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Part-Time Faculty: Student Perceptions and Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Educators and higher education researchers have speculated that the presence of part-time faculty in universities must have a negative impact on students' learning experience. The research reported in this article has yielded no evidence in support of this view. Students tend to be either unaware of, or indifferent toward, differences between part-time and full-time status.

RÉSUMÉ

Pendant cette phase de notre étude sur le professorat à temps partiel dans une grande université métropolitaine en Canada, nous examinons son influence sur les étudiants. Des questionnaires ont été envoyeés à 356 étudiants (à plein temps et à temps partiel) dans plusieurs facultés. Des interviews personnels ont été conduits avec 24 étudiants. Nous avons exploré si les étudiants etaient conscients du fait que leurs professeurs travaillent à plein temps où à temps partiel, leurs expériences avec ces catégories différentes des professeurs, leurs opinions sur l'accent relatif que les universités devraient donner, soit à l'enseignement, soit à la recherche, et leur idées pour améliorer l'enseignement universitaire. Une grand majorité des étudiants est inconsciente de la position de leurs professeurs ou y est indifférente. Aussi les étudiants n'attribuent pas des différences en matière de compétence. Plus de 88% considère l'enseignement comme la fonction la plus importante de l'université. Dans le cas où les étudiants ne sont pas satisfaits de l'enseignement, ils n'accusent pas la position différente de leurs professeurs, mais plûtot l'aspect impersonnel d'une grande organisation et la priorité donneé à la recherche et à la publication des resultats. Il nous semble que les étudiants ne se considèrent pas comme une catégorie qui porte les frais du fait que l'université emploie un professorat à temps partiel.

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A clear distinction exists within the university between full-time and part-time faculty in terms of mandate, material rewards and professional status. How and to what extent are these differences reflected in patterns of students' perceptions of faculty? Do students see the presence of a group that is substantially excluded from the faculty collegium as affecting their educational experience and, if so, how?

By part-time faculty we mean those who are hired by the university to teach one or more courses, or conduct tutorials, and who receive a stipend for each teaching or tutoring assignment. This definition does not include persons who are appointed to contractually limited full-time positions, nor does it include teaching assistants, whom we regard as holding an apprenticeship. The part-time mandate is confined to teaching, generally at the undergraduate level, entailing no obligation to conduct research, publish, or serve on committees.

Part-time status denotes conditions of employment rather than the number of hours worked. As Bonacich notes about part-time work in general,

> [it] does not always refer to shorter hours, but to a particular type of employment status. Usually this status is characterized by temporariness and limited commitment on the part of the employer to the employee. Sometimes the supposedly 'temporary' arrangement may persist for a number of years, but the 'part-time' status reflects conditions of work and benefits available to the worker. (1972: 16/7)

Thus, some individuals who would prefer a full-time, tenured position, may contract for the equivalent of a full-time teaching load. Their jobs, nevertheless, do *not* connect them to the 'occupational ladder' of the university (Roemer & Schnitz, 1982).

Insofar as the university can be characterized as a service organization by virtue of its teaching function (Blau & Scott 1962), it is important to examine what impact, if any, a sizable cadre of part-time faculty has on the quality of service. The question assumes particular significance in light of the growing proportion of teaching allocated to part-time faculty (Gappa 1984; Leslie, Kellams & Gunne 1982; Wallace 1984), and because this accommodation to fiscal restraint appears to be becoming a long-term one.

As is true of organizational typologies generally, organizations do not fit into only one slot of Blau and Scott's schema. Universities can also be categorized as commonweal organizations, in that the creation of knowledge and its transmission to the next generation benefit society as a whole. Extensive use of part-time faculty, whose contractual mandate does not include scholarly pursuits, weakens the link between the creation and the dissemination of knowledge. Attenuation of this link threatens the view of the university as the unique forum in which these functions are twinned.

Like many others, Franklin, Laurence and Denham speculate that the increasing proportion of part-time faculty in American institutions of higher education constitutes a series threat to the quality of education. Their concerns are based on those expressed by departmental chairs surveyed for an Association of Departments of English (ADE) study, and by chairs of modern language departments across the country. In an explicitly polemical essay, they argue:

> No matter how dedicated and responsible part-time teachers are, the practice of hiring, year after year, large numbers of transient workers to teach courses central to an undergraduate education has already damaged higher education and will continue to do so. If the practice is not curtailed, it may define the teaching of introductory courses as work appropriate only for itinerant laborers (1988: 15).

Previous studies of part-time faculty do not yield a clear picture of the relationship between full-time or part-time status, and student perceptions and accounts of the learning experience. Leslie, Kellams and Gunne (1982) report no significant differences in student course evaluations of full-time and part-time faculty. Abel (1984) takes an equivocal position. On the one hand, she refers to the absence of correlation between faculty full-time or part-time status and evaluations of teaching. On the other hand, she argues that the disadvantages part-timers suffer, such as lack of office space, inadequate secretarial assistance and short notice on course assignments, have adverse effects on their teaching and on their interaction with students. In terms of the hierarchy of educational institutions in the United States, Abel argues further that socially disadvantaged students, those most likely to attend community colleges where part-time faculty are most numerous, are less likely to receive quality education:

> The quality of education at non-elite institutions is more profoundly affected by a ... money-saving tactic – the hiring of part-time temporary faculty. Although part-timers are employed in all tiers of the academic hierarchy, they are concentrated in the schools established to accommodate groups previously denied access to higher education. Almost half of all adjuncts teach in community colleges. In 1977, part-time teachers constituted 51 percent of the faculty in community colleges but only 24 percent in four-year colleges and universities (1984: 77).

Boyer, who authored the Carnegie Foundation's recent study on undergraduate education in the United States (1987), also emphasized the risk to the quality of education posed by the use of a high proportion of part-time instructors. He referred to the tenuous connections such individuals are able to establish with other faculty members and with students, and noted that, on a large urban campus, most student comments about part-time faculty instructors were negative. Boyer's recommendation is that part-time faculty constitute no more than 20 percent of the faculty complement of an institution.

Both Abel and Boyer refer to limited informal contact with students as a disadvantage associated with the use of part-time faculty. Althought Bean and Kuh (1984) do not distinguish between part-time and full-time faculty in their study of "The Reciprocity between Student-Faculty Informal Contact and Academic Performance of University Undergraduate Students", it is interesting to note that their study showed little relationship between students' academic performance and the frequency and extensiveness of contact with faculty.

Bowen and Schuster (1986) suggest that the presence of part-time faculty may affect the quality of instruction and students' learning experience both directly and indirectly. The influence is direct because "part-timers are not available to bear their share of student advising, of participation in education policy making, and of the intellectual discourse of a campus" (1986: 64). It is also indirect in that

the increased burden falls on full-time faculty, thus reducing the time and energy they have available for teaching.

Biles and Tuckman (1986) have provided a guide to administrators on how to develop clear-cut and fair personnel policies covering part-time faculty. Two of their arguments are relevant here:

1. It is important to carry out evaluations of part-timers' teaching, especially since they are not subjected to the periodic close scrutiny associated with the processes of hiring, tenuring and promoting full-time faculty.
2. Regular part-timers should be integrated into institutions as much as possible by means of a broadened teaching role which would include curriculum development and student advisement.

In our ongoing research project on part-time faculty, we have examined the impact of structural conditions on the part-timers themselves and, in turn, the impact of part-time faculty on the matrix in which they are situated. To understand their position one must take into account the university culture in which the very activities contractually abridged for part-timers are prized most. Part-timers are not on a career path where scholarly and professional productivity is rewarded by tenure and by increasing recognition within the university and disciplinary communities. Both by contract and by actual working conditions (lack of access to funding, and to research facilities), they are excluded from the knowledge-producing function of the university.

As sociologists specializing in the study of work and organizations, we sought information about an elite reserve labour force whose training has made heavy demands on societal funds, and on the time and energy of the individuals themselves. In April 1983, we embarked on the first phase of a multi-faceted study of unionized part-timers at a large metropolitan university in Canada. During this phase we conducted a questionnaire survey of the population to establish social characteristics, career patterns, expectations and mobility of part-time faculty (Baker 1985). Secondly, we conducted in-depth interviews with part-time academics to gain an understanding of how they experience their work. We were particularly interested in the dilemmas of those who attempted to pursue a full professional career despite the structural constraints of an abridged mandate (Lundy & Warme 1986).

The next two phases encompassed interviews with senior university administrators, deans of Faculties in which part-timers are employed, union leaders and members of the full-time faculty. [1] We explored the interaction between the university and a category of academic employees with whom it stands in a particular contractual relationship. We also examined the way in which full and part-time members perceive each other. The two sets of actors must cope with the fact that, although their teaching roles, and frequently their credentials, are indistinguishable, discrepancies in pay, power and prestige make collegiality problematic (Warme & Lundy 1988).

A major objective of our research was to identify the costs and benefits of using large complements of part-time faculty on a continuing basis. Our analysis moved

in two directions: we examined career consequences for those with part-time status, as well as for the collegium and for the institution itself. We found that the distribution of costs and benefits for all constituencies varied, depending on the willingness or reluctance [2] of individuals to teach part-time, and on the extent to which Faculties stress the advantages or disadvantages of part-time teaching positions.

In September 1986, we embarked on the student-centered phase of the research. As with phase I, we sought both the access to a greater number of respondents that a questionnaire provides, and the intensiveness afforded by personal interviews.

Questionnaires were administered in the classroom situation to 356 students (full-time as well as part-time) in different faculties and in different years of study. We explored the following areas:

—Awareness of whether their professors have full-time or part-time status and, if students are aware, what assumptions they make about reasons for this difference in status.

—Actual experiences of having been taught by part-time and by full-time faculty and evaluations of these experiences (perceived competence, formal and informal contacts, accessibility).

—Views on the teaching and research mandates of the university and on the relative weight that should be given to each.

—Impact, if any, of gender, years of study, academic standing and extent of exposure to part-time teaching on students' views. The questionnaires were subjected to computer analysis.

We conducted personal interviews with 24 student volunteers, drawn from different disciplines and year levels, and including part-time as well as full-time students. Our questions were prompted by the questionnaire data, but also touched on students' reasons for going to university and on ways in which they thought university teaching could be improved.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the absence of clear status symbols, it cannot be assumed that students are aware of their professors' status. We therefore sought to ascertain their awareness via several questions. More than 50 percent of our survey respondents were unaware of, or indifferent to, their professors' status.[3] Lack of awareness is supported by the finding that only 9.3 percent reported 'extensive' [4] contact with part-time faculty, even though in 1984–85 43.5 percent of teaching was done by part-time faculty (York University 1986) and there has been no appreciable reduction in the proportion since then.

The distribution of responses to the question "Do you have a general preference for being taught by part-time or full-time faculty?" was as follows:

Part-time faculty	4.9 percent
Full-time faculty	18.0 percent
Don't care	49.2 percent

Unaware of Faculty member's status	26.9
No response	1.2 percent

(N = 356 – percentages do not total 100 because of rounding)

To the extent that students expressed a preference at all, it clearly favours full-time faculty, but less than one-fifth of respondents expressed such a preference.

To test whether the high degree of unawareness was due to 'ignorance' or 'indifference', we excluded first-year students, but found that more than half of the group reporting unawareness were upper level students. This finding, coupled with the high percentage who explicitly responded 'don't care' when asked whether they had a general preference for being taught by full-time or part-time faculty, suggests indifference. Some students qualified the 'don't care' response by adding "as long as they do a good job teaching". Other researchers, too, have found evidence of student apathy to anything they do not see as affecting their immediate self-interest (Hope & Aukney 1985; Levine 1980).

We examined whether academic standing, enrolment in an honours' program or intention to pursue graduate studies influenced students' awareness of their professors' status, or preference for full-time professors. We found no such relationships, even though we had hypothesized that students planning advanced study would be more aware of status and more likely to prefer full-time instructors.

That the official status of their professors is not seen by students as significantly affecting them is borne out by evaluations of the competence of full-time and part-time instructors. Responses to the question "If you have been taught by part-time faculty members, how would you rate their competence relative to that of full-timers?" were distributed as follows:

Much higher or higher	12.9 percent
About the same	43.8 percent
Lower or much lower	9.8 percent
No response	33.4 percent

(N =356 – percentages do not total 100 because of rounding)

Of the 119 students (33.4 percent) who did not respond to the question, 75 had completed fewer than five courses, and can therefore be regarded as first-year students.

These findings are consonant with those of other researchers (Abel 1980; Leslie, Kellams & Gunne 1982) with respect to student evaluations of teaching by full-time and part-time instructors. We tried to shed some light in the interviews on the finding that, while more than three times as many students preferred to be taught by full-time faculty members than by part-timers, (18.0 versus 4.8 percent), the edge was given to the latter on the question of relative competence.

Sixteen students expressed awareness of their professors' status, but only two were clearly not indifferent, both favouring full-time faculty. One (who is contemplating applying to a professional Faculty) explained his preference pragmatically:

> It is better to work with full-time faculty, because you know they will be there. Part-timers might not be around later, so to put out really good work for them and then not have them be there for a reference is stupid. [5]

A first-year student referred to her tutorial leader's lack of availability out of class hours. In fact, the tutorial leader had never announced his status, but the student inferred that he is part-time because he is not around and noted that "full-time faculty members are generally more available". Another student noted: "I am a little more inclined to full-timers because presumably it is easier to get in touch with them".

No definite picture emerged on the question of preference. What preference there is for full-time faculty appears to be based on practical concerns regarding availability – now and in the future. On the other hand, students felt that part-timers' competence is enhanced by their presumed familiarity with the 'real world'. For example:

> If they were involved in a job connected with their teaching, they would be in the field. It would be great for students to learn first-hand from their teachers what it is like in the trenches.
>
> Part-timers are more practical and more realistic about what is going on in the world.

We found no pattern in how students became aware of their professor's status. In some cases, the professors themselves made their status clear (sometimes by giving students their outside work telephone numbers); some students posed the question directly, while others obtained the information from fellow students. Some made the inference on the basis of status symbols (or, as mentioned earlier, because of unavailability):

> I can tell by office size, how well the office is furnished and whether the whole library is there. Titles also tell one.

Students' high level of unawareness of faculty members' status is echoed in the haziness of their understanding of what part-time status means. In the interviews, part-timers were variously referred to as:

> Pursuing research or writing a book, so they don't have time to teach too much.
>
> Mothers with young children. [6]
>
> People who have more time to spend on students because they don't teach as many courses.
>
> People who have an opportunity to become involved in the university atmosphere even though they don't want to dedicate all their time as full-time professors.
>
> Someone who has a full-time job outside the university, e.g. a psych. prof. who is a full-time researcher in a consulting firm.

One student assumed that part-time teaching is a kind of apprenticeship to a full-fledged university position (in other words, the traditional teaching assistantship):

> I guess they give them [part-timers] pre-university courses and have them graduate to full university courses.

A few students were aware that part-time status has invidious consequences for the individuals themselves:

> Part-time teaching means less money, no time to do research, less job stability.
> Part-timers have to work a lot harder. I think part-timers are hired as the need arises. They get a course based on enrollments, this means time constraints; must do course outlines, notes, in short order.

In other service organizations, such as hospitals or schools, status is tied to the possession of certain qualifications and is reflected in the division of labour. Physicians carry out diagnostic and therapeutic procedures, registered nurses dispense medications and perform some therapeutic tasks, and so on down the line to registered nursing assistants and ward aides. Furthermore, an individual's status is generally identified by name tags that include occupational status: "Jane Brook, M.D.", "John Jones, R.N.". In schools, principals and vice-principals administer, while teachers do most of the actual teaching. Universities are usually much larger than schools, and nobody wears uniforms or name tags. Students' preoccupations with their own immediate concerns, the absence of ready status symbols, and the fact that both groups fill identical classroom roles, obscure for many students the distinction between part-time and full-time faculty.

We asked those students who had been taught by part-time faculty to rate (as poor, adequate, good or excellent) their experiences on a variety of dimensions. When we collapsed the responses into poor/adequate and good/excellent, part-timers received positive ratings by a majority of students, ranging from 59.5 to 74.3 percent on course content, organization of lecture material, familiarity with current research, availability by appointment and preparedness to discuss marks on tests or assignments.

In contrast, part-time faculty members were accorded low ratings on two dimensions: "familiarity with the university's administrative procedures" was accorded to low rating by 55 percent of respondents and "regular office hours" was rated low by 57.1 percent. Several researchers have noted (Abel 1980; Gappa 1984; Wallace 1984) that restricted access to facilities such as office space is both a practical handicap for part-time faculty and an ongoing reflection of their low institutional status.[7] These findings that demonstrate the consequences for students of part-timers' lack of integration in the university, add support to Biles and Tuckman's argument (1986) that universities must develop policies to bring about the integration of part-time faculty, since this group is likely to remain a permanent presence rather than a temporary expedient.

On the whole, the interviews indicated that full-timers were more accessible on a regular structured basis, while some part-timers compensated for lack of structured accessibility by making themselves available on an ad hoc basis. For example, they gave students their telephone numbers at home and/or at their place of work.

The shortage of space is so acute in the university generally that the administration has issued a Report on Space Planning (York University 1987) in

which it was noted that the quality of the learning experience is adversely affected and that:

> part-time faculty are often housed two or three or more to a room, while some have no office space at all; many are unable to prepare for classes or meet students on campus (1987: 2).

As they did in explaining their preference for part-time faculty, a number of interviewees stressed the importance of part-timers' ability to enrich course content with professional or business experience. Positive comments were made by both full-time and part-time students, but the latter were the most vocal in expressing the need for course material which had some applicability to their work experience. For instance:

> I think part-timers are great; that's why I volunteered for an interview. Part-timers put a lot of work into their teaching, they teach well and are more realistic.

We were struck by the gulf between the dominant academic culture and that of students. This was demonstrated by the high degree of unawareness of professorial status in an environment in which status is salient and in which, moreover, full-time and part-time faculty belong to separate unions and have been on strike *at different times*. The gulf also became evident in response to a question concerning the university's most important function. Teaching was deemed most important by 88.1 percent of respondents, and research by only 7.9 percent. In our interviews with administrators and with full-time faculty, the lower research productivity of part-timers [8] had emerged as a major concern. It is worth noting here that the administration and full-time faculty may put especially heavy emphasis on research because the university is a relatively young one (founded in 1960), striving to move up the prestige hierarchy of Canadian research universities. Boyer pointed out that in American universities:

> We found this conflict between scholarly productivity and other campus duties [teaching and administrative tasks] to be especially conspicuous at institutions that define themselves as 'emerging'. The goal is to be ranked among the 'top fifty' or 'top one hundred' research institutions in the nation, or at least to move up the prestige ladder another rung or two (1987: 123).

It is interesting that, in our study, male students were more than twice as likely as female ones to give priority to the university's research function (12.9 versus 6.4 percent), whereas on other questions there was no response pattern related to gender. Our data provide no other clues for speculating about the correlation between gender and the importance accorded to research.

When asked what they considered to be the most important function of the university, only two students spontaneously mentioned research in the interviews. Unlike some of the academics interviewed by Boyer, one of whom declared that "the very best teachers I have ever seen are those who are also on the leading edge of the research, and that is axiomatic" (1987: 124), students saw no necessary link between research productivity and teaching skills.

Several respondents referred to the instrumental function the university performs in preparing students for the work world:

> There is the practical function of providing students with a degree so that they can obtain employment.

Others focused on the intrinsic rewards of higher education:

> So in the thinking process you can work yourself out of the corner you are in and find answers.
>
> Learning how to learn, how to absorb information, how to think about something, and how to communicate it to other people.
>
> Providing students with a good education, so they can move into good careers, and to get them used to work life.

What is pervasive in the answers is student-centeredness, that is to say, a view of the university as existing to meet the needs of students.

In the interviews we raised the question: "how can university teaching be improved?" Students were eloquent in their suggestions, suggestions that transcended differences between part-time and full-time teachers. Rather, they focused on the difficulties students confront in attempting to function effectively in an impersonal environment. One student complained about "feeling like a cipher in a vast bureaucracy". Students want smaller classes, more interaction in tutorials, professors who communicate well and "who don't hide behind specialized language". One student noted:

> Teachers should learn how to teach, some communication skills should be a requirement for tenure. No criticism of knowledge, but too many professors put all their energies into publishing, and it's no good being an expert if one cannot communicate the expertise.

There was a desire for more personal contact and greater opportunity for class discussion. For example:

> In one course last year, the professor did not want any questions at all. Why not have the lecture on video, give the man royalties and let him go work on his papers?
>
> Concentrating on the first year is very important unless you are born to be a physicist. Going over an essay or an exam is essential. I didn't ask in order to get more marks, but to learn.

Part-time students expect professors to make accommodations to the conflicting pressures of full-time work, study, and domestic responsibilities that such students often experience.

Like clients in other service organizations, students want their needs to be given explicit priority:

> I'd want profs to come to terms with the fact that they should function primarily as teachers, next as scholars. And all the things that flow from that. Has to do with attitude – patience, pedagogical devices, and all the other things. The ones who want to teach are more available and enthusiastic. A different job description would shape things for the better.
>
> In terms of being a student, I'd say it is important for faculty to have more time for us. I feel badly when I take their time up, because I know it's a problem.

Not a single student mentioned increasing the number of full-time faculty, or reducing the number of part-timers, as a way of improving teaching in the university.

The question regarding possible improvements in university teaching prompted student to talk about what they enjoyed about learning:

> Learning to love learning itself.
>
> To teach me tolerance. Not to be close-minded; to limit my ignorance as much as possible ....My greatest fear was to sit in a room and have people talk about something that I was totally ignorant of. Ignorance.
>
> I felt there was some larger thing I should be clued into and wasn't.

CONCLUSION

In this phase, we have identified both positive and negative effects that students recognize as associated with being taught by part-time faculty. Students do not perceive the presence of a large cadre of part-time faculty as entailing significant costs for their learning experience. Our overriding finding was that students are largely indifferent to the official status of their professors.

Previous phases of our research have identified both manifest and hidden costs which are borne by the part-timers themselves, by full-time faculty and by the university as a community. The way in which part-time faculty is presently used has created a two-caste system (Roemer & Schnitz 1982) in a social unit that is normatively collegial, and this contradiction diminishes all participants.

As reported in our review of the literature, previous researchers have argued that a high proportion of part-time faculty *must* have deleterious consequences for students, given the disadvantages with which part-timers have to contend, and the administrative burden which their presence places on full-time faculty. Our study of students' perceptions of part-time faculty and their experiences with this group has yielded no evidence of major costs to the student clientele. The findings caution against viewing the elimination of part-time instructors as a solution to the problem of improving university teaching. Of course, it cannot be concluded that such costs, if not perceived by students, do not exist. In view of the importance of this question, other approaches should be constructed to illuminate the relationship between the presence of a part-time professoriate and the quality of students' learning experience.[9]

FOOTNOTES

1 This phase was reported in a paper presented to the 1986 Conference on Workers and Their Communities in Ottawa (May). The paper was entitled "Part-Time Faculty: Costs Saved and Costs Incurred".

2 Following Baker (1985) we classified as 'willing' those part-timers who *chose* to teach part-time, and as 'reluctant' those who desired a full-time academic position but were unable to obtain one.

3 It should be noted that results might differ in smaller universities or in those where a lower proportion of teaching is allocated to part-time faculty.
4 We defined contact as 'extensive' if the following conditions obtained: (a) a student had had a part-time faculty member as a course director in the past (b) had such a course director in the current year and (c) was in a tutorial led by a part-timer. This exluded first-year students by definition, but then they have not had 'extensive' contact with any type of faculty member.
5 In interviews with full-time faculty members, several had noted that a high proportion of part-timers would result in "lack of continuity". This, then, is a concern for both full-time faculty and for students, albeit for somewhat different reasons. It is also a concern for part-time faculty members themselves who can only plan their lives one semester or one academic year at a time.
6 In fact, we found that only four percent of respondents cited having to care for young children as a reason for teaching part-time (Baker 1985).
7 Zaleznik and Moment (1964) have noted that organizations act as a 'Hall of Mirrors' in which individuals continually receive a reflection of their own position.
8 In our interviews with part-timers, we found that they experienced lack of adequate resources to do research as a major drawback of part-time teaching.
9 The most recent phase of our research is based on 1) a second questionnaire survey (spring 1988) of the part-time faculty, and 2) in-depth interviews with twenty of the respondents. One of the questions we are exploring is the ways in which part-time faculty themselves see their status and conditions of work as affecting their teaching.

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