

# Changing the Narrative: What the Research Really Says About Adjunct Teaching

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# Just for laughs?



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*"Enterth not this sacred place. For I seest quite plain, thou wearest the scarlet letter, the shameful badge of the adjunct."*

# The narrative

- The foundational narrative is “blame adjuncts.”
- It is a central piece of the belief system in tenure-track faculty culture; and it is also important in the belief systems of the faculty unions.
- From this parent myth, many variants have resulted.
- The national AAUP, for example, has a special section on its website that promulgates its “Background Facts on Contingent Faculty.”
- Some of the “facts” are quite reasonable and verifiable; some are less so.

# The narrative

- AAUP “Fact” #1:
- More than 50% of all faculty appointments are part-time.
- This one is accurate, the numbers can be double-checked.
  
- AAUP “Fact” #2:
- In 2017, the percentage of contingent faculty (non-tenure track) full- and part-time, including graduate assistants is now 70%.
- This number is in line with other estimates, so it is fine.

# The narrative

- AAUP “Fact” #3:
- The majority of part-time faculty do not have professional careers outside of academe.
- While some contingent faculty do have professional careers that allow them to share their “real-world” expertise with students, the greater portion work in the same academic areas for which they received training in graduate programs.
- They are professionals and specialists in the current academic workplace. They deal in the realities of today’s employment market that most of their students are or will be working in eventually.

# The narrative

- AAUP “Fact” #4:
- The excessive use of, and inadequate compensation and professional support for, contingent faculty exploits these colleagues.
- This is true. Ask any part-timer you know if they agree with this.
- In 1993, the AAUP recommended that compensation for contingent appointments should be the applicable fraction of the compensation (including benefits) for a comparable full-time position.

# The narrative

- AAUP “Fact” #4 (continued):
- Despite the AAUP’s recommendation, nothing has changed in the intervening 24 years.
- Support and compensation for part-time faculty is still insufficient.
- Might this have something to do with the anti-adjunct narrative?
- Is it time to rethink the narrative, given that it has not helped advance the AAUP’s recommendation?

# The narrative

- AAUP “Fact” #5:
- The excessive use of part-time faculty has costs.
- AAUP: “It damages student learning, faculty governance, and academic freedom. Each of these is an educational cost that institutions incur when they choose not to invest adequately in their instructional missions.”
- This is the “fact” we have chosen to focus on today. Let’s examine the AAUP quote a bit more carefully.

# The narrative

- AAUP “Fact” #5 (continued):
- Lumping “student learning” with “faculty governance and academic freedom” is a logical fallacy. There are many factors that go into student learning. Factors that include student preparation for college rigors and student finances affect retention rates (one of the other measures).
- In other words, where is the study that proves that part-time faculty hurt student learning outcomes?

# The narrative

- AAUP “Fact” #5 (continued):
- What are institutional instructional missions? This is a vague statement and does not cover the variety of educational institutions out there, from on-line degree mills, community colleges, public universities, and elite privates. Unless the AAUP is involved in most of these, how can they lump them all into one basket?
- Is this a fact? If so, what is the evidence?

# The problems with the narrative

- There is the claim that “the research” shows part-time faculty are bad for student outcomes.
- We have heard the opinion / belief portion of this statement for years.
- The claim that the research supports this notion is more recent.
  - We started hearing it in earnest at last year’s AAUP Annual Conference.
- There is **not** a large amount of research on the topic. There is more opinion and speculation than anything else.
  - This material can be found on the AAUP national website.
  - It also exists on the Delphi Project website; along with a bibliography of some “selected results.”

# The problems with the narrative

- The people making this claim have most likely not read the actual empirical research, with both pro and con results.
- They have read the opinion pieces, some of which may discuss an actual study or two. These works **do not** contain complete reviews of the scholarly research. They are speculative.
- Belief / opinion and science / social science are two very different discourses.
  - Belief  $\neq$  fact.
  - This point should be part of any discussion of **critical thinking**.
  - As academics, we should know better than to conflate the two.

# The problems with the narrative

- “Part-time faculty are bad for student outcomes” is a **causal** statement.
- The actual research we’ve found so far is **observational / correlational**.
- Correlation **does not** infer causation.
  - E.g., there is a correlation between the amount of ice cream consumed and the number of drownings.
- Experiments are the only research design from which we may conclude (cautiously) cause and effect.
  - To this point, we have been unable to find any experiments, or even quasi-experiments, in the literature.

# What does the research really say?

Measured outcomes	Part-time status associated with negative outcomes	Mixed; some associations with negative outcomes	No association or positive association	Number of studies
Student outcomes (e.g., persistence, retention, graduation and transfer rates, taking future classes)	12	4	10	26
Faculty outcomes (e.g., class hours, out-of-class hours, availability outside of class, use of “high impact” and “student centered” techniques)	6	1	0	7
Number of studies	18	5	10	33

NB: An annotated bibliography of these studies is available.

# What does the research really say?

- Some of the literature **does** show an association between faculty status (full- vs. part-time) and various student outcomes.
- Most researchers say this is due to the lack of resources and support that part-timers have; not necessarily due to their part-time status.
  - E.g., “this high attrition rate has nothing to do with the quality of instruction adjuncts provide; it is entirely a function of the compromised working conditions adjuncts face.” (Delphi Project)
- This is the proper way to speak about relationships and correlations among variables.
- Some of the literature **does not** show this relationship.

# What does the research really say?

- Yet, in many of the opinion pieces, and even in some of the research pieces, cause and effect statements are made.
  - E.g., “students who take more classes with adjuncts are more likely to drop out.” (Delphi Project)
- Observational studies **do not** allow us to make such conclusions.
- A complete (scholarly) review of the literature **does not** support the claim that part-time faculty are the cause of negative student outcomes.
- The literature **does not** make a clear and compelling case for the belief that part-time faculty are bad for student outcomes.

# Complicating factors

- Part-time faculty are more likely than full-time tenure track faculty to teach introductory and remedial courses, and courses that meet in the evenings and on weekends.
  - How are these courses different? How are the students different?
- How do the faculty outcomes relate to student outcomes?
- There is no discussion of research evidence that might bear on this point
  - The relationship would seem to be indirect at best.

# Complicating factors

- The best evidence for student outcomes is for first semester and first year persistence.
  - The answer is to have full-time, tenure-track faculty teach more of the introductory and remedial courses.
- Why hasn't this happened?
- Why are part-time faculty routinely given courses with the highest academic risk?
  - Introductory and remedial students are the most vulnerable population.
  - E.g., highest DFW rates, lowest persistence, etc.

# Complicating factors

- Short-term adjuncts are more strongly associated with negative student outcomes than long-term adjuncts.
  - Then let us have longer (multiple semester or year) appointments.
- Part-time contingent faculty are more strongly associated with negative student outcomes than full-time contingent faculty.
  - So let us be full-time.
- The empirical studies are careful enough to say that the negative associations are most likely due to the lack of resources and working conditions of part-time faculty, and not to their quality of instruction.
  - Why has there been no large-scale change in the resources and working conditions afforded to part-time faculty?

# Resulting narrative

- To say that part-time faculty **cause** negative student outcomes is a misrepresentation of the empirical research.
- Of course, people are free to believe this if they want. It is **not** fine, however, to claim that the research supports their belief.
- If the empirical research does not support this belief, why do you want to believe it? Why do you repeat it?

# Resulting narrative

- Although academic freedom allows you to freely speak and believe what you wish, be careful.
- Academic freedom also compels you to examine the scholarly research, where available. Your beliefs should be informed by the facts
  - “Hence, they should always be accurate.” (AAUP 1940 statement on academic freedom)
- Academic freedom does not allow you to perpetuate “alternative facts.”

# Thoughts

- How do we change the “blame adjuncts” narrative, which is such a central tenet in tenure-track faculty culture?
- We shudder every year when the AAUP “state of the profession” report comes out.
- The report is yet another opportunity to drag out the “blame adjuncts” narrative.
  - This is unfortunate because the report does also serve a valuable and important purpose.
- Without fail, it cites “the research” that shows part-time faculty are bad for student outcomes.

# Thoughts

- As we've just seen, it turns out that “the research” does not say this.
- To watch the AAUP use misrepresented research results to justify the limiting of its part-time members' numbers, pay, work, and opportunities is chilling.
- Why does the AAUP do this year after year?
- What could the AAUP do instead?

# Thoughts

- Risa L. Lieberwitz, General Counsel of the AAUP and Professor of Labor and Employment Law at Cornell University has said that the **stratification of the faculty is killing us**.
- She urges us to resist this stratification and to support **communal values** such as:
  - Academic freedom.
  - Shared governance.
  - Respect for our colleagues.

# A new beginning?



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# A new beginning?

- Does anyone know what the “A” on Hester Prynne’s dress stands for?
  - From Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, to which our cartoon alludes.
- It stands for “**able.**”
- Now let’s have a conversation about the “fact” that adjuncts are bad for student outcomes.

# These are our questions

- Is there sufficient empirical support for this idea?
- Is this a constructive belief?
- Does it serve to improve student outcomes?
- Does it improve collegiality or union solidarity?
- Does it help your part-time colleagues?
- If this belief is not constructive or helpful, why do you want to believe it? Why do you repeat it?

# What are your questions?

- How do we dispel this harmful and counterproductive myth as we move forward?
- Thank you!