

Original Paper

Perceived Sense of Belonging of Part-time Faculty within Institutions of Higher Education

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Abstract

Although part-time faculty positions in higher education continue to increase, reports reveal the lack of acceptance and valuing of part-time faculty across higher education institutions. Yet few qualitative studies explore this phenomenon within academic culture. This exploratory qualitative case study analyzed part-time faculty members' perceptions of inclusion or exclusion within their higher education institutions. This study was based on interviews with a diverse sample of part-time faculty members from a private and public institute of higher education. The findings revealed that, in general, part-time faculty perceived a sense of belonging when their socio-emotional needs were met, and reciprocal relationships were present within their academic culture. Additionally, part-time faculty who desired and dedicated energy towards involvement in their academic cultures had a higher chance of developing a sense of inclusion.

Keywords

part-time faculty, adjunct faculty, belonging, higher education, academic culture

1. Introduction

Although part-time (adjunct, contingent) faculty positions in higher education continue to increase, reports reveal the lack of acceptance and valuing of part-time faculty across higher education institutions. Part-time faculty now makes up more than 70 percent of higher education faculty in many institutions (Fruscione, 2014). However, part-time faculty often does not receive the support necessary to be effective instructors (Kezar & Sam, 2013; Purcell, 2007). Several universities have seen part-time faculty begin to discuss these issues, which have resulted in the formation of groups, programs and even unions. Yet few qualitative studies exist that explore the experiences and perceptions of part-time

faculty within their academic cultures.

While their titles and responsibilities might vary, this diverse group often shares a lack of security in their positions and support from the higher education institutions that employ them. A growing number of disciplinary groups and unions have begun to report the poor and unfair working conditions that part-time faculty members face when compared to the higher levels of security and support experienced by tenure-track faculty. Additionally, the lack of support from the institutions that employ them reflects the predominantly negative departmental cultures and working environments contingent faculty face (Kezar & Sam, 2013). The large increase of contingent faculty members across the country has resulted in many questions concerning the experiences of part-time faculty.

Institutions of higher education often fall short in supporting part-time faculty (Hoyt, 2012). Given their working conditions and lack of recognition, part-time faculty have increasingly turned to reporting their experiences on social media, produce studies in academic journals, and unionize across campuses to have their voices heard (Fredrickson, 2015). Hoeller (2014) adds that the economic recession of 2007-2009 resulted in growing attention from the public on the value of education they are receiving from college and university instructors. Yet, even with the increase in the number of contingent faculty over the past 40 years and the increase in reports such as these, there is still a lack of understanding concerning the experiences of part-time faculty.

Discussions of the poor working conditions part-time faculty face typically focus on low pay and nonexistent job security. Reevy and Deason (2014) found that the contingency or precariousness of being part-time faculty as being the most significant stressor. The intense stressors part-time faculty face within their higher education institutions and the lack of support they receive to compensate in some way for these stressors impact their lives in multiple dimensions such as emotional, financial, and professional.

Although much of the literature on part-time faculty frames their inclusion in academic departments as either satisfactory/non-satisfactory or supportive/non-supportive, little qualitative research exists that allows part-time faculty to explain their perceptions of their status and position in their institutions. Purcell (2007) notes that part-time faculty must appear grateful for their positions to their university colleagues, yet often have feelings of frustration, bitterness, and even rage at the various forms of oppression, both material and cultural they face. However, some studies have found that part-time faculty members have higher levels of satisfaction than their full-time counterparts (Levinson, Kaufman, & Bickel, 1993; Socolar & Kelman, 2002; Townsend, 2006). A majority of part-time faculty do not desire to become full-time faculty because they usually have full-time careers outside of education (Wallin, 2004). Given this discrepancy and lack of qualitative studies on part-time faculty members' experiences, a greater understanding of who part-time faculty are and their beliefs about their position in higher education is needed especially as more colleges and universities have the majority of their faculty being part-time. This study focused on the experiences of part-time faculty in order to learn what contributed to their sense of belonging at their institutions.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to determine how part-time faculty members perceived a sense of belonging or exclusion within their institution of higher education. The findings attempt to answer the following research question: What do part-time faculty perceive to their sense of belonging or exclusion from a college/university academic culture?

2. Literature Review

Organizations possess their own cultures formed by shared sets of values, beliefs, and norms that guide the actions and attitudes of members (Schneider, Ehrhart, & Macey, 2013). These common beliefs are often taken for granted, primarily because they are intangible, but are necessary for an organization's activity. Alvesson (2002) emphasizes an important distinction that culture is not primarily inside employees' heads, but is somewhere between the heads of a group of people within an organization where symbols and meanings are publicly expressed. Individuals create and understand their own meanings, but these may or may not contribute to the organization's culture. An individual's perception and his or her experiences with the symbols and their meanings are unique to that individual and the ways in which an organization's culture are shared to the newcomer varies by organization. Schein's (2010) organizational culture model presents the cultural aspects that are taught to or withheld from newcomers by long standing members, the observable cultural phenomena within organizations that newcomers learn from, and the characteristics that influence internal integration of employees.

Establishing and fostering relatedness to others is a deeply held and pervasive human concern. Maslow (1954) describes belonging as a basic human need and Baumeister and Leary (1995) state belonging is a fundamental human emotion. McClure and Brown (2008) believe it is important to remember that any exploration into the phenomenon of belonging will reveal its interdependent, dynamic, and contradictory components. Therefore, "the desire for interpersonal attachment may well be one of the most far-reaching and integrative constructs currently available to understand human nature" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 522). Yet, belonging is experienced every day in our interactions with colleagues. One particularly idealistic description of belonging is: "people of all social identity groups [have] the opportunity to be present, to have their voices heard and appreciated, and to engage in core activities on behalf of the collective" (Wasserman, Gallegos, & Ferdman, 2008, p. 176). A sense of belonging may be difficult to define, but it is greatly desired and valued in the workplace.

Part-time faculty members develop self and organization schemas to understand their academic cultures. These schemas contribute to the way the individual makes sense of oneself and the way that the individual makes sense of the organization both consciously and unconsciously. The part-time faculty member will utilize the self-schema to understand and assess their position or relationship within the organization. The organization schema overlaps the self-schema and represents the cultural knowledge, meanings, and consensual sense-making that are characteristic of the organization (Harris, 1994; Schein, 2010). The organization schema is informed by how the individual sees their personal characteristics as fitting in with the organization's culture (Hagerty, Williams, Coyne, & Early, 1994).

Harris (1994) found that an individual's motives and goals are processed in self-schemas, but influenced by organization schemas. Basic underlying assumptions, reciprocity, and complete valuing contribute to supporting or diminishing a part-time faculty member's sense of belonging. These three aspects contribute to the part-time faculty member's understanding of the department and university's leadership, climate, practices, and policies. Barak (1999) states an organization is both a technical and social system and employees will navigate the landscape based on their interpretation of the system.

Maitlis (2005) defined sense making as a process of social construction in which individuals attempt to interpret and explain sets of cues from their environments. Due to the part-time faculty member's lack of time spent on campus and limited interaction with other faculty, part-time faculty members engaged in an extraordinary amount of sense making in which they often had to understand their academic cultures on their own. Although organizational sense making is a social process, part-time faculty members often made sense of their academic cultures through limited interactions they had with the colleagues in their departments.

Lawrence and Corwin's (2003) theoretical model identifies characteristics of local work contexts that contribute to the acceptance or exclusion of part-time employees. The degree to which a part-time faculty member will be accepted or marginalized will vary significantly depending on organizations and cultures. Based on their research, Lawrence and Corwin (2003) note that part-time professionals must choose from two options of interaction rituals to prevent marginalization by coworkers and managers: compliance with existing rituals or the innovation of new rituals. A part-time professional who adopts a compliance strategy requires the individual to participate to whatever extent possible in key rituals that define membership within the organization's culture.

Parks, Kidder, and Gallagher (1998) present the dimensions of psychological contracts specifically in the context of the realities faced by part-time faculty. The stability of a psychological contract refers to how malleable or concrete the terms of the psychological contract are to the employee. More specifically, stability is the degree to which the terms of the psychological contract can evolve and change without renegotiation of the contract's terms. The more renegotiation that occurs, the more unstable the psychological contract becomes.

Parks, Kidder, and Gallagher (1998) found that more dynamic or emergent contracts require the development of trust as the employee "proves" him or herself to the organization. Economic resources are an important part of any work contract. Focus relates to the emphasis a part-time faculty member places on the economic resources versus the socio-emotional resources in the psychological contract. Economic resources include pay and benefits. Socio-emotional resources include opportunities for personal or professional growth, loyalty to the organization, and identification as member of the organization. Part-time faculty are less likely to receive socio-emotional rewards than permanent employees due to their temporary position within the organization. Therefore, a focus on the economic aspects of a job will cause the part-time faculty member to feel less ownership over the position and reduced commitment to the organization. A focus on socio-emotional resources will lead to greater

ownership of one's work and commitment to the organization. The time frame of a work contract is an essential component of the employment contract.

Psychological contracts are considered determinants for behavior of individuals within an organization and are part of an organization's culture. Rousseau (1989) defines psychological contracts as the individual's beliefs regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between that focal person and another party. Within organizational theory, psychological contracts are unwritten expectations that operate between employees and managers. The basic steps of a psychological contract are that a party makes a promise and some form of recompense is offered in return from another party, consequently creating a reciprocal obligation between the two parties. When considering a psychological contract, it is important to think about the consistency between what is promised or understood and what is actually received and its consequences to an individual's well-being and perspective. Psychological contracts exist at the individual level and are created between an individual and the organization. Psychological contracts can be assessed by an individual's self-reported perceptions of part-time expectations or by studying the connections between sets of expectations.

Parks, Kidder, and Gallagher (1998) present the dimensions of psychological contracts specifically in the context of the realities faced by part-time faculty. They found that there are two important components of the time frame: the duration, meaning the extent to which the employee perceives the relationship to be short- or long-term, and precision, meaning the extent to which the employee perceives the relationship to be finite or indefinite. Individuals who believe they have chosen their employment will be more committed to the employer as opposed to individuals who chose the employment because it was the only or the best option at the time.

3. Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to determine how part-time faculty members perceived a sense of belonging or exclusion within their institution of higher education. This study also examined the academic culture and its impact on part-time faculty through the part-time faculty members' description of the interactions, practices, and policies of the department and institution. Fourteen part-time faculty members were interviewed from two separate higher education institutions that represented years of teaching experience and disciplines.

This qualitative study used a multi-site case study method. Two four-year higher education institutions were chosen, one a private institution and the other a public institution in the western United States. Maximum variation sampling was used to select and interview 14 part-time faculty members representing a range of academic disciplines, professional backgrounds, and years of teaching. The interviews were conducted in-person, over the phone or through video conferencing depending on which option the part-time faculty member felt was most convenient and desired. The interviews ranged from 40 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes.

Interviews consisted of semi-structured open-ended questions. Data collection took place over a six

week period. Three interview protocols were created to guide the conversations. One interview protocol was for part-time faculty teaching at a single institution, one for part-time faculty teaching at multiple institutions, and one for part-time faculty teaching online. Questions for the part-time faculty members focused on describing the organizational climates they worked in, the leadership they experienced, and the policies and practices they encountered. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. During the interviews, observer comments were also made to note words that particularly seemed meaningful or emotions that the part-time faculty member exhibited.

Since part-time faculty are composed of a very diverse group of individuals, purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants with a range of specific categories or criteria of experiences. The criterion were as follows: (1) Part-time faculty were selected who represented a range of years serving in instruction. Seven of the part-time faculty taught 0 to 2 years, four of the part-time faculty taught 5 to 10 years, two of the part-time faculty taught 11 to 15 years, and one of the part-time faculty taught 16 to 20 years. (2) Part-time faculty were selected who had a range of professional experiences. Five of the part-time faculty solely taught and had no other employment. Five of the part-time faculty had a position in their career field in addition to teaching. Four of the faculty held positions in their career fields and also taught at other higher education institutions. (3) Part-time faculty were selected who either had reached the highest educational attainment of a master's or doctorate degree. Three of the part-time faculty members had master's degrees and 11 had doctorate degrees. (4) Part-time faculty were selected who taught on campus or online. Nine of the part-time faculty members taught on campus. Three of the part-time faculty members taught online. Two of the part-time faculty members taught both on campus and online. (5) Part-time faculty members were selected who represented a range of disciplines.

Specifically, a snowball sampling method was used to recruit part-time faculty members. At the public university, emails were sent to the department chairs or program coordinators of 45 academic programs to recruit part-time faculty for this study. At the private university, emails were sent to chairs within one division to recruit part-time faculty. The department chairs either contacted the faculty themselves or granted permission for this researcher to send an email directly to the approved part-time faculty member. A part-time faculty member who agreed to participate in this study was sent a screening survey to determine if the criterion were met.

4. Results

The findings revealed that the part-time faculty interviewed perceived a sense of belonging when their socio-emotional needs were met and reciprocal relationships were present within their academic culture. Part-time faculty who desired and dedicated energy towards involvement in their academic cultures developed a sense of belonging. Data analysis revealed that similarities existed in how they defined belonging, what they perceived contributed to their membership, and their understanding of support in their academic cultures based on personal factors such as external employment, professional and

academic qualifications, and life phase, that contributed to their sense of belonging.

Part-time faculty members defined belonging similarly. All of the part-time faculty members shared invisible diversity attributes, such as not having tenure, being less physically present in their academic cultures, and not being invited to participate in decision-making, which were some of the ways that shaped how they viewed belonging within their academic cultures. Although the part-time faculty members had diverse experiences within their academic cultures that led to either a sense of belonging or exclusion, the act of being a part-time faculty member within an academic culture contributed to a consistent understanding of belonging that bound them together. Additionally, analysis revealed that although what constituted a sense of belonging were similar, the focus or where they placed their emphasis within their definition of belonging differed depending on whether the part-time faculty member experienced a sense of inclusion or exclusion in his or her academic culture.

The six part-time faculty members who had reported a sense of belonging emphasized the importance of feeling connected. Their definitions more specifically pointed to working in supportive academic cultures that had policies and practices that made them feel as though they were welcomed members. In contrast, the eight part-time faculty members who had a sense of exclusion provided descriptions of their experiences as distanced and hierarchical. For instance, part-time faculty members who experienced a sense of exclusion indicated they worked in academic cultures with a focus on contractual and/or economic needs. Although that is the reality of their hiring, being constantly reminded of that arrangement made them feel less of being a member of the larger academic department. The following examples demonstrate similarities in the use of analogies within the definitions of belonging. Additionally, the difference in focus on the definitions of part-time faculty with a sense of belonging or exclusion is also discussed.

Part-time faculty members who had a sense of belonging in their academic cultures provided definitions of belonging that focused on being in environments that met their socio-emotional needs. The definitions discussed working in environments that caused them to feel calm, comfortable, accepted, respected, valued, fulfilled, and happy. The part-time faculty members experienced positive feelings because although they shared invisible diversity attributes, they worked in academic cultures that did not exclude them for their diversity attributes, but respected them and encouraged their participation. The departments created an environment where the part-time faculty members were accepted and respected members of the academic culture.

As part-time faculty members shared invisible diversity attributes, they defined belonging using similar analogies due to the experiences they had within their academic cultures. Part-time faculty who experienced a sense of belonging provided definitions focusing on academic cultures that supported their connectedness as opposed to those who experienced exclusion and provided definitions that did not have a strong focus on connectedness. The conditions that fostered a sense of belonging are: basic underlying assumptions that part-time faculty members are members of the department and institution, reciprocal relations that contributed to connectedness, and a focus on meeting the part-time faculty

members' socio-emotional needs that included valuing of their skills and knowledge.

5. Discussion

This study sheds light on how part-time faculty felt about their position in the departments and institutions of higher education they worked within. It also gave further information on how part-time faculty perceive themselves in relation to their supervisors and faculty colleagues.

The findings suggested that part-time faculty defined belonging in similar ways in that perceived connectedness, socio-emotional aspects, and reciprocity all contribute to a sense of belonging. Part-time faculty who experienced exclusion felt disconnected and unwelcomed in their academic cultures and their socio-emotional needs were not met. Further, part-time faculty who desired and dedicated energy towards involvement and were supported by their academic cultures experienced a sense of belonging. This was in contrast to part-time faculty who did not desire or dedicated energy towards involvement and experienced negative feelings associated with their academic cultures.

Part-time faculty who experienced a sense of belonging felt so to a great degree in similar ways. The similarities on belonging included analogies that represented connectedness and a focus on socio-emotional aspects. Analogies included intimate environments such as community, family, and home to describe environments that fostered a sense of belonging. The emphasis on meeting socio-emotional needs was reflected in definitions that discussed working in academic cultures that respected and encouraged part-time faculty members' participation and contributions.

This study provided qualitative data on the experiences of part-time faculty working and teaching within academic cultures in two higher education institutions. Thus far, studies on this group of faculty have primarily focused on quantitative data collection, though important, the studies have not provided the data needed to understand the aspects in higher education that are beneficial or detrimental to part-time faculty members' positions. Aspects of a work culture that contribute to an individual's sense of belonging is one way to understand the ways in which individuals are accepted and supported. This study sought to understand the aspects that part-time faculty members perceive contribute to a sense of belonging or exclusion in their academic cultures. Although a complex group, themes emerged from the data that provide implications and recommendations for practice, policy, and research. Therefore, the following recommendations should be considered options and a starting point for further development of practice, policy, and research on part-time faculty.

The findings suggested that part-time faculty members perceived a sense of belonging when they worked in academic cultures that supported their socio-emotional needs through connectedness to their departments and reciprocal relationships. However, it is difficult for part-time faculty to experience connectedness and engage in reciprocal relationships because of the contingent nature of part-time work. Additionally, faculty within the department may not welcome or extend reciprocity to the part-time faculty, which led to limited communication and connections between individuals within the department and the part-time faculty member.

Some part-time faculty members developed resentment and frustration towards their academic cultures when their socio-emotional needs were not met. This led them to believe their relationship with their academic cultures was solely based on contractual obligations. Feelings of being an outsider, devalued, and not aware of occurrences in the department all contributed to feelings of exclusion. The result was that these part-time faculty members did not have a sense of belonging in their departments and universities. Implications and recommendations for this issue fell into two needs: connection is needed with a designated individual in the department and connection is also needed with other part-time faculty members.

Reciprocity contributed to part-time faculty members having a sense of belonging in their academic cultures. The absence of reciprocity contributed to feelings of exclusion. Exclusion was experienced when the part-time faculty member engaged in the process of negotiating his or her membership through contributions to the department, but received no reciprocation from the department or was rebuffed by an individual within the department. Therefore, two themes emerged: the presence of reciprocal relationships that contributed to a sense of belonging and an absence of reciprocal relationships that contributed to exclusion.

Part-time faculty members who desired and committed energy towards involvement had a sense of belonging. The part-time members made efforts beyond their instructional requirements to contribute their knowledge and expertise to their departments and were recognized for their contributions by individuals within their departments. Part-time faculty members who lacked recognition of their contributions experienced exclusion due to working in academic cultures that were not encouraging of their involvement or did not provide opportunities that the part-time faculty members found meaningful.

This study sought to understand the aspects of an academic culture that part-time faculty members perceive contribute to a sense of belonging or exclusion. Collectively, the findings suggested that part-time faculty members perceive academic cultures that are supportive of their socio-emotional needs and provide for reciprocal relationships contribute to their sense of belonging. Additionally, part-time faculty members' desire and energy towards involvement through making contributions to their academic cultures also contribute to a sense of belonging.

5.1 Implications for Practice

Based on the findings from this exploratory study, the majority of interviewed part-time faculty feel disconnected from the academic culture that they were hired to be a part of and represent. Very rarely do students understand the difference between a full-time faculty member and a part-time one. Subsequently, all faculty that interact and interface with students represent the department and the college/university as a whole. Being that the majority of part-time faculty felt disconnected and excluded from the academic culture, does that have an effect on teaching performance? A follow-up study that looked into student perception of part-time faculty (those that felt connected versus disconnected) would add knowledge to the scholarship of teaching and learning.

An analysis of academic culture would also be a logical next step in this line of research. How do academic organizations view part-time faculty and what influences their perspectives? As part-time faculty plays a very large role in the successful day-to-day operations of a college/university, why would academic cultures not value and incorporate this group of faculty more? An analysis of the culture and more information about the social-political implications would inform those that recruit and support part-time faculty.

The data suggests that institutions of higher education should review their support practices for part-time faculty. There appears to be a desire to feel connected to the academic culture that they were brought on to teach for. This desire to assist appears to be an untapped resource for many colleges/universities that suffer from financial constraints. Further analysis and developing action research for pilot projects involving part-time faculty is needed.

A limitation of this study is its relatively small sample size. A replication of this study involving a sample size of at least 30 diverse participants would increase this study's generalizability. Despite the relatively small sample size, this study did what it was supposed to do, which was to explore the experiences of part-time faculty and determine if future action should be taken. This study identified a number of areas of need to help support and possibly increase the efficacy of part-time faculty.

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