

The Part-Time Adjunct Instructor Dilemma in North Carolina Community Colleges

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Part-time adjunct instructors teach the majority (69%) of North Carolina community college courses (Quinterno, 2020). The expectations for these employees can vary significantly from institution to institution (Ellison, 2002). Adjunct employees may struggle to manage the expectations of quality instruction when faced with low pay and low benefits (Way, 2018). These issues have led to a shifting culture on college campuses regarding full-time instructors (McKenna, 2015). To ensure students receive a quality education, colleges need to examine factors that impact adjunct quality (Mueller et al., 2013). The following discussion will relate to improving instructor pay and course design expectations to address adjunct quality and overall course quality for students in North Carolina community colleges.

Kendzior (2014) highlighted how adjuncts struggle with lower pay, no benefits, and job security. In “The Adjunct Crisis is Everyone’s Problem,” she discussed how these instructors struggle due to many variables impacting their work. Kendzior notes, “Debates continue over the quality of adjunct teaching, but the fact remains that contingent instructors do not receive the same support and resources as their tenured colleagues” (p. 2).

When trying to understand more about how adjuncts are dealing with the current climate in community colleges in North Carolina, data is limited (Young & Townsend, 2021). According to Young and Townsend (2021), we have no baseline to stop the unfair treatment of adjunct employees in colleges

because we lack data to inform the quality of higher education. In addition, adjunct instructors are struggling to meet the needs of institutions due to pay (Guerra, 2018; McKenna, 2015; Way, 2018) and variable expectations at different community colleges across the state regarding course design.

Depending on the institution and courses taught, some instructors could make as little as \$1,000 per course (Guerra, 2018). A quarter of adjuncts struggle to make a living wage and receive public assistance in the form of food stamps and Medicaid (McKenna, 2015). Additionally, there is no guarantee that courses will have the necessary enrollment to be added to the schedule, and adjunct instructors would receive no compensation based upon their employment status. Since North Carolina is an at-will employer, most adjuncts have no grounds for due process (Casagrande, 2015). Additionally, adjuncts are hired on a semester contract basis, which means they are not eligible for unemployment should they not receive a contract.

North Carolina community colleges obtain a large portion of their budget on full-time equivalent (FTE) students. According to a 2022 report, North Carolina community colleges receive funding based on the FTE they generate (Ezzone, 2022). Adjuncts are paid based upon the course taught, which means they receive the same amount whether they teach five or 25 students, and this number can vary from institution to institution across the state. Some institutions have reported testing out new structures for instructor pay, such as compensating instructors with additional funds based on the number of students enrolled in the course (Lieberman, 2018).

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While many factors go into the pay structure for adjuncts, it may be time for colleges and the system office to reconsider the pay scale for adjunct instructors.

Another area for further investigation and consideration is the area of adjunct expectations. Community colleges across North Carolina can have different expectations for adjuncts regarding course design. Some colleges may have a course shell already prepared for adjuncts, while others may require adjuncts to build courses from the ground up. These differences can be detrimental to adjuncts and compound stress on adjunct faculty members (Dailey-Herbert et al., 2014). A uniform approach to adjunct expectations can improve treatment and college operations (Ellison, 2002).

While there are many benefits to being an adjunct in the North Carolina Community College System, there are still many struggles regarding pay and course design expectations for faculty and the quality of instruction. Therefore, community colleges should consider adding new pay scale parameters and a uniform course design policy to address these issues. There may not be a solution to this problem overnight, but it is definitely an investigation worth pursuing.

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Author's Note

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