzing a sample from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System for the 2014-15 academic year, the authors found that adjunct faculty tended to have lower educational levels than tenured faculty; 12 percent did not have graduate degrees and lacked the professional capabilities to effectively advise students on course selection (Ran & Sanders, 2019). Compared with full-time faculty, who tend to follow more traditional academic trajectories, adjunct instructors often have diverse educational and professional backgrounds. On one hand, their real-world perspectives can enrich classroom discussions. On the other hand, frequent resource and time constraints can prevent them from turning their experience into innovative pedagogy.

Unlike their part-time counterparts, almost all full-time faculty have graduate degrees, job security, and access to a variety of institutional resources and benefits. Their work involves scholarship and extensive participation in institutional activities, including advising, research, and administrative responsibilities. In addition, they usually teach “traditional” students who require less targeted support. Adjunct faculty are disproportionately assigned to students who are underrepresented; most need financial aid, and many do not have a high school diploma (Ran & Sanders, 2019). As teaching at community colleges is significantly dependent on adjunct faculty, the lack of support for extensive instructional planning also harms student learning outcomes. This is deepened by differences in the delivery method relative to traditional classes, limited campus resources, and few opportunities for instructors to interact with students outside of the classroom. Overall, Ran and Sanders’ findings point to numerous challenges for adjunct faculty, including a severe lack of support from the community colleges where they teach and limited opportunities for career development. These factors directly impact student enrollment in future courses, along with retention and completion rates.

The 2004 National Postsecondary Faculty Study details numerous strategies and programs that community colleges have implemented to support their adjunct faculty and enhance student achievement (Cataldi et al., 2005). Through my exploration of these professional development programs, I have identified some successful initiatives that community colleges have advanced in the past, which could help in the current environment. One example comes from Harper College, one of the largest community colleges in the United States, located in the northwestern suburbs of Chicago. The school's Center for Adjunct Faculty Engagement (CAFE) conducts research and provides professional development opportunities for adjunct faculty, including engagement programs, faculty administration, training, and an array of other initiatives. Further, the center is dedicated to addressing and establishing standardized adjunct faculty evaluations at community colleges, with the aim of improving the quality of teaching and learning, and serving students in a more professional manner. CAFE has invested substantial time and resources to develop these common evaluation standards, which can be easily personalized to serve a variety of majors, academic levels, and to improve teaching and learning outcomes.

In their efforts to improve the overall quality of instruction and student outcomes, community colleges need to create appropriate school assessments, as well as take steps to support the professional development of adjunct faculty. According to an analysis by the Coalition on the Academic Workforce (CAW), which has collected statistics on the opinions and career development of adjunct faculty for many years, more than 80 percent of adjunct instructors have been doing this work for three years, and 50 percent for at least five years (CAW, 2012). This suggests that community colleges need to invest more time and resources into the development of their adjunct faculty, so they can position them to be engaged in student success as long-term community members. The current structure of most community colleges, however, echoes what Rachel Lyke, a researcher, has called "two-tier employment structures" in higher education - adjunct faculty and full-time tenured professors (Lyke, 2019). Lyke utilizes role theory as a research framework, using supportive policy principles and practices to propose that adjunct faculty collaboration and participation improves student academic performance. However, role theory has limitations, including its vague definition of adjunct faculty and of student and community college satisfaction. In my research, I would expand upon Lyke's theory by applying a more nuanced definition of adjunct faculty roles and examining how specific policy interventions, such as professional development programs and improved job security, could enhance both faculty engagement and student outcomes within the unique context of community colleges.

Community College Faculty: Training and Mental Health

Community college instructors can have a powerful influence on student learning outcomes, as well as students' interest in future academic studies. The purpose of their teaching is not only to deliver specialized knowledge, but also to transform their students' future development (Barnett & Cho, 2023). Elisabeth A. Barnett and Selena Cho's proposed "Caring Campus" model affirms that community college faculty's nurturing of positive interpersonal relationships with students and other co-workers should be central to their jobs. Using consistent communication and delivery of strong support can positively impact student success and development. The model promotes flexibility for community colleges and their faculty, including diverse pedagogical approaches, better use of instructors' specialized knowledge, and both in-person and virtual program delivery. Based on Barnett and Cho's research findings, a "Caring Campus" can support and enhance community college students' academic development, as well as their engagement and completion rates (Barnett & Cho, 2023). By increasing faculty support through professional development, provision of mental health resources, and collaboration opportunities, community colleges can better address the diverse academic and personal needs of their students, ensuring better holistic educational outcomes.

Another area deserving of further research is faculty training, specifically, its impact on student achievement, including when delivered in the form of faculty coaching and team workshops. As an example of how this can be done effectively, Barnett and Cho highlight a program designed for new faculty at Michigan's Delta College. In 2021, the College began forming faculty coaching teams, with each having four to six faculty members, and led by one or two peer coordinators (Barnett & Cho, 2023). The teams met regularly to discuss different teaching topics, with the participating faculty using open thinking to understand current problems with students, discuss effective communication methods, hone problem-solving skills, and brainstorm differences between the rational and emotional aspects of their jobs. Delta's training curriculum focused on bolstering faculty empathy toward and encouragement of their students, along with enhancing students' unique personal values and building team awareness. When instructors encountered problems during teaching, they knew they could turn to their team members for resources and support. The role of team coordinator was also particularly important, not only in coordinating the meeting schedule, but also in developing smoother communication. Notably, faculty participation in the program was voluntary, framed with the objective of improving professional development. The experiment was ultimately successful, and other community colleges in the United States could easily carry out similar faculty training programs aimed at strengthening communication skills, and professionally guiding faculty to improve student performance.

Another key consideration across industries in modern society is stress, along with other mental health problems. In academia, faculty members tend to experience a great deal of pressure due to their numerous responsibilities; along with teaching, they are tasked with advising students and administrative duties. Their workloads are heavy, but it is rarely possible to share the pressure with colleagues. An additional challenge came during the COVID-19 pandemic, when colleges began requiring faculty to develop distance teaching and Internet communication methods to support students academically. Faculties needed to adapt quickly to online teaching and learning. Many faculties were anxious about using new software tools to communicate with students, and worried about the long-term impact on students' learning evaluations and reviews. Professor Hilal A. Lashuel provides an especially striking account of the new challenges in teachers' lives, recounting two heart attacks he suffered in three years as a result of elevated stress (Lashuel, 2020). Such a huge change led to an imbalance in Lashuel's work and life, but it also allowed him to gain some new perspective on the need for faculty to find a better equilibrium. People, he writes, "must clarify their life goals and actively share their experiences and pressures with their teams, family, and friends as sharing can have a powerful positive impact on mental health (Lashuel, 2020)." Lashuel also proposed creating a platform for employees to share information, collaborate, and thus relieve stress. When faculty members focus on improving their own mental health, they can more effectively support their students' performance and success.

Recommendations

Strengthen Community College Support for Faculty

Community colleges are responsible for educating millions of Americans, and their faculty members play a key role in doing so. Based on previous research, I have identified several suggestions for community colleges and other stakeholders seeking to better support their faculty. First, education departments and local governments should assist community colleges in formulating standardized teaching requirements and refining faculty management regulations. Community colleges might partner with higher education laboratories to do this, enabling faculty to learn evidence-based teaching techniques and strategies from teaching practice guides to improve their skills in the classroom. For community colleges, actively partnering with other higher educational institutions (for instance, research focused universities) will help with the development of more innovative curricula, and also help ensure consistency of educational quality across all colleges. At the same time, each individual school's management team should keep in mind the college's positioning, student population, and advantages when selecting suitable faculty. Relatedly, in their study evaluating the link between quality teaching and student success, the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Strada Education Network also offered recommendations for schools. They suggested that colleges pay special attention to adjunct faculty, and encouraged additional research, which will support the development of pedagogical approaches that improve student outcomes (Davis et al., 2021).

Second, colleges should increase their efforts to collect faculty teaching data, student feedback, and peer evaluations. Long-term data analysis can better support faculty professional development, help them manage teaching goals, improve faculty manuals, and enhance student academic success. Third, community colleges should provide employment security and benefits for their faculty of all types. As part of this effort, they should expand teaching privileges and opportunities for professional development; for example, by offering long-term contracts to adjunct instructors, and increasing their engagement in students' academic evaluations. They could also let adjunct faculty members participate in course design, which would enable them to use their professional knowledge and teaching experience to better support students' academic development. Generally, colleges should also give their adjunct faculty an increased say in college decision-making, thus showing faculty and students alike that these instructors are a part of the college community, and not just visitors to campus for the time they are teaching.

Professional Faculty Career Development

Community colleges can take a number of steps to prioritize the sustainable professional development of their faculty members, including when it comes to their teaching skills and enthusiasm. Firstly, community colleges can support their faculty in seeking additional professional certifications and improving their teaching skills. This can include encouraging them to adopt more personalized educational methods to meet the diverse needs of their students; to name a few examples, online teaching, special education, and adult learning guidance. Secondly, community college faculty members need better training in some workshops after teaching, such as professional classroom communication, participation, as well as the development of mutual support groups and the cultivation of relationships between faculty and academic counselors. One resource schools can turn to for guidance is the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (REL). Led by WestEd and evaluated by a Community College Resource Center (CCRC) team, the REL designed specialized toolkits to assist community colleges in promoting faculty resource sharing and strengthening teaching capacity (CCRC, 2022).

Third, community colleges can design sustainable programs, like faculty learning communities, that are aligned with professional development; these can improve teaching outcomes and equity. It is essential for their long-term sustainability that colleges engage all faculty members, including adjuncts, in these professional learning opportunities, and to enlist them as partners in change. One way that schools could do this is by utilizing reward systems to recognize faculty engagement, which studies have found is effective at driving instructional improvement and increasing student performance. Overall, by prioritizing the career development of all faculty members, community colleges can also help improve the higher education environment nationwide, while also promoting all around student success and social development.

Directions for Future Research

Future research should delve into the challenges facing higher education faculty, particularly part-time and adjunct faculty, with a focus on their impact on community colleges and universities. An important area of exploration is the growing reliance on adjunct faculty, which can affect not only student outcomes, but also the career trajectories of these faculty, especially in STEM fields. Research should explore how institutional structures and professional development opportunities (or lack thereof) affect the experiences of adjunct faculty, particularly their ability to adopt innovative teaching methods and mentor students over time. This research also impacts those who wanted to be tenured, or who were tenured but lost their position

Additionally, gender differences in female faculty, particularly in STEM fields, warrant further investigation. There is a need to explore how adjunct faculty positions affect women's career advancement in academia and their ability to obtain tenure. Future research could analyze the specific barriers that women in STEM face when serving as adjunct faculty, including issues related to job security, mentorship, promotion, and work-life balance. In addition, the role of professional development programs designed to support women in STEM could be further evaluated to identify strategies that could better assist them in overcoming these challenges, improving teaching effectiveness, and fostering career advancement.

Finally, mental health and burnout among faculty, especially adjunct faculty, should be examined in greater depth to understand the long-term impact of faculty stress on personal well-being and student success. This research can help inform policy recommendations aimed at improving faculty support systems, promoting employment equity, and increasing engagement at all levels of academic institutions.

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