The Road Scholars: Bronx Community College Adjunct Faculty Survey

Report November 2019

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Russell's day starts at 5:30 AM, when his alarm goes off. He takes the subway from Brooklyn to the Bronx, changing trains for another one that will take him to the stop nearest to Bronx Community College (BCC). He walks up the hill from the station and gets to campus just in time to teach his 8: 00 AM class. At the end of class, several students ask him questions about that day's class topic. He has to rush through these discussions, as he has to leave BCC to teach at 12:00 PM at Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) in downtown Manhattan. He feels guilty for short-changing his students, but has no choice but to hurry to BMCC, taking two trains again. If he's lucky, he'll get a seat and so he can look over his class notes before his class.

Russell arrives at BMCC with some time to spare and grabs a cup of coffee from a street vendor. He'll have a late lunch again today, or no lunch at all, as his class ends at 2:40 PM. After class, he stops by his department's adjunct office, which has two computers for over 300 adjuncts, to check his emails from both schools. He spends another two hours grading papers and wraps up by 6:30 PM. He heads back to Brooklyn and gets ready for another day of travelling, teaching, and student conferences. Russell also teaches at Pace University, located near to BMCC one day a week. He has had to cobble together these part-time gigs to make his rent. He's concerned about what will happen during the upcoming six-week winter break when he won't be teaching anywhere, and doesn't get paid by any school.

Why the survey?

The preceding vignette is fictional, but reflects a composite of the life of many adjunct faculty at BCC. Adjunct life is precarious, characterized by little or no job security and minimal wages,

compared to the amount of unpaid time spent on course preparation, grading, and meeting with students. But few full-time faculty, and indeed CUNY students are fully aware of the life of an adjunct.

In order to address this deficit, in Spring 2019, A Diversity and Inclusion Task Force of the BCC Faculty Council recommended that—as part of the goal of inclusion—BCC adjunct faculty should be surveyed to assess their attitudes towards various issues. At the same time, a similar exercise, known as the COACHE[1] survey, was being administered to all full-time CUNY faculty only, in all CUNY four-year and two-year schools. This larger survey was aimed at gauging full-time faculty about their level of satisfaction with three areas: working conditions and culture, support and professional development, and climate and collegiality. The COACHE survey did not poll adjunct faculty, even though they taught almost 60% of all the courses, and made up 77 percent of all the faculty at the college. The BCC adjunct survey was intended to complement the COACHE survey. It addressed the same three categories of workplace life as the COACHE instrument.

Who participated?

The survey questionnaire was emailed to all BCC adjunct faculty. A total of 105 out of 392 adjuncts responded, representing a 27 percent response rate.[2] Most respondents were lecturers (54%), followed by assistant adjunct professors (29%). Adjunct instructors were less represented (9%), and so were associate professors (5%) and full professors (3%). More men replied (51%) than women (46%), and white faculty predominated (47%), followed by Black/Non Hispanics (24%), Hispanics (20%) and Asian/Pacific Islanders (11%). Most respondents were between _____ and _____, with a modal age of ___. Most faculty had worked at BCC from five to 20 years (51%). Some faculty had over 20 years experience at BCC (18%), and another 30 percent had worked at BCC between one and five years.

As is typical of adjunct faculty in other institutions, the respondents worked part-time

(37%) and as part of their teaching responsibilities, taught at another CUNY school (20%), or worked full-time elsewhere (24%). Others worked part-time at BCC in non-teaching positions (17%), and a few (8%) were employed full-time at BCC. The rest of the respondents were retired from BCC or elsewhere (18%) but had returned to teach. In terms of qualifications, most faculty had a Master's degree (60%). Fewer had a PhD (29%) and a few had a Bachelor's degree (4%). Most faculty had earned their degrees over 10 years ago (60%), and the remainder were mid-career professionals earning their degrees within the last five to 10 years (18%) and from one to five years prior (16%). A few respondents (8%) had completed graduate school within the past year.

What Did We Find?

Working Conditions

Faculty were most satisfied with the administrative support they received in their department (85%)[3], their class sizes (72%), computing and technological support (68%), and pedagogical support (63%). They were satisfied with their collaboration with full-time faculty regarding class materials with standard departmental requirements (57%). Communication within and between departments, information about college staff changes, and BCC policies regarding students were all highly rated. Another strength was department level communication, such as the sharing of course design and materials (58%). Faculty had a high level of confidence in classroom security (53%), but their views about parking on campus were mixed, with 36 percent satisfied, compared to 29 percent who were not.

There were areas where faculty were dissatisfied with several logistical and teaching conditions. The main issue was the condition of campus buildings (61%), with urgent requests from respondents to "fix the crumbling building" and "fix the bathrooms in Bliss Hall." Public restroom facilities were a sore point, according to many respondents including this one: "I use

only half the bathrooms on this campus because they are dirty and in such disrepair." Respondents were also dissatisfied with their salaries (53%), inadequate office space (41%) and benefits (37%). Inadequate office space was a department by department problem, where some departments made the effort to provide seating, storage and computer facilities for adjuncts to share, whereas others provided very limited facilities. Several respondents had basic requests such as "provide us with adequate work space and a photocopy machine" and "devise a schema for shared adjunct office space." Adjuncts often had no choice but to meet with their students in small, crowded shared spaces, in public hallways, or the school cafeteria, where private and confidential information between both parties was open to public scrutiny.

Adjunct salaries continued to be an area of contention for these faculty vis-a-vis full-time faculty. Respondents repeatedly commented that they needed a living wage in order to continue teaching: "You can barely earn a living if you need to raise a family", and parity with full-timers was a frequent recommendation "keep up on this path of respect and equity for adjuncts." Some respondents were dissatisfied with the term "adjunct": "We must be paid equally. The term 'adjunct' should be eliminated as it's no longer remotely accurate and has become derogatory."

Faculty were mixed in their assessment of the academic standards of their students, with a substantial minority dissatisfied (39%). One adjunct cautioned the administration about being too permissive with its admission requirements: "A push to adopt as many students as possible and to pressurize teachers to pass as many as we can doesn't help anyone in the long run. Students who are given grades that are better than what they deserve based on merit are undermined in the eyes of prospective colleges or employers." Many adjuncts were assigned developmental or remedial courses for incoming freshmen. Anecdotal evidence suggests that more senior adjuncts with terminal degrees taught upper level courses, which could explain the discrepancy in these scores. In contrast, 47 percent of respondents were satisfied with this area.

Support and Professional Development

Adjunct faculty form the backbone of the BCC teaching corps, and the survey results indicated that they were receiving the support that they needed to do their jobs effectively. However, they were still not seamlessly integrated into their respective departments. As one stated: "we're not really included in the department policies and discussions until after these decisions are made. We are 'in it' but not 'of it'." Adjuncts relied on the College's formal measurement tools of their performance, and were satisfied with these, namely their student evaluations (67%), their classroom observations by full-time faculty (61%), and formative feedback from their full-time colleagues (64%). Within many of their departments, adjuncts were interacting with full-time faculty members more frequently than not, which indicated some level of cohesiveness between both groups. Full-timers served as both formal and informal mentors to adjuncts, which they found satisfactory (44%), although this departmental team atmosphere was unsatisfactory for others (27%). Therefore, respondents called for "more mentoring from faculty course leaders" and less "bias of full-time faculty towards adjuncts."

Despite these positive trends within many departments, professional development opportunities and their quality were more problematic for adjuncts. This area demonstrated the disconnect between part-timers and full-timers where equity in benefits was not in place. Requests for applications to attend professional conferences, for research grants and other types of assistance were usually confined to full-time faculty. There were very few such opportunities for part-time faculty, except under the aegis of the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), the union which represented all faculty. The PSC had in place a professional development fund established specifically for part-time faculty, and had demanded more pay equity for adjuncts as part of its current labor contract, which had expired in October 2017.

Nevertheless, a small majority of adjuncts were satisfied with the College's professional development opportunities (42%), and the quality of these (40%), compared to others who were

dissatisfied with both the opportunities (33%), and their quality (23%). One respondent offered a systemic solution: “we need more paid professional development workshops given by seasoned faculty from our departments. The workshops should focus on pedagogy and psychology, as we are here to manage our classrooms and to teach.” Of all the questions in the survey, this one concerning professional development had the largest percentage of neutral responses (39%), which possibly indicated that this area was one which these adjuncts had no opinion about either way, as it was irrelevant to them.

Climate, Culture and Collegiality

For adjunct faculty, their respective departments were at the core of their BCC experience, and shaped their perception of BCC as a whole. As with the previous section, adjuncts felt comfortable in their departments, as most (80%) were either very satisfied (54 %) or somewhat satisfied (29%). Most also felt comfortable at BCC (78%). Departments were rated highly for their leadership (76%), personal interaction with faculty (72%), diversity of the student body and faculty, the intellectual climate, professional interaction with faculty (all 67%), cohesion and unity (66%), and how adjuncts were treated by their full-time colleagues (65%). There were some exceptions as two respondents noted: “it would help if departments were more inclusive” and “invite us to meetings in order that we might make suggestions.”

At the college-wide level, some areas did not fare as well. Compared to the department level, the intellectual climate at the college was not as highly rated (49%), nor did adjuncts believe that the administration treated them satisfactorily (43%). Current procedures were seen as non-productive: “we are treated unequally by the administration, made to fill out time sheets, unable to split direct deposit between two accounts, and unable to file requests for repairs online.” However, college diversity was seen as satisfactory (70%), though college leadership was less so (51%).

Future Prospects

Adjunct faculty may have felt comfortable with their conditions of employment, namely department camaraderie and their positive interaction with full-time faculty. But they were most dissatisfied with their terms of employment. When they were asked what their major challenges were as part-timers, they listed earning a living wage (69%) as their number one priority, followed by lack of job security (62%). Most respondents (68%) were interested in a full-time position at BCC or any other institution they worked at. As an alternative, 66 percent would consider a full-time substitute position of this was available. As one respondent observed, departments needed to: "inform adjuncts about full-time or substitute teaching vacancies. At present, these are not widely publicized internally."

The prospects for BCC adjunct faculty continue to be precarious. With reducing enrollment at BCC and several other CUNY colleges, and class cancellations, job security will be elusive.

The PSC secured some job security for adjuncts teaching at least six contact hours within the same department for 10 most recent consecutive semesters by way of a pilot program of three-year appointments. These contracts took effect in 2017. At the time of this writing, all CUNY faculty were still to ratify a new collective bargaining agreement between CUNY and the PSC that, if successful, would extend this program to the 2023-2024 academic year.

Although these three-year appointments have been a major step in achieving job security, only a small minority of adjuncts—just over 2,000 throughout CUNY—qualified for this program. Most adjuncts lacked 10 consecutive semesters of employment, and in the same department or college. Most had experienced breaks in service beyond their control such as last minute class cancellations, or reductions in teaching hours. These contracts were not based on seniority, and these constraints affected many adjuncts with 15 or more years of teaching experience.

Being appointed to a full-time substitute position combined full-time salaries with some job security, but these positions were as just as uncertain. These positions depended on departmental budgets, and could be terminated during an academic year with short notice, if funds were not available. The teaching load was heavy, with these professors assigned four courses each semester, compared to full-timers who taught three. Full-time substitutes were also expected to serve on departmental committees and participate in other service activities. The time demands of these duties impacted heavily on the faculty member's productivity.

To conclude, adjunct faculty at BCC were a diverse group in terms of gender, ethnicity, credentials, age (???), and teaching experience. But they were faced with systemic factors that constantly undermined their satisfaction with this type of work, and limited their inclusion into the wider faculty. Many respondents cited the freedom and flexibility they enjoyed as part timers, but this benefit came at a cost. Their future prospects would still be precarious. This forced many adjunct faculty to make serious career decisions about their future as contingent employees in higher education, where they were being employed in even greater numbers.

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[1] Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

[2] The results of this survey cannot be generalized to the entire BCC adjunct population. However, as a measure of adjunct views, a 27 percent response rate is acceptable for a self-administered survey.

[3] Throughout this report, "satisfaction" refers to the scores for two measurement "somewhat satisfied" and "very satisfied" combined. "Dissatisfaction" refers to "somewhat dissatisfied" and "very Dissatisfied" combined.