

PRAC Assessment Grant Final Report Format

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Impact of faculty teaching on student learning outcomes: Analysis of full-time tenure track and part time non-tenure track faculty

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Project Summary

The purpose of this exploration was to examine the impact of working conditions on faculty teaching for full time faculty and non-tenure track faculty (NTTF). Specifically, questions were posed to ascertain whether resources, or lack thereof, potentially hindered student learning outcomes, especially in the context of employment status. The hypothesis was that a “disconnect” existed between part time faculty and full-time faculty (FTF) within the department that resulted in varying curriculum focus, an array of student learning outcomes, and lack of course scaffolding.

For the purposes of this exploration, a small academic department at a large Midwestern university was reviewed. At the time of this review, the department employed five FTF and 23 NTTF, with an undergraduate enrollment of 540 students. The NTTF taught approximately 73% of the required 15 core courses within the undergraduate major. Many of the courses taught by NTTF were introductory courses where faculty support and mentorship were crucial.

For the NTTF, 82% are part time (i.e., one to two courses per semester) while 17% are employed full time (one clinical faculty member who teaches four courses per semester and three staff members). Similar to others (Kezar, 2013; Yakoboski & Foster, 2014), this department uses part time faculty in response to budget restraints, cost savings, course release time, new course offerings, online education courses, or minors and certificates that demand a skillset often met by part time faculty expertise.

Data Collection Methods

The initial survey was administered in spring 2019 with follow up one-on-one interviews taking place in May 2019. The written survey asked all faculty (TTF and NTTF) to provide pertinent demographic information, expertise area, years of experience, reason for teaching, and other questions. The results were used to assess factors such as (but not limited to): time for teaching (e.g., is the individual working full time and teaching part time?), teaching experience, subject matter expertise, and geographic proximity to students. Further, individual interviews were held with seven faculty, at which time faculty were asked questions regarding job satisfaction, suggestions for improvement, assessment methods, and current teaching practices. This project took place over the 2019 calendar year and received Institutional Review Board approval.

Data analysis

Interviews were analyzed using NVivo, a qualitative software management program developed by QSR International. NVivo allows for importation, management, coding, and analysis of unstructured data. Coding can occur following a grounded theory method in which various researchers separately code and extract key themes from transcribed data. Coding discrepancies are resolved through discussion and validated through NVivo’s inter-rater reliability function.

Findings

Of the potential 28 faculty in the target population, 21 faculty accessed or opened the survey; 12 completed the survey, nine faculty exited without completing the survey. The 12 respondents included nine part time faculty (i.e., teaching 1-2 courses per semester) and three full time faculty. The part time faculty group was represented by one staff member, two doctoral

students, and six adjunct faculty members. Demographically, the group included 10 females and two males with a predominantly white population (9) with two Black or African American respondents and one Asian/Pacific Islander, with a mean age of 44 (28-67 years range). Overall, faculty members possessed five doctoral degrees and seven masters' degrees in disciplines such as health sciences, kinesiology, nursing, and gerontology. Respondents had taught in higher education anywhere from 2 to 30 years, with five of the respondents teaching 15 or more years and three of the respondents teaching less than three years.

A portion of the administered survey addressed the impact various factors have on faculty members' performance (Table 1). Respondents were asked to use the scale of 1-100 with 1 being "highly negative" and 100 being "highly positive" to rate how each of these factors impacted their ability to perform their job.

Table 1: Factors affecting faculty performance

Factor	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Departmental faculty collegiality	12	80.8	14.5	50	100
Departmental administrative support	12	83.4	17.2	50	100
Work/life integration	11	71.8	24.2	30	97
Mentorship	11	70.3	22.8	40	100
Interactions with students	11	80.0	22.1	40	100
Available resources	12	79.6	18.7	30	100

Faculty were further asked to rate how valued they felt as a faculty member in the department using a scale of "1" (not valued) to "100" (highly valued). Twelve faculty responded, with a mean of 78.8 (SD 16.4, 50-100 range). Faculty were also asked to consider how they perceived their current workload impacting student learning outcomes. Respondents were provided a Likert scale with the choices of "No influence," "Little influence," "Neutral," "Somewhat influential," and "Highly influential." Of the 12 respondents, one chose "Little influence;" two stating "Neutral;" six felt workload was "Somewhat influential," and two felt workload was "Highly influential" in impacting student learning outcomes.

Using the same Likert scale of "No influence" to "Highly influential," respondents were asked how departmental policies and practices impacted their performance and ability to create a positive learning environment for students. Again, all 12 respondents answered, with one choosing "No influence;" two stating "Neutral;" four responding "Somewhat influential," while five faculty chose "Highly influential" for policies and practices impacting student learning outcomes.

When asked about their current satisfaction with teaching in the department, the majority of faculty reported positive satisfaction with the department and university citing such attributes as autonomy, staff support, and faculty meetings as contributing to overall satisfaction. However, when asked about factors hindering or reducing teaching satisfaction, faculty mentioned several items focused on curriculum and interaction with other faculty as reasons for dissatisfaction.

For example, faculty mentioned that they often did not understand how their particular course fit into the overall degree program or what the goal of the course was in relation to the degree. This lack of discussion as to the course purpose, development, or structure was felt to impede progress. "I am guessing about how to teach," mentioned one participant.

In addition, faculty felt they could not reach out to another faculty to discuss course content. Many of the participants lamented that they “did not know what other instructors are doing,” or asked the question, “What are other faculty teaching in similar courses?” This was a similar theme by other faculty, who asked the question, “What is being taught in a previous course?” Faculty were concerned that students often came to a class unprepared or unskilled in fundamental skills, which the faculty member expected them to have learned in an earlier course. Faculty then spent time teaching or reviewing prerequisite skills needed for the current course.

This time spent on reviewing resulted in frustration for faculty, who wanted to know “what other faculty are teaching so I can build on this.” This was evident in previous answers, when faculty were asked questions about onboarding. One faculty member stated, “There was no guidance or input when starting. I was given a syllabus, which I revised to fit my teaching style.”

This connection to other faculty was mentioned again when asked about resources. Faculty mentioned they would like to have an opportunity to talk with other faculty, although one participant commented that the “separate faculty meetings for NTTF and TTF creates a disconnect between faculty members; NTTF perceive themselves to be of “lesser” value.”

When asked about other resources, the majority of faculty stated they felt they had adequate resources to perform their job, although many mentioned the physical proximity as being a deterrent, especially for those faculty living in another state. In addition, faculty mentioned interest in webinars or other teaching sessions, in which they could watch tutorials or attend technology sessions to learn new teaching methods. Specifically, several faculty asked for a list of campus resources for students that provided them with information without having to search the university website. Since many of the NTTF are not on campus, they are unfamiliar with the location and availability of many campus resources. For TTF, two mentioned the requirements for research output and the strain this imposed on learning new technology methods.

When discussing “teaching ability” with participants, questions focused on how departmental practices affected faculty ability to create a positive learning environment along with suggested changes from the department to support their efforts. A couple of participants mentioned students in response to this question, stating aspects such as how to respond when several students were not submitting assignments, quit showing up to class, or not responding to emails. “There has to be a culture somewhere that they’re either afraid to talk to professors about things going on or people just don’t care if they submit things or not” remarked one faculty. Other faculty focused on department requirements as impeding teaching ability, mentioning ongoing assessment requirements and policies as “time-consuming” and “focusing on tasks other than teaching.” One participant stated that policies, practices, and expectations should be clearly outlined in a faculty contract prior to beginning work as a NTTF member.

When asked about other department policies related to interactions that may affect teaching ability, the majority of participants responded they were highly satisfied and felt an “open, supportive, and positive environment” existed. Others disagreed, stating they did not feel “connected in any way” to others in the department. Still others mentioned the physical separation of the small department in relation to other departments within the school as creating isolation and further disconnect.

Faculty suggested incorporating an “in-service” in the curriculum or within faculty meetings to allow faculty to work together, learn new skills, and develop course materials. NTTF also asked for stronger advocacy in school faculty meetings for NTTF inclusion.

Finally, participants were asked how valued they felt as a faculty member in the department. Although one faculty member did not feel valued, the majority of those participating indicated a high level of satisfaction with the department. Although faculty expressed the need for change and more interaction, they felt the past year had produced changes that were on track to include faculty and address many of the concerns expressed.

Obstacles/Challenges encountered

Developing a project examining faculty perceptions is challenging, especially when couched in the premise of eventual student outcomes. While it was stressed to potential participants that the focus was on external factors related to teaching that may influence or hinder student learning, casual conversations with colleagues indicated individuals were leery of questions measuring individual impact. This may have contributed to the low response rate, although time to complete a survey and participate in discussion may have also contributed.

Regardless, the exploration served to provide insight as to current department policies and concerns. Given that the curriculum is key to student learning outcomes, the dissatisfaction expressed about the curriculum and faculty interaction is pivotal. A review of course objectives conducted fall 2018 indicated varying learning objectives in sections of identical courses resulting in the same course being taught differently between NTTF and TTF. This “curriculum creep” resulted in different sections of identical courses being taught with opposing or contrasting learning outcomes, therefore dimensioning overall degree expectations.

Project Accomplishments

The results of this analysis served as an impetus to strengthen and improve faculty resources and interactions within the department. The intent was not only to indirectly improve student success, but to ensure all faculty members understood and felt valued for their contributions to the department mission. Steps taken to make these changes included the following, which were led by the department Undergraduate Program Director and Program Coordinator in conjunction with faculty input:

Focus on curriculum and course development

- Identifying a “primary faculty member” for each course, with a list of instructors teaching additional sections. Primary faculty members (whether TTF or NTTF) are responsible for major course concepts and directions, making sure to adhere to program objectives and degree outcomes. Other faculty members teaching the course collaborate with the primary member via email and teleconferencing calls to ensure consistency and course adherence to the curriculum. Instructors are encouraged, and welcome, to suggest changes and modifications but understand the core requirements of the course are subject to degree specifications.
- Revising Program Learning Objectives (PLOs) with input from NTTF and TTF
 - o Once updated, requiring faculty to include and link PLOs on syllabi to specific assignments
- Creating a five-year assessment grid with targeted courses for data collection to allow faculty insight as to when specific courses are assessed

Focus on improving interaction

- Monthly meetings with NTTF, both in-person and via Zoom teleconferencing. Since several adjuncts work in different states, offering a digital meeting form was imperative. Meetings were recorded for those unable to attend.
- Monthly NTTF meetings included:
 - o Overview of available resources for faculty
 - o Teaching strategies and instruction on available technology in online courses
 - o Information from student advisors on deadlines, student issues, and resources
 - o Opportunity to ask questions and discuss student or course issues
- Offering one-on-one Zoom or in-person meetings for those who wanted to learn a new strategy, review assessment requirements, or discuss issues
- Offering all faculty the opportunity for a peer evaluation, either within a face-to-face course or online
- Inviting NTTF to student events, faculty panels, and faculty/student luncheons

Focus on policies and procedures

- Developing a concise contract for NTTF that includes specific responsibilities and expectations for part time work
- Creating forms for specific student issues (e.g., incompletes) with specific steps and actions to follow

Efforts are still underway but the steps mentioned above have proved helpful and are beginning to open dialogue and conversations. Initial feedback from faculty is positive, with a noticeable increase in faculty attendance at monthly meetings and student events. Curriculum efforts have eliminated prior discrepancies in different sections of identical courses and faculty are working in teams to revise and develop content each semester. A shared folder provides critical resources to help faculty work with students and respond to student issues. Yearly academic contracts are provided to NTTF based on willingness to teach and expected enrollments for the academic year; contracts specifically outline roles and responsibilities in terms of curriculum development, assessment reports, and monthly meetings.

A final accomplishment is the recent acceptance (April 2021) of our manuscript on this project. Much of the narrative for this report was taken from the accepted publication, which will be published in the *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*.