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## A Field Study: The Business of Engaging Higher Education Adjunct Faculty

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# A Field Study: The Business Of Engaging Higher Education Adjunct Faculty


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## ABSTRACT

*Competition among higher educational institutions has increased especially among public and private institutions; this is exacerbated by demographic changes whereby the number of high school graduates continues to decrease. Additionally, colleges and universities face daunting competition challenges retaining students; therefore, they are reexamining their long-established business models. As a result, to offset costs, higher education institutions continue to increase the hiring of adjunct faculty. Currently, adjunct instructors account for more than half of all faculty appointments and that number is expected to increase. To amplify the situation, college and university accreditation organizations are requiring student retention and faculty work engagement as part of the effectiveness and accreditation process. Customarily, compared to full-time faculty, adjunct faculty are less engaged with their work as effective coaches and mentors for students outside the classroom. Thus, a quantitative study using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale questionnaire sought adjunct faculty feedback in terms of engagement with their work for academic and student success and how the results could be used to increase this engagement.*

**Keywords:** Adjunct Instructor; Work Engagement; Universities; Colleges; Business

## INTRODUCTION

 anDuzer (2016) notes that higher education institutions operate with a businesslike strategy. Similarly, Leih and Teece (2016) point out that educational institutions have become large organizations that are facing national and international competition. They go on to say that a better management business strategy is essential for these institutions to operate from a position of strength. Friedman and Kass-Shraibman (2017) hold that organizations that employ a businesslike strategy can address completion with a sustainability focus on employee engagement. They believe that a fully engaged faculty can give colleges and universities a competitive advantage over their rivals.

The current study seeks to contribute to the existing body of knowledge, by investigating adjunct faculty engagement. The goal is to help higher education institutions rethink their business strategies, to better leverage the knowledge, skills, and abilities of their adjunct faculty. This, in turn, will help them attract new students, retain current students ensure effective delivery of courses and increase graduation rates.

Well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, universities and colleges are witnessing academic challenges that include adjunct faculty engagement for student learning (Frye, 2017; Kezar & Maxey, 2015). With dwindling financial support from state legislators and increasing pressure to curtail cost, it has becoming harder to deliver state-of-the art education, recruit a sufficient number of college-ready students, and attract highly qualified faculty (Harraf, 2019).

For a college or university to accomplish its goals of student learning, it must have faculty members who are fully engaged in their work (Lawson & Masyn, 2015). For colleges and universities working on the issue of fully engaging both adjunct and full-time faculty in ensuring the effective delivery of degree program courses, it is critical how specific engagement practices might be employed (Roksa, Trolan, Blaich & Wise, 2017). This can be especially important in that colleges and universities over the past years, have been increasing the number of adjunct (part-time) faculty members. The percentage of adjunct faculty teaching at colleges and universities has increased from 30.2% in 1975 to more than half of all faculty appointments, with more than two-thirds of the adjuncts teaching at community colleges (AAUP, n.d.; Thirolf & Woods, 2017).

The role of a college or university adjunct faculty member is important. A degree curriculum can be enriched by having adjunct faculty with particular areas of expertise that more often than not comes from active work and connections to the workforce and the business community (Ridge & Ritt, 2017; The Room 241 Team, 2015). The use of adjunct faculty provides a college or a university with a wide range of practical and hands-on expertise that can foster learning success. Adjunct faculty members can teach courses that highly benefit student learning (The Room 241 Team, 2015) and, therefore, the students' success. On the negative side, adjunct faculty are often treated by colleges and universities as second-class citizens, less engaged with their work and not providing service to the university. Furthermore, no matter how qualified and dedicated adjuncts may be, the performance of the duties in the classroom is hampered by the lack of professional support and available resources (AAUP, n.d.; Mangan, 2015; Brennan & Magness, 2016). To intensify the situation, student retention can be adversely affected by faculty that are not fully engaged with their work. Thus, colleges and university accreditation organizations are requiring student retention and faculty work engagement as part of the effectiveness and accreditation process (Garcia, McNuaghtan & Nehls, 2018).

Consequently, it is in the best interest for a college or university's leadership to keep adjunct faculty fully engaged in their work as a way to retain students in their studies. Further, they should not withdraw from exploring every possibility to create an environment that promotes fully engaged adjunct faculty for high retention rates and academic success (Ridge & Ritt, 2017). In sum, institutions of higher learning should be thinking and striving to fully engage assigned adjunct faculty early and often maximize student academic progress and, therefore be in a better position to sustain and scale the most of their talents and enhance their performance (Vincente, 2017).

#### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The concept of employee engagement can be traced back to Kahn (1990), who suggested that for individuals to be fully engaged with their work, they must be able to engage "cognitively, emotionally, and physically during role performances" (Kahn, 1990, p. 694). Overlapping conceptually with Kahn's work on engagement, (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, (2006) defined worker engagement as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. Employee engagement entails the use of emotions and cognition in completing work tasks (Thompson, Lemmon & Walter, 2015). Gallup (2017) defines engaged employees as "those who are involved in, enthusiastic about and committed to their work and workplace" (p.1). DecisionWise defines employee engagement as an emotional state where we feel passionate, energetic, and committed toward our work (Wride, 2017). In turn, we fully invest our best selves our hearts, spirits, minds, and hands in the work we do. Others define employee work engagement as being characterized by energy, involvement, and efficacy (Schaufeli et al. (2006). Furthermore, employees express themselves cognitively, physically, and emotionally while performing their work (Saks, 2006). Equally important, engaged employees work toward the advancement of the organization's goals by feeling empowered, and thus, are committed to excelling in their work performance (Buhler, 2006). Research shows that organizations and companies that develop a high-trust work culture have employees, who perform twenty percent better and have a fifty percent less turnover than low-trust organizations (Zigarmi & Conley, 2019). A common theme in all these definitions is that an engaged employee workforce is the key link to the achievement of organizational goals and objectives that lead to winning in a competitive marketplace (Gallup, 2019).

Nowhere is the concept of work engagement more important than at colleges and universities because they are the center of higher education. In teaching curriculum courses, success is measured by effectively improving individual students' performances to meet explicit and implicit learning outcomes for their respective future careers (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). This approach to education aims to concentrate solely on the technical aspects of teaching. However, teaching is performed by humans, and without engaged faculty dedicated to attaining the course learning objectives, and mentoring students for success, achieving a vital part of the university's teaching and educational mission is difficult if not impossible (Huntington, Dick & Ryder, 2018).

Faculty engagement has become a critical factor in attaining teaching effectiveness and for higher education institutions' goals of educational quality (Holliman & Daniels, 2018). Accordingly, a university's leadership should create a work environment for faculty to be fully engaged in teaching, and services to the college or university (AAUP, 2019). Establishing and providing resources, incentives, and recognition have proven to be ways of engaging adjunct faculty. This can include pedagogical resources, professional development opportunities, rewards, certificates, and merit pay for performance, as well as recognizing adjunct faculty achievements, which are ways that can enable

college and university leaders to begin creating an engaging adjunct faculty work environment (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014). However, the attainment of the full engagement of adjunct faculty fully engaged in their work goes beyond such extrinsic rewards and can be as simple as management expressing appreciation for their work and giving support. Such interaction may also be an important factor in overall job satisfaction and the decision of adjunct faculty to leave or stay with the institution (Cerci & Dumludag, 2019). When the university academic directors understand how to inspire faculty work engagement, it can lead to more innovation, flexibility, and adaptation to the ever-changing learning and work environment (Luthans, Luthans & Palmer, 2016). A higher education institute with an engaged faculty workforce will allow for a greater focus on student educational needs, instructional quality, and strengthening academic programs (Cerci & Dumludag, 2019). Consequently, it is imperative for a college or university's leadership to find what level of engagement the adjunct faculty are in terms of their responsibilities and what factors and initiatives promote adjunct faculty to be fully engaged with the work (Holliman & Daniels, 2018).

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

In this research, the aim was to gain an insight into the work engagement level of higher education assigned adjunct faculty. It is with the belief that it is crucial to find evidence of the supposition and how it can assist higher education institutions to develop a business strategy for attracting new students, retraining students, education success, and higher graduation rates.

#### **Problem Statement**

The demand for post-secondary education is shrinking. For example, decreased high school graduates, student retention, lack of student affinity, and shrinking university budgets (Tight, 2019). Many colleges and universities are increasing the hiring of adjunct faculty to save in faculty costs to stay competitive. The problem is that, although adjunct faculty bring on-the-job experience and reality to the classroom, there are problems associated with their use to include lack of departmental academic support, a minimal voice in academic decision making, and few or no professional development opportunities or incentives (Vincente, 2018). Many adjunct faculty members seek to teach only as a way to supplement their income (Brennan & Magness, 2018). Others are teaching in several colleges or universities and may have little or no time outside the classroom student-faculty interaction. As a result, such lack of engagement can lead to poor overall student performance, decreased student retention, and low graduation rates thus, student learning suffers and many higher-level educational institutions are less competitive in registering and retaining students (Roksa et al. (2017). Therefore, university management must strive to have both full-time and adjunct faculty that are fully engaged in their work to maximize student learning, retention, and graduation rates Johnson & Stage, 2018).

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Data Collection**

A total of 194 university adjunct faculty volunteered to participate in this study employing the use of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale Survey. Notably, 81% of the participants were male, and 19% were female. Of the 194 study participants, 67% had a doctorate, and 33% had a master's degree. A total of 59% of study participants had an academic rank of Adjunct Instructor, 23% was Adjunct Assistant Professor, 17% was an Associate Professor, and 1% had an Adjunct Professor rank. 37% of study participants had taught 10 or fewer courses for the university, 15% had taught between 11 and 20 courses, and 48% had taught more than 20 courses.

#### **Task and Procedure**

This research study was conducted with adjunct faculty assigned to a large university with campuses worldwide. These adjunct faculty members volunteered and responded to the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale Survey (UWES). The survey contained 17 questions and was administered via SurveyMonkey. For each of the 17 questions, the participants recorded their responses on a scale of 1-7. A significant finding would suggest whether the adjunct faculty were fully engaged in work at the university.

Schaufeli & Bakker, (2004) state the UWES utilizes three scales to determine the level of work engagement: *Vigor, dedication, and absorption.*

1. **Vigor:** refers to a high level of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence in the face of difficulties.
  - a. *At my work, I feel bursting with energy*
  - b. *At my job, I feel strong and vigorous*
  - c. *When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work*
  - d. *I can continue working for very long periods at a time*
  - e. *At my job, I am very resilient, mentally*
  - f. *At my work, I always persevere, even when things do not go well\**
2. **Dedication** refers to being involved in one's work, finding meaning in one's work, being challenged, and experiencing a sense of enthusiasm, inspiration, and pride.
  - a. *I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose*
  - b. *I am enthusiastic about my job*
  - c. *My job inspires me*
  - d. *I am proud of the work that I do*
  - e. *To me, my job is challenging*
3. **Absorption** refers to being fully concentrated and engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly, and one has difficulties detaching oneself from work.
  - a. *Time flies when I'm working*
  - b. *When I am working, I forget everything else around me*
  - c. *I feel happy when I am working intensely*
  - d. *I am immersed in my work*
  - e. *I get carried away when I'm working*
  - f. *It is difficult to detach myself from my job*

### **Statistical Measures**

Descriptive statistics were produced to include Minimum (*Min*), Maximum (*Max*), Median (*Me*), Mean (*M*), Skewness (*Sk*), and Kurtosis (*Ku*) for the 17 questions evaluated. The findings led to a better understanding of adjunct faculty level of emotional work engagement.

### **RESEARCH RESULTS**

Descriptive Statistics for the 17 questions are given in Table 1. Fourteen of the 17 answers had a median value of 6. The overall mean response for the 17 questions was 5.14. No item showed *Sk* and *Ku* values that were suggestive of a severe deviation from Normal distortion (all absolute values of *SK* and *Ku* were lower than 2).

Table 1. Survey Results

Item	Min	Max	Median	Mean	Skewness	Kurtosis
1. At work, I always persevere, even when things do not go well	3	7	6	6.01	-0.63	-0.407
2. It is difficult to detach myself from my job	1	7	4	3.89	-0.55	-0.29
3. At my job, I am very resilient, mentally	1	7	6	6.00	-0.57	0.13
4. I get carried away when I am working	2	5	4	4.05	-0.57	-0.53
5. To me, my job is challenging	3	7	6	5.65	-0.44	-0.81
6. I can continue working for very long periods of time	1	7	6	5.61	-0.91	1.83
7. I am immersed with my work	1	7	6	5.67	0.17	-0.58
8. I am proud of the work I do	2	7	6	5.67	-1.41	2.48
9. When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work	1	7	6	5.78	-0.75	1.26
10. I feel happy working intensely	1	7	6	5.76	-0.75	1.15
11. My job inspires me	1	7	6	5.72	-0.75	1.10
12. When I am working, I forget everything else around me	1	7	4	4.42	-0.22	-0.66
13. At my job, I feel strong and vigorous	2	7	6	5.54	-0.50	-0.02
14. Time flies when I'm working	1	7	6	5.73	-0.94	1.33
15. I find work full of meaning and purpose	3	7	6	5.95	-0.77	0.32
16. At my work, I feel bursting with energy	2	7	6	5.48	-0.26	-0.26
17. I am enthusiastic about my job.	3	7	6	5.76	-0.97	0.84

## DISCUSSION

The aim of the present research was to gain insight into the work engagement of higher education assigned adjunct faculty. It is crucial to find evidence of the supposition and understand how it can assist higher education institutions in developing a business strategy for educational success. University adjunct faculty work engagement was measured with the UWES, which is a 17-item scale consisting of three dimensions, namely vigor, dedication, and absorption. The items are scored on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (“never”) to 6 (“every day”). The current study set out to understand university adjunct faculty engagement by using the selected database. Using the UWES, 194 study participants responded, and their scores were calculated. This resulted in an overall mean for the 17 questions of (5.47). The unique item for the Dedication scale was, “I am enthusiastic about my job” with a mean of (6.11). This was supplemented by “I find work full of meaning and purpose” with a mean of (5.95). These high means indicate the adjunct faculty strongly identify with their work because it is experienced as meaningful, inspiring, and challenging. Besides, they usually feel enthusiastic and proud of their work. The most characteristic item for the Vigor scale was, “At work, I always persevere, even when things do not go well” with a mean of (6.01). This was, supplemented by “At my job, I am very resilient, mentally” with a mean of (6.0). This indicates the adjunct faculty display a high level of energy and a willingness to invest effort in their work. The most characteristic items for the Adsorption scale were, “I feel happy when I am working intensely” (5.76) and “I am immersed in my work” (5.76). These were supplemented with “Time flies when I'm working” (5.73). The lowest item was “It is difficult to detach myself from my job” (3.89.). Based on the results, it can be said that most of the adjunct faculty members are engaged with their work.

## CONCLUSIONS

As noted at the outset of this paper, the changing landscape in higher education has caused institutions to rethink their business model. Leadership requires faculty to coach, mentor, and be fully engaged with students (Burns & Mooney, 2018). Research shows that when adjunct faculty members are fully engaged in delivering courses and, more importantly, assisting students in reaching their educational goals, the educational process is greatly improved (Ridge & Ritt, 2017). Therefore, a university's leadership must provide its adjunct faculty with the institutional support needed to be engaged to carry out its mission of maximizing student learning (Shulman, 2019). To accomplish this objective, university leadership should initiate change to support working conditions that enhance adjunct faculty work engagement to fulfill its responsibilities to students and the campus (Holliman & Daniels, 2018). An essential task for higher education in the 21st century is to create a business model that includes a fully engaged adjunct faculty



workforce. Higher education institutions that develop a serious business model that includes a strategy to develop a cadre of full-time and adjunct faculty engagement can add greater richness to their existing teaching and research programs, as well as provide tangible benefits that would help them meet financial goals. pto their quest to meet financial budget goals.

### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

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**NOTES**