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Faculty

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Keeping Adjuncts Engaged Is Key to Helping Community-College Students Stay on Track

By Katherine Mangan
Boston

Professional development is more important than ever for adjunct professors at community colleges, according to speakers here at the annual meeting of the League for Innovation in the Community College.

Part-time instructors teach more than half of all classes and students at community colleges but often feel only a flimsy connection to their institutions, where they're often hired at the last minute and offered little or no job security beyond that semester.

At the same time, they are increasingly in the front lines as the colleges struggle to meet mandates to improve [completion rates](#), overhaul [remediation](#), and teach growing numbers of [at-risk students](#). Many adjuncts have far less experience than their full-time colleagues, yet they are teaching some of the most challenging students, including many who are the first in their families to pursue a higher education.

Colleges that have been criticized for years for treating part-time faculty members as second-class citizens are realizing that the institutions' success, and [continued financial support](#), may depend on creating a [more supportive environment](#) for their growing ranks of adjuncts, speakers said at a session here on Wednesday.

Part-time or contingent instructors teach 58 percent of community-college classes and 53 percent of their students, according to a [report](#) last year by the Center for Community

College Student Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin.

"If we don't engage the adjuncts at least as much as we engage the full-time faculty, we're never going to reach the goals that have been set out for us," said Bill Lamb, vice president for academic affairs at Kirkwood Community College, in Iowa.

Connecting with students is particularly hard, he said, for adjuncts who are on the campus only one night or two days a week. One strategy the college might use to help them is to set up a separate Facebook page or blog to encourage communication.

Steps that can help adjuncts feel more engaged include making sure they're represented in faculty governance, textbook, and hiring committees, speakers said.

On some campuses, full-time faculty members serve as mentors to adjuncts, but at Estrella Mountain Community College, in Arizona, adjuncts mentor one another.

Jennifer Copeland, an adjunct professor of communications at Estrella Mountain, described how she shares teaching strategies and develops interdisciplinary lessons with an instructor she mentors, who teaches English as a second language.

Estrella Mountain also offers adjuncts an [online orientation](#) they can refer to throughout the year, with tips for the first day of classes and other milestones in the calendar and guidelines on how to identify students who are academically struggling or to deal with those who are unruly.

Comparing Notes

If everything is bigger in Texas, so are the challenges for Lone Star College, a Houston-area system where enrollment grew by 68 percent, to 95,000, from 2007 to 2014.

The influx included growing numbers of low-income and minority students, [most needing remedial](#), or developmental, courses. Meanwhile, Texas, like the rest of the country, was experimenting with a variety of approaches to remedial education, trying to improve success rates while lawmakers were tying dwindling state

appropriations to completion and other performance measures.

"When you have success rates of 50 percent or less in some developmental classes, you have to provide opportunities for adjuncts to compare notes" on strategies that work, Katherine B. Persson, president of Lone Star's Kingwood campus, said after the session.

To help encourage those connections, adjunct professors are invited to attend department meetings that are scheduled during "dead times" between classes, she said, and some meetings are held in the evenings to accommodate those with other jobs.

A "one size fits all" approach doesn't work when engaging adjuncts, said Judy Korb, executive vice president for instruction and operations at Johnson County Community College, in Kansas.

"Some of our faculty want to be there, actively participating on campus, while others with full-time jobs can't do that," she said. "Creating a system that allows everyone to be as engaged and informed as they want to be is a challenge."

Katherine Mangan writes about community colleges, completion efforts, and job training, as well as other topics in daily news.

Follow her on Twitter [@KatherineMangan](#), or email her at katherine.mangan@chronicle.com.

29 Comments

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jxs53 · 4 days ago

Here's a thought:

'Give' adjuncts some of the benefits of real professors that will allow them to participate more fully without having to forgo that juicy rib-eye or that cushy conference junket to Akron, or health insurance. Little things, like decent pay.

Maybe offer them some perks (expensive, I know, but probably worth it) like a desk, or a locker, or some designated table space to put their books down.

Want them to be 'more engaged' with your students? You might want to consider reimbursing them for the office time involved, or at least give them access to a room with a door. One that doesn't involve mops, buckets, or TT faculty coats.

Beyond that, many adjunct faculty are already clamoring to do just what you say you want them to do, and many of them are actively denied the opportunity to do it, or made to feel unwelcome when they try.

This is a problem of your own making. You can fix it with a wave of your attitude, whenever you really wish it.

42 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



DocHollywood_2 → jxs53 • 14 hours ago

And office with a door? Now sir you have gone just too far!

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



bud jamison • 4 days ago

'...adjunct professors are invited to attend department meetings that are scheduled during "dead times" between classes, she said, and some meetings are held in the evenings to accommodate those with other jobs...'

Seriously, this is a way to work on a shortfall of 'engagement?' Expecting someone that you're not paying a living wage to to further diminish his pay by hanging around an extra hour?

24 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Ilene → bud jamison • 4 days ago

That's right bud. We are invited, but usually unpaid when we participate in college events, meetings, and other activities. If I participate in our Women's Study Group, that's okay, but because I'm an adjunct, the hour or more each week I spend in the Group is as an underappreciated volunteer--or slave--accept I want to be a part of that Group and other faculty and student clubs, unions, events, and so on. Part-time adjuncts and other contingents are informed that they can attend union meetings as long as it's during their lunch times. Nope. No lunch. Just coffee and donuts maybe and lunch bits the dust at union meetings because union meetings are very active, so eating a full or even a light lunch can be awkward and nerve-wracking. Besides, it's an entirely arbitrary decision by whoever is the leading administrator of the college at given time. We don't expect to be paid during actual days off especially for union meetings on Saturdays or Sundays at different locations than the college. The tension between adjunct wages and full-time professors' salaries is what continues to disturb professional collegueship via unwise and unnecessary forces of competition and oppression. Okay, so that is my ranting screed for the day. Happy St. Patrick's Day everyone!

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



px7_mq9 • 4 days ago

adjunct professors are invited to attend department meetings that are scheduled during "dead times" between classes

You mean the hour that adjuncts use to meet students and grade papers? Clever thinking!

some meetings are held in the evenings to accommodate those with other jobs.

So an adjunct can teach a class at Campus A, commute for an hour to Campus B, teach another class, then commute *back* to Campus A, possibly eating dinner in her car now, instead of at home with her family -- and for no additional compensation? I'm sure she's very grateful for that accommodation. Thank you, sir, may I have another.

12 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



oslep123 • 4 days ago



"A "one size fits all" approach doesn't work when engaging adjuncts, ... ". In fact, a one size fits all approach would work - what doesn't work is trying to get faculty to do work for which they aren't paid in an environment in which it is made clear that they are second-class employees.

16 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



mabeelrc · 4 days ago

One key element for "professional development" might be a full time position. Sounds crazy but it just might work.

22 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Dr_Doctorstein · 4 days ago

Every comment thus far is spot-on. The fact is that most state legislatures, education "reformers, and the like don't care about educating the poor. They SAY they care, but they really don't. When you really care about something, you're willing to pay for it.

7 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



DriplsBetter → **Dr_Doctorstein** · 4 days ago

Like legislators who are so unenlightened they say they say things like:

PHOENIX — Arizona is spending too much money providing a university education to students who really do not need it, according to the head of the House Appropriations Committee.

"The university redistributes a tremendous amount of tuition money so that almost anybody can go to the university," Rep. John Kavanagh said in an interview. But he said not everyone should be going to a university — especially one subsidized with state tax money.

"If somebody's going to end up in a sales position or someone's going to be a real estate agent, why are we investing all this money in a research university degree?" he said. "What's the purpose of it?"

Kavanagh's comments come as lawmakers are deciding how much more money, if any, to give to the state university system next fiscal year.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Ilene → **Dr_Doctorstein** · 4 days ago

Many of us adjuncts have been paying for it for two or three decades and still counting. Dedication, being Called, devoted, sacrificial, because we love teaching, we believe in education and we love how we evolve while we are involved in caring more for the purpose and the work than for the money--until we begin to feel like oppressed slaves--torn between the joy and love of giving life-changing educations to our students or receding into the background of something worse than nothing. Students while in college earn up to \$30,000 on their jobs or more. Adjuncts average about \$20,000 a year or less. What's wrong with honoring educated men and women with decent livings? How can we encourage or students to be dignified and feel worthy of their skills and themselves while we are belittled, underpaid, unsupported, and so on?

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



bud jamison → **Dr_Doctorstein** · 4 days ago

The legislators are part of it, but the college administrators told the big wide world 'our faculty don't need money. They want to give back to the community.' The legislators know crooks when they see them.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Braintruste · 4 days ago

Gag. If you want us to be "engaged" then quit violating multiple labor laws and

pay us for the time we spend on our classes outside of class. Then we would suddenly get "engaged". Sure, we would all just LOVE to come to a (free) "mentoring" session on our \$1.75/hour wages after cleaning buildings on the side and applying for public assistance to pay our mortgages. Gosh, something else for us to do for free. Thanks so much!

11 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



failureofreality · 4 days ago

Adjunct teachers have low status because community colleges do not value education. It is a basic principle of economics that value is determined by what you are willing to pay. Community colleges do not value teachers. They value administrators. The administrators get full time jobs with benefits. The issue that is never addressed is the power adjuncts have to give grades. Why should a low-status part time employee be given the power to assign grades? Clearly, the rulers of the community colleges care more about themselves than the students and never have any qualms about delegating the important task of assigning grades to workers that they value very little. As long as the money flows from student debt and government grants, administrators care little about the students or the adjunct teachers.

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Ilene → failureofreality · 4 days ago

True and not true. What is worse, community (city) colleges have been forced to aim at "reinvention." Prepare them for entry level jobs. Success! Case closed. That's not education; that's vocational training. There's nothing wrong with gaining skills so anyone can become employed for a job. But "what happens to a dream deferred?" The shadow of academic education has not yet faded, but the powers-that-be, if not stopped, what failureofreality has written above, will prove to be truly tragic. I know! Let's "reinvent" human rights by transforming anti-humane powermongers into generous, compassionate, understanding and enlightened persons for dignity, integrity and conscientious humanistic awareness. Oh, Educated Administrators! And Politicians! What a concept! Yes, of course, I mean educated as in enlightened humane and BALANCED via reason, creativity, the incredible renewing processes of the human soul. Otherwise, I urge us humans to let the world go to the dogs. Really! They don't hate anywhere near as much as homo sapiens know how to hate no matter how stupid it may be. Second screed after all. Happy St. Patrick's Day!

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



camgray · 4 days ago

...and the key to keeping adjuncts engaged is to compensate them appropriately, encourage a long-term employment relationship, and provide them with the tools necessary to help students and participate as equals on their campuses.

10 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



mnewberry · 4 days ago

Bull. This push for "professional development" is made by people who believe they understand higher-ed as merely an extension of K-12 and who buy into the meme that adjuncts are rightfully paid below a subsistence wage because they are substandard.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Dr_Doctorstein · 4 days ago

So a bunch of administrators calling themselves the League for Innovation get together to solve a problem. Their solution is to make the lowest paid employees do extra work without extra pay. And this is considered "innovation"? Looks to me like the oldest trick in the book.

8 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**coastalprof** → Dr. Doctorstein · 3 days ago

Right on! Only a bunch of administrators would think that giving people extra unpaid work would "engage" them.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**Dr. J. Standing Courage, Ph.D.** · 4 days ago

Thanks so much for the opportunity to engage concerning my extant notion thus D/C'd. Please restore my communicade as it reads and recons the current debate of adjuncts in the American professorate. Thank you for your ethical and personal acumen.

Once again and to restore my thoughts, When those of us with the Ph.D. in the American professorate reiterate our criterion and skill achieved in the institution rigors of the European-American model of higher education, administrators of tax fueled community colleges desist our employ because they will not cede their budgets to the price of exemplary American teaching excellence. Rather, the choice is made to hire and equivocate the employ of a non trained teacher without the rigorous Ph.D. The reasons are not legion. Perhaps the notation and formula for the employ of "lessor professors" remains with the notion that any non-collegian can

[see more](#)

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**bud jamison** → Dr. J. Standing Courage, Ph.D. · 4 days ago

I've met a few PhD's who are first class boobs.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**Alan Trevithick** · 3 days ago

Higher ed administrations--like higher ed "reformers" and higher ed government officials--become more and more delusional every day, with the Gates Foundation for instance, announcing a "change" in emphasis that still includes the comically commissar-like fantasy that future job requirements (the needs of society in the future, blah, blah) can be predicted and satisfied if only we can measure things precisely enough (worked for Soviet industry, right, not to mention the Viet Nam War), and now this tripe from some community college bosses who imagine that their systems of rank exploitation can be reformed so that "everyone is as engaged and informed as they want to be." Yeah, that's a "challenge." By the way, seems worth mentioning that at both Lone Star College and Kirkland CC, 100% of faculty are non-tenure track, that is, contingent, and about 3/4 are part-time adjuncts, and that this has been so, with very little change, since at least 1995. They are just noticing that this sort of abuse of faculty may not be ideal? It would be incredible--to anybody who hasn't been checking in.

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**Alan Trevithick** · 3 days ago

I cannot resist adding this, from the webpage of the "League for Innovation in the Community College," which apparently is supplying the news here. Here--notice any faculty input at all? Any real room for it?

"The League for Innovation in the Community College (League) is an international, nonprofit association dedicated to catalyzing the community college movement. CEOs from the most influential, resourceful, and dynamic community colleges and districts in the world comprise the League's board of directors and provide strategic direction for its ongoing activities. These community colleges and their leaders are joined by more than 800 institutions that hold membership in the League Alliance.

With this core of powerful and innovative community colleges and more than

160 corporate partners, the League serves community colleges around the world by hosting conferences and institutes, developing print and digital resources, and leading projects and initiatives with member colleges, corporate partners, and other agencies.

Mission

The mission of the League is to catalyze the community college movement."

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Alan Trevithick • 3 days ago

Sorry, I've wronged them, they DO have room for faculty voices. In fact, they have a whole project:

"Faculty Voices is using a phased approach of research, engagement and learning, and empowerment and dissemination. The project is supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the League has partnered with Public Agenda to provide training and technical assistance."

<http://www.league.org/league/p...>

Can't make this stuff up.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



coastalprof → Alan Trevithick • 3 days ago

Did you notice that there's no way there to share your "voice," just an invitation to sign up fr their newsletter?

And check out their board of directors--a collection of administrators--not a single person on it who teaches.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



forlorn hope • 3 days ago

Engagement usually means more demands on Adjunct time for convocations, workshops, projects etc. More work, same miserable pay.

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Adjunct Joe • 3 days ago

This article is a step backwards in the increasingly attentive Chronicle coverage of the adjunct crisis. If you want to "engage" me at the college, hire me on a professional basis: a decent salary, full-time employment, job security. When you hire me on the cheap, you are going to get what you pay for. I feel for the students, but for \$3,000 a course I will do as little as possible to get good enough student evaluations to be invited back for more exploitation. I am becoming expert at it.

4 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



bud jamison → Adjunct Joe • 2 days ago

Candid and well said. There are a lot of administrators who see the 'adjunct crisis' as a public relations crisis, nothing else.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



bud jamison • 3 days ago

"Steps that can help adjuncts feel more engaged include making sure they're represented in faculty governance, textbook, and hiring committees, speakers said."

Speaking for myself, I don't need to FEEL more engaged, given the situation. They have been happy for 30 years or more to have us as faceless outsiders. It's going to be a huge culture shock to our TT faculty if they start seeing us at meetings, and then even speaking at them. But if the department were actually looking at things differently and deciding they need us to play a visible role, they might be able to do that. But first they'd have to realize our union is their ally in creating better education, if it can get them to spend a little. Cause they won't do it on their own.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**DocHollywood_2** · 15 hours ago

So how about having a policy that dictates a percentage of adjuncts that are migrated to fulltime status and have first shot at an FT opening? Hiring from within is the best thing any organization can do for themselves. Instead of having adjuncts who have been PT for years, start converting them to FT within a given time frame such as 3-4 years or after teaching a certain number of classes? A colleague has taught over 100 courses or 2,900 students over the last six years at the same institution, and still gets passed over (and sometimes not even invited) even with a terminal degree and the same experience.

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