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Students' Perceptions of Part-time and Tenured/ Tenure-Track Faculty: Accessibility, Mentoring, and Extra-Class Communication

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THE composition of faculties at American institutions of higher learning is changing, with a steady increase of part-time instructors in recent years (Coalition on the Academic Workforce, 2001). In 1970, part-time instructors accounted for approximately 22% of college faculty in the United States; currently, part-timers make up nearly half of college faculties, and the proportion of part-time faculty continues to climb (CAW, 2001; Leatherman, 2000). College and university administrators may view the employment of part-time faculty as a viable response to increasing enrollment while saving money (Avakian, 1995; Mangan, 1991; Monroe & Denman, 1991; Osborn, 1990; Rhoades, 1998; Selvadurai, 1990) as well as a means of bringing specific vocational expertise to the classroom (Cline, 1993). Such an increase raises questions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of these changes in the faculty in higher education. There is a dearth of research on how this shift in faculty might be affecting students.

Of particular interest to communication scholars and administrators is how the reality of part-time college instruction, which for many instructors may include working at multiple institutions, inadequate office space, and lack of access to faculty "perks" such as course load reductions, may affect the frequency and quality of part-time faculty members' interactions with students. This study examines students' perceptions of teacher accessibility and mentoring ability, as well as students' likelihood of pursuing extra-class communication (ECC) with their instructors, as related to teacher employment status.

In the following section, we begin with an overview of the differences between part-time and tenured/tenure-track faculty members, with particular attention to how these differences may impact students' perceptions of instructors' accessibility. We then address the mentoring relationship between students and faculty, and discuss how faculty employment status may affect students' beliefs that they will receive useful mentoring from their instructors. Finally, we introduce the construct of ECC and explore how faculty employment status of instructors may affect students' ECC decisions.

Faculty Employment Status and Accessibility

For the current study, "accessibility" is conceptualized as having two dimensions: physical accessibility, or the degree to which students view instructors as being present and available for outside-of-class interaction; and social accessibility, which refers to the degree to which students view instructors as being socially available, or seem interested in informal interaction. This dual conceptualization is supported by the work of Wilson, Wood, and Gaff (1974), who found that while physical accessibility during office hours was found to have little effect on informal interaction, teachers' behaviors in class that encourage such informal interaction had a significant influence on the amount of informal interaction that takes place between students and teachers. These findings suggest that instructors' social accessibility exhibits a distinct influence on students' interaction with them, separate from their physical accessibility.

Students' perceptions of the accessibility of their instructors may be influenced by the faculty employment status of instructors. The most obvious differences between tenured/tenure-track and part-time faculty members is in the expectations associated with their appointments and the support they receive from their departments and administration. Part-time faculty members, for example, are usually not invited to serve on committees or advise students (Monroe & Denman, 1991), and are not typically well-integrated into the organizational culture of the college (Roueche, Roueche & Milliron, 1996). In addition, part-time college teachers often face low wages (CAW, 2001), limited office space (Krier & Staples, 1993; Scarff, 2000; Stephens & Wright, 1999), the need to work at multiple institutions (Curzon-Brown, 1988; Scarff, 2000), and a lack of job stability (Curzon-Brown, 1988; Krier & Staples, 1993; Scarff, 2000; Stephens & Wright, 1999). Friedlander (1980) explains that colleges save money by hiring adjunct faculty, in part because these instructors are often paid only for their time spent in the classroom and are not required or funded to attend meetings or engage in professional development (CAW, 2001). Part-time faculty members also tend to receive less secretarial support and computer services (CAW, 2001; Hickman, 1998), which may make contact via telephone or email more difficult. These discrepant expectations and work environments of part-time and tenured/tenure-track instructors are likely to translate into differences in their accessibility to students.

In fact, Lundy and Warme (1989) found that students report a general perception that part-time instructors are unreliable about office hours and full-time faculty are available on a more regular structured basis. There is less evidence to suggest differences between tenured/tenure-track and part-time instructors in terms of their social accessibility. However, the same issues that make them less physically available—limited access to office space, computer equipment, and secretarial support on campus, as well as the need of many to work on multiple campuses—may make them less apt to encourage students to seek out interactions with them beyond class time.

In summary, there is ample evidence to suggest that part-time faculty has less access to on-campus support and equipment, may face the demands of working at multiple jobs, and is less integrated into the department organization as compared to tenured and tenure-track employees. However, previous research has not yet explored how these

discrepancies may affect students' perceptions of the accessibility of their instructors. Furthermore, beyond simply believing their instructors to be physically available and friendly, students may have specific goals for interacting with their instructors. The next section addresses the concept of mentoring and how faculty employment status may affect students' perceptions of the mentoring abilities of their instructors.

Faculty Employment Status and Mentoring

The research on mentoring relationships provides valuable insight into the various goals that students may have for interacting with their instructors. Kram (1983) developed a conceptual model of the phases of a mentoring relationship within an organization. Kram found that mentoring relationships serve two main functions: career and psychosocial. Whereas career functions provide assistance "in learning the ropes of organizational life and in preparing for advancement opportunities" (Kram, 1983, p. 613-614), psychosocial functions include role modeling, counseling, and friendship. More recently, research on organizational mentoring has been applied to the academic context (Waldeck, Orrego, Plax, & Kearney, 1997). Though formal mentoring relationships with faculty may be more typical for graduate students, undergraduate students also may seek out informal mentoring in order to address a variety of potential concerns regarding coursework, academic program choices, or simply establishing a sense of belonging in the impersonal environment at many large institutions of higher learning.

Students may view part-time and tenured/tenure-track faculty members as differing in their ability to provide such mentoring assistance. Friedlander (1980) found that part-time college teachers typically have fewer credentials, are less active in professional associations and professional development, have less teaching experience, are less likely to utilize new educational technology, and are less likely to be informed about campus activities. Lundy and Warne (1989) found that students generally perceive part-time instructors to be unknowledgeable about university administrative procedures. Krier and Staples (1993) argue that part-time college teachers tend to be physically isolated from tenured/tenure-track faculty due to the limited or lack of office space offered to them. As a result, students may perceive tenured/tenure-track faculty as being more valuable potential mentors because they are more active in the discipline, more experienced, and more connected to the department and college.

To the extent that students perceive their instructors to be accessible and to have the potential to provide them with valuable mentoring, students are likely to be motivated to seek out those instructors for interactions beyond the allotted class time. The next section discusses the concept of ECC and how faculty employment status may affect students' decisions to pursue ECC with their instructors.

Faculty Employment Status and Extra-Class Communication

A significant number of studies have detailed the benefits of informal faculty-student interaction for students. Informal interaction with instructors has a positive influence on student learning (Kuh, 1995; Pascarella, & Terenzini, 1991; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1996) and is associated with lower student attrition rates (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977; Tinto, 1975). In addition, informal faculty-student interaction has been found to increase students' confidence in making career choices (Wilson, Gaff, Dienst, Wood, & Bavry, 1975; Wilson, Wood, & Gaff, 1974), strengthen students' academic persistence and dedication to educational goals (Pascarella, 1980; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977, 1979; Tinto, 1975; Wilson et al., 1975), and enhance students' overall satisfaction with college (Wilson et al., 1975; Wilson et al., 1974).

While researchers have begun to focus on informal faculty-student interaction, the conceptualization of such interaction has remained somewhat vague. Fusani (1994)

used the phrase “extra class” communication, or ECC, in defining informal faculty-student interaction as a communicative phenomena. Similarly, Jaasma and Koper (1999) examined out-of-class communication, or OCC. Even though Jaasma and Koper (1999) recognized that OCC could take place before and after class, ECC appears to be the more comprehensive and useful phrase, since it acknowledges that informal interactions can occur within the physical classroom setting as well as in other venues. In the broadest sense, ECC includes a wide variety of informal faculty-student contact such as that which occurs before and after class, in or outside of the physical classroom setting, spontaneously on campus, during official office hours, by appointment, or via technological media such as the telephone or the Internet.

Since previous research has suggested a variety of benefits that students derive from informal faculty-student interaction, it is important to consider how the changing compositions of college faculty may impact the phenomenon of ECC. The discrepancies between tenured/tenure-track and part-time faculty members may also affect students’ likelihood of engaging in ECC with them. For part-time faculty who teach numerous classes, work at multiple campuses, and have limited access to office space and on-campus equipments such as phones and email connections, it may be challenging to find the time and location to have outside-of-class interactions with students. Thus, students may report that they are less likely to pursue ECC with part-time instructors as compared to tenured/tenure-track instructors.

The impact of faculty employment status on students has not been thoroughly addressed in previous research. Thus, it remains unknown whether the discrepancy between part-time and tenured/tenure-track faculty in terms of their responsibilities and the campus support they receive actually affects students’ experiences with them. In order to address this issue, it is necessary to base a comparison upon instructors’ actual employment status, rather than students’ perceptions of their employment status. Lundy and Warne (1989) found that students were generally unaware of the employment status of instructors and lacked a clear understanding of the nuances of faculty rank. Thus, it is unclear to what degree students are accurate in perceiving the employment status of their instructors. The first research question addresses the accuracy of students’ perceptions of faculty employment status:

RQ 1: Are students accurate in their perceptions of the employment status of their instructors?

Furthermore, it remains unclear whether part-time and tenured/tenure-track faculty members, regardless of students’ perceptions of their rank, differ in how students perceive them in terms of their physical and social accessibility. Lundy and Warne (1989) found that students reported differences in their perceptions of the accessibility of part-time and full-time faculty in general, without reference to specific instructors. Having students rate their instructors, while using personnel information to verify the actual employment status of those instructors, may provide a more valid assessment of these issues. Thus, the following research question was proposed:

RQ2: How do part-time and tenured/tenure track faculty compare in terms of students’ perceptions of their physical and social accessibility?

Similarly, ample evidence suggests that tenured/tenure track faculty members engage in more professional development and are better integrated into their departments and universities as compared to part-time instructors. It is unknown, however, whether these differences lead students to perceive tenured/tenure-track instructors as better mentors than part-timers. The third research question probes this issue:

RQ3: How do part-time and tenured/tenure-track faculty compare in terms of students' perceptions of their mentoring ability?

Finally, because of the potential differences identified between part-time and tenured/tenure-track faculty members, students may be more likely to pursue interactions outside of class time with their tenured/tenure-track instructors than with their part-time instructors. However, Lundy and Warne (1989) note that students recognize that part-time instructors may compensate for a lack of structured availability on campus by making themselves available in other ways, such as by giving them their home phone numbers or arranging meetings outside the office. Therefore, the actual impact of faculty employment status on students' ECC decisions is unclear. The final research question addresses the possibility that there may be differences in students' reported likelihood of pursuing ECC with part-time versus tenured/tenure-track faculty members:

RQ4: How do part-time and tenured/tenure-track faculty compare in terms of students' perceptions of the likelihood they would pursue ECC with them?

METHOD

Participants

Undergraduate students enrolled in both lower and upper division courses at a large western university participated in the study on a voluntary basis. Students were asked to not report about the instructor of the class in which they were completing the questionnaire, but rather to respond to the questions based on the instructor of the class that they had attended immediately preceding the class in which they were completing the questionnaire.

A total of 597 students participated. For the purposes of the present study, only respondents who reported about part-time instructors and tenured/tenure-track instructors were included in the sample. Full-time lecturers were omitted from the study because of the ambiguity of their employment status, which includes qualities of both part-time and full-time status. Furthermore, the responses of students who reported on teaching associates were also omitted from the sample, since they are graduate students who are temporary employees, often only teach lab sections of classes, and are not typically recognized as faculty members. The final sample consisted of 480 student responses, with 214 reporting about part-time instructors, and 266 reporting about tenured/tenure-track instructors (57 assistant professors, 49 associate professors, 160 full professors). Students' estimates of the sizes of the class in which they had the instructors ranged from 2 to 300, with a median size of 35 students.

Two hundred ninety-two females and 188 males participated, ranging in age from 17 to 55 years old, with a mean age of 21.32 (SD = 4.17). The class breakdown was as follows: 125 freshmen (26%), 78 sophomores (16.3 %), 117 juniors (24.4 %), and 158 seniors (32.9%), with two participants leaving this question blank. One hundred sixty-two participants (33.8%) were communication majors, with the rest representing over 60 other majors. Finally, 226 participants were Euroamerican/white (47.1%), 102 were Latino/a or Mexican American (21.3%), 77 were Asian American (16%), 38 were African American (7.9%), 2 were Native American (.4%), and 27 (5.65%) indicated their ethnicity as "Other."

Procedure

Students were asked to participate in this study during their regularly scheduled classes. They were assured of the anonymity of their responses and the confidentiality of the identity of the instructor about whom they completed the questionnaire. Each subject signed an informed consent form that was processed separately from the questionnaire. Next, participants received a questionnaire with a preprinted identification number at the top of the first two pages. On the first page, they were prompted to name the target instructor about whom they would complete the questionnaire and to list the instructor's departmental affiliation to aid in the coding process. That page was also processed separately from the questionnaire.

To protect the confidentiality of the ratings of instructors, a double-blind system was utilized in coding the employment status and department of the targeted instructors. Using a master list of faculty, the number on the first page of each questionnaire was assigned a code for the faculty employment status of the named instructor as well as a code for the department with which they are affiliated. Thus, a master code list was generated containing only the questionnaire identification numbers, the faculty employment codes, and the department codes. The faculty employment status code and the department code corresponding to each questionnaire identification number were entered along with the rest of the data by a separate researcher. This double blind coding procedure ensured that students' responses could not be linked to individual students or individual faculty members because of the way the data processing tasks were divided among research team members. This procedure for ascertaining the faculty employment status of targeted instructors was also necessary to ensure an accurate comparison among various categories of faculty. Specifically, this study did not rely solely upon students' reports of faculty employment status, but also used actual personnel classification of faculty. This coding system made it possible to evaluate the degree to which students are actually aware of the faculty employment status of their instructors, and to ensure the accuracy of the faculty employment status data.

Measures

The questionnaire contained several sections. The first section asked participants to report the sex and the faculty employment status of their instructor. This section also solicited a variety of demographic information about the respondents, including age, major, class standing, and ethnic background. The remaining portion of the questionnaire consisted of a number of measures, several of which were generated specifically for this investigation.

Instructor Accessibility.

A twenty-six item, 7-point Likert-type scale was developed to assess students' perceptions of their instructor's accessibility. Higher scores on these items corresponded to greater perceptions of instructor accessibility. Thirteen of these items were generated to assess students' perceptions of their instructor's physical accessibility for informal interaction, such as their tendency to return phone calls, respond to emails, or to be on campus for meeting one-on-one with students. These items included, "My teacher is on campus a lot," and "My teacher will meet with students beyond scheduled office hours or class time." The alpha reliability estimate for this measure was .90. Scores on the physical accessibility measure ranged from 13 to 91 with a mean of 66.05 (SD = 14.26). Thirteen additional questions were developed to assess instructors' perceived social accessibility, such as the degree to which they seem to encourage or are receptive to contact with students. These items included, "My teacher encourages students to contact him/her outside of class," and "My teacher doesn't seem to have time outside of class for students'

concerns.” The alpha reliability estimate for this measure was .94. Scores on the social accessibility measure ranged from 13 to 91, with a mean of 70.83 (SD= 16.63).

Instructor Mentoring Function.

Students’ perceptions of instructors’ mentoring ability were assessed with a 24-item, 7-point Likert-type scale drawn from previous work by Waldeck et al. (1997) and Ragins and McFarlin (1990). Items were worded to reflect mentor roles in the academic setting. Higher scores corresponded to greater perceptions of instructor mentoring ability. The measure included six items to represent each of the four mentoring areas of career (e.g., “When and if I see my teacher outside of class, he/she is likely to help me narrow my career options”), course (e.g., “When and if I see my teacher outside of class, he/she is likely to help me to get a good grade”), psychosocial self (e.g., “When and if I see my teacher outside of class, he/she is likely to provide me with insights into who I am”), and psychosocial teacher (e.g., “When and if I see my teacher outside of class, he/she is likely to give me an opportunity to know her/him”). These twenty-four items were submitted to a principal components factor analysis using varimax rotation. A three-factor model yielded the best fit with the data, using the scree plot as a guide. Seven items from the psychosocial self and psychosocial teacher failed to load on the three factors and thus were dropped from the model. The remaining psychosocial self and psychosocial teacher items loaded together. The resulting model consisted of the following three factors: career mentoring ($\alpha = .96$, range = 6 - 42, $M = 22.74$, $SD = 10.37$), course mentoring ($\alpha = .93$, range = 6 - 42, $M = 32.08$, $SD = 8.52$), and psychosocial mentoring ($\alpha = .93$, range = 5 - 35, $M = 18.97$, $SD = 8.14$).

Student Willingness to Engage in ECC.

Eight items assessing participants’ willingness to contact or see their instructor outside of formal classroom instruction if they should need to or want to were drawn from Shepard (1996). The 7-point semantic differential-type scale included responses such as, “Would/Would Not,” “Likely/Unlikely,” and “Interested/Uninterested.” Scores on this measure ranged from 8 to 56 ($M = 42.39$, $SD = 11.70$), with higher scores corresponded to greater willingness to engage in ECC. The *alpha* reliability of this measure was .96.

RESULTS

The first research question explored the degree to which students are accurate in their perceptions of the employment status of their instructors. To address this question, students’ perceptions of their instructors’ employment rank were correlated with their instructors’ actual rank as determined by personnel data. The results indicated a significant and inverse association between instructors’ actual faculty employment status and students’ perceptions of their faculty employment status ($\rho = -.12$, $p < .01$).

In order to address the remaining research questions, a MANOVA was computed to compare part-time and tenured/tenure-track faculty on the dependent variables and to control for the number of tests. The overall model was significant [$\Delta = .93$, $F(6, 368) = 4.41$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$, $power = .98$].

The second research question probed the degree to which part-time and tenured/tenure-track faculty differ in terms of students’ perceptions of their physical and social accessibility. The univariate ANOVA revealed no significant differences between part-time faculty ($M = 71.92$, $SD = 15.65$) and tenured/tenure-track faculty ($M = 69.34$, $SD = 17.16$) in terms of their perceived social accessibility [$F(1, 373) = 2.29$, ns, $\eta^2 = .01$, $power = .33$]. Part-time faculty ($M = 65.52$, $SD = 14.14$) and tenured/tenure-track faculty

($M = 66.36$, $SD = 14.48$) also did not differ significantly in their perceived physical accessibility as rated by their students [$F(1, 373) = .32$, *ns*, $\eta^2 = .00$, *power* = .09].

The third research question was aimed at finding out how part-time and tenured/tenure-track faculty compare in terms of students' perceptions of their career, course, and psychosocial mentoring ability. Univariate ANOVAs were computed to compare part-time and tenured/tenure-track faculty on each of the mentoring ratings. There was no significant difference between part-time faculty ($M = 22.82$, $SD = 9.79$) and tenured/tenure-track faculty ($M = 23.22$, $SD = 10.32$) in their perceived ability to provide career mentoring [$F(1, 373) = .14$, *ns*, $\eta^2 = .00$, *power* = .07]. However, part-time faculty ($M = 32.97$, $SD = 8.07$) was rated higher than tenured/tenure-track faculty ($M = 31.14$, $SD = 8.82$) in terms of course mentoring [$F(1, 373) = 4.32$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .01$, *power* = .55]. Students also rated part-time faculty ($M = 19.97$, $SD = 7.69$) higher in terms of psychosocial mentoring [$F(1, 373) = 4.01$, $\eta^2 = .01$, *power* = .52] as compared to tenured/tenure-track faculty ($M = 18.35$, $SD = 7.88$).

The fourth research question explored the degree to which part-time and tenured/tenure-track faculty members differ in terms of students' perceptions of the likelihood they would pursue ECC with them. A univariate ANOVA revealed no significant difference [$F(1, 373) = .91$, *ns*, $\eta^2 = .00$, *power* = .16] in students' reported likelihood of pursuing ECC with part-time faculty ($M = 43.22$, $SD = 10.57$) as compared to their likelihood of pursuing ECC with tenured/tenure-track faculty ($M = 42.08$, $SD = 12.27$).

DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that students are generally unaware of the employment status and rank of their instructors. In fact, students' perceptions of their teacher's rank were inversely related to their actual rank, such that higher the rank of faculty members, the lower the rank students perceived them to be. Moreover, comparison between part-time and tenured/tenure track faculty based on their actual employment status revealed no significant difference between these two groups of instructors as far as students' perception of their physical accessibility and social accessibility, nor in terms of students' report likelihood of pursuing ECC with them. Part-time and tenured/tenure-track faculty also did not differ in students' perceptions of their ability to provide career mentoring, but part-time instructors were seen as more capable of providing course-related support, as well as more likely to converse with students about personal issues. However, the effect sizes for these mentoring results were quite small.

It should be noted that the power estimates for the univariate analyses were less than ideal. However, given the small effect sizes for all of the univariate tests, it is doubtful that the power issues had a substantial impact on our results. Ratings of part-time and tenured/tenure track faculty members were remarkably similar across all dependent variables, particularly given the possible ranges on these variables.

In addition, future research is needed to validate these findings at with other sample populations. This study was conducted at a four-year campus at which part-time instructors may enjoy more institutional support than they typically do at other types of institutions, such as community colleges. Given the prevalence of the trend toward use of part-time faculty on college campuses, additional research into the effects of this trend on student-teacher communication is certainly warranted.

These findings have several significant implications for university administrators, department chairs, and faculty members. First, faculty employment status is not a salient issue to students. Students do not appear to believe that part-time instructors provide them with an inferior educational experience as far as the availability and quality of communication with them outside of the classroom. Certainly, it could be argued that stu-

dents may not have an accurate perspective on the quality of mentoring their instructors can provide. That is, student may put inordinate emphasis on a teacher appearing to be friendly and approachable, rather than the accuracy and usefulness of the information that the teacher might be able to provide. However, students must first be motivated to seek out their instructors to for ECC, and that motivation is likely based on their beliefs about the accessibility and mentoring ability of their instructors.

Second, an examination of the means on all of the dependent variables reveals that both part time and tenured/tenure track faculty members were perceived to be highly physically and socially accessible, and students saw themselves as being very likely to engage ECC in with their instructors. Furthermore, students in our sample perceived their instructors to be highly capable of providing career mentoring, and slightly above the scale medians in their ability to provide both career and psychosocial mentoring. Taken as a whole, these findings reveal that students generally have favorable perceptions of their instructors. Insofar as these qualities influence students' actual decisions to pursue ECC with their instructors, these results are encouraging.

In summary, this investigation suggests that students perceive little difference between part-time and tenured/tenure track faculty as far as their communication with them. Based on students' own experiences with part-time and tenured/tenured-track faculty members, it appears that they have no preference for tenured/tenure track faculty over part-time instructors, and even regard part-time instructors as superior in certain mentoring capacities. Therefore, arguments decrying the growing trend toward the use of part-time college faculty cannot be based on claims that it jeopardizes valuable informal communication between students and their instructors.

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