

Towards Professionalism in Higher Education: An Exploratory Case Study of Struggles and Needs of Online Adjunct Professors

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to gain an understanding of the unique professional development needs related to the struggles of online adjunct professors. Twenty-one participants from within a purposefully selected group of online adjunct professors in the United States participated in this qualitative investigation. Data were gathered in two phases: the first phase consisted of a six open-ended-question Qualtrics questionnaire completed by the 21 respondents, and the second phase was follow-up interviews with six of the 21 participants along with the collection of pertinent documents related to professional development. Results indicate that online adjunct professors receive varied and limited professional development, and therefore need more training in the following major categories: course preparation and technology awareness, access to course materials and online resources, and improved communication interaction and engagement. The participating online adjunct professors confirmed that training within these professional development areas would be most beneficial for all stakeholders and should be provided by their employing institution or attained through self-initiated methods.

Keywords: adjunct, faculty, online education, professional development

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During the past decade, institutions of higher education have significantly increased their use of online modalities to deliver education services to meet society demands (Seaman et al., 2018). More people are realizing and acknowledging the fact that a college degree, especially postsecondary education, is becoming increasingly important, enabling them to become marketable and successful in today's workplace (Gehrke et al., 2015). The changes in student population demographics, such as the growth of non-traditional and distance learning students, are a primary reason that online courses continue to emerge and grow, thereby creating a need for more qualified educators. The rapid growth of online education demands careful attention be placed on the preparedness of the academic force in these online settings. Academic leadership must ensure that non-traditional and traditional learning quality remains consistent by addressing pedagogical needs of professors (Nash, 2015).

Online adjunct instructors' pedagogical decision-making regarding their instructional approach has a significant impact on whether the student's online course experience and outcome are positive or negative. Although many online professors have extensive teaching experience within a classroom environment, they may not possess the specific skills needed to teach online with the same level of confidence (Bennett, 2019; Mandernach et al., 2015). Research indicates that professional development efforts for online adjunct professors directly correlate to improved student outcomes, as well as greater faculty satisfaction, engagement, and sense of belonging (Nash, 2015; Nica, 2018; Rich, 2017). However, despite the correlation between faculty and student outcomes, the majority of online adjunct faculty receive little, if any, formal preparation, or professional development in effective teaching practices (Eagan et al., 2014). Since the use of technology for on-campus and online education has become widespread, more than half of new faculty appointed are part-time or other non-tenure attaining, fixed-contract personnel, and the number of full-time positions has declined (Magda et al., 2015; Rich, 2017). These changes within the traditional academic faculty setting could potentially have a negative impact on teaching efficacy, student learning outcomes, higher degree completion, and institutional financial solvency (Gehrke et al., 2016). With these changes and their potential impact on the educational community comes a need to examine current research in the field related to adjunct faculty and their professional development opportunities as the use of adjuncts continues to grow across institutions (Nash, 2015; Nica, 2018; Rich, 2017). The following research questions guided this case study:

RQ1. How do online adjunct faculty describe pedagogical struggles that affect their teaching skills?

RQ2: What professional development opportunities do online faculty describe as needed to mitigate these struggles?

Review of Literature

The definition of online education has evolved over time due to changing aspects regarding the nature of technology and institutional organizations. In a broad sense, online education is described as planned instruction that normally occurs through different technologies and usually a specific organizational structure (Bolitzer, 2019). Online education reaches a very large number of students, and it continues to gain in popularity. This phenomenon has led to new programs being developed at a wide range of colleges and universities, which is creating a competitive environment related to the recruitment, marketing, and retention of students and faculty alike (Allen & Seaman, 2017).

As the student population becomes more diverse, higher education institutions are providing more online education options to meet the needs of the growing population of students whose lifestyle are not best met by the traditional classroom (Nordin & Anthony, 2014). Most students who seek online higher education are adults who are holding full-time jobs; some have additional constraints that come with having children or a family. Higher education students who fit within these demographics may be drawn to the benefits of online education, which include accessibility, less commuting time, ease in management of school/work conflicts, and lower cost and need for childcare (Stack, 2015).

Due to the expanding number of online courses being offered at colleges and universities, and an increased reliance on the adjunct faculty supporting such growth, more research must be conducted to ensure that adjunct online professors are better prepared to meet the challenges associated with this evolving academic environment (Rich, 2017). This review of literature will specifically focus on adjunct faculty, their role and challenges, as well as professional development literature related to higher education and adjunct faculty. This literature review is meant to demonstrate the importance of these topics that led to the need for further research, as conducted in this study.

Adjunct Faculty: Their Role and Challenges

Adjunct professors can be described as non-tenured faculty who teach on a part-time or limited basis. Adjuncts can be employed to teach one or more courses during a semester or academic year, and they may instruct at multiple colleges simultaneously (Nica, 2016). Adjunct faculty typically perform multiple duties under the direction of the educational institution's academic department chair. Adjunct professors are usually motivated to teach for a variety of personal and professional reasons, including the emotional and intellectual rewards of teaching, the freedom associated with a flexible work schedule, and financial compensation (Bolitzer, 2019).

In general, online adjunct faculty are required to have a minimum of a master's degree and additional hours of work experience in education to be considered for employment at a college or university. Educational institutions tend to hire online adjunct faculty because of their flexibility and cost-effectiveness (Magda et al., 2015). Adjunct faculty bring some distinct and positive attributes to the classroom, such as special competencies, more diverse experiences, and innovative approaches. However, due to the special challenges that adjunct online professors and faculty face, valid concern exists that the quality of higher education will be negatively impacted (Nash, 2015; Nica, 2018).

Efforts to improve adjunct faculty teaching and development face certain challenges, in part because the majority of adjunct professors are temporary faculty working outside the tenure track (Finkelstein et al., 2016; Kezar & Maxey, 2016). The scholarly literature suggests that adjunct faculty receive limited institutional resources, services, and instructional development opportunities (Bojarcyk, 2008; Eagan et al., 2015; Gehrke & Kezar, 2015; Keehn & Martinez, 2007; Meixner et al., 2010). Additionally, many online adjunct professors have unique monetary and time management obstacles. This is due, in part, to their part-time status that may entail a lack of full-time benefits, such as healthcare, and lower wages, creating the need to be employed by multiple institutions (Nica, 2018). Many adjunct faculty are now seeking part-time or contingent positions with multiple institutions as a way to maximize compensation potential. The disparity of salaries and benefits among online adjunct faculty and tenured professors creates

additional stress on the individuals and educational institutions alike, which can impact the performance of the organization (Eagan et al., 2015).

Online adjunct faculty have further obstacles as they usually have a lack of support for beneficial professional development opportunities, limited contact and guidance from their employing higher education institution and limited or nonexistent support for research prospects (Burns et al., 2015; Nica, 2018; Terosky & Heasley, 2015). In the past, adjunct professors may have had full-time jobs and benefits outside the university or were retired and were not reliant on the adjunct wages as their primary source of income. However, the demographics have evolved, and now many adjunct faculty are relying solely on courses taught to earn a living with aspirations of obtaining full-time employment (Eagan et al., 2015).

Professional Development in Higher Education

Professional development for higher education professors, including online adjunct faculty, is a critical element in helping expose faculty to new techniques, technologies, and pedagogical practices and how these new practices can be applied to teaching. Furthermore, professional development is considered to be an essential component in the success of individual professors, as well as the educational institution in which they serve. Professional development has the potential to address many areas associated with a faculty member's duties and responsibilities, including their connection to the mission and goals of the education institution (Burns et al., 2015).

Professional development for online instructors can be used to introduce them to teaching methodologies that will help improve their effectiveness and enable them to succeed as faculty members (Williams, et al., 2014). Many professional development opportunities are accomplished effectively by using a holistic approach to training instead of concentrating only on specific areas (Rhode & Krishnamurthi, 2016; Rhode et al., 2017). Professional development programs that allow for flexibility and self-paced scheduling have also been shown to be successful, and instructors in these types of programs are usually more receptive to learning when it can be immediately applied to their specific subjects and shared with their peers (Baran, 2018; Elliot et al., 2015).

Professional development programs differ among educational institutions and discussions have occurred for years regarding the theory and efficacy surrounding professional development (Webster-Wright, 2009). However, in general, professional development programs are usually delivered using multiple approaches since there is no single model used as a standard (Kennedy, 2016; Trust et al., 2016). There exists a great variance between institutions regarding their interactions with online adjunct faculty that affects development opportunities, supervision, and employment policies. Although there is no recognized standard model for professional development, many institutions follow the traditional models using various training options such as workshops, seminars, webinars, and teaching guides (Kennedy, 2016; Zuber-Skerritt, 1994).

Professional development for online adjunct professors should be diverse and varied to meet the specific needs of instructors based on their different experience levels and background (Opfer & Pedder, 2011), as well as the need to assist them in engaging within an online environment (Baran et al., 2018). Effective practices in online instruction rely on structures such as course designs that promote online instruction, interaction among course participants, and instructor preparation and support. These practices can be effectively mastered with proper professional development (Crawford et al., 2012). Although many higher education institutions have implemented an array of programs to facilitate faculty in the development and instruction of

online courses and increase opportunities for knowledge sharing and recognition, online professors continue to be dissatisfied with the level of support for professional development of online teaching (Meyer, 2014; Terosky & Heasley, 2015). Adjunct faculty play a critical role in the expansion and sustainability of online education, but due to online educators' geographical diversity and infrequency of campus visits, challenges exist in providing the online faculty with adequate professional development opportunities without placing an additional time and financial burden on these professors (Cottom et al., 2018). Literature suggests that many distance learning instructors felt that while there has been a trend to address this highly desired asset, the structure of online courses and minimal physical campus presence has led to the exclusion of adjunct faculty from campus governance and collegiate interaction (Terosky & Heasley, 2015). Adjunct professors are more likely to participate in professional development when it is offered by their education department or program, when the development includes their colleagues, and when it is grounded in their specific work experience (Beach et al., 2016; Bolitzer, 2019; Moskal et al., 2015).

Although online adjunct faculty can provide meaningful expertise gained from actual experience, their teaching acumen must be developed through effective professional development (Rich, 2017). Online professors, due to their lack of face-to-face contact with the students, have special challenges. These challenges may include unclear lines concerning hours and days that the professor should be available, insufficient opportunities to give students adequate individual attention, and maintaining the quality of online instruction (Gregory & Martindale, 2016; Nash, 2015). A draw to online instruction for many higher education faculty is the ability to make higher education more accessible to a larger, more diverse student audience, many who might otherwise find higher education inaccessible; however, according to a study by Evans and Myrick (2015), a pedagogical challenge for online professors was finding the correct balance in providing educational access to a global student audience and providing the proper educational materials to meet the needs of the diverse student population.

Online adjunct instructors' pedagogical decision-making regarding their instructional approach has a significant impact on whether the student's online course experience and outcome are positive or negative. Although many online professors have extensive teaching experience within a classroom environment, they may not possess the specific skills needed to teach online with the same level of confidence. To assist these instructors with a smoother transition to online learning practices, they may need professional development support in the areas of student interaction, content management, and the use of technology (Baran, 2018). Online instructors have expressed that proficiency and familiarity with the use of technology are skills that are critical for positive online instructor/student experiences. In addition, access to dependable technology is a necessary component for a satisfying online education outcome (Evans & Myrick, 2015).

Problem, Purpose, and Research Questions

Research and literature addressing adjunct faculty and professional development exists, as has been explored in the previous sections. This literature focuses on topics such as the growth and future of online education and adjunct professors (Nash, 2015), the value of adjuncts (Rich, 2017), as well as the outcomes of professional development in higher education (Elliot et al., 2015) among others. Though these researchers have addressed several important educational issues, there is a need to continue to consider and address the specific pedagogical professional development needs of online adjunct faculty.

The problem this study sought to address was the lack of understanding concerning the specific and unique professional development needs of online adjunct professors. As the previous research has shown, although adjunct faculty bring real-world expertise and knowledge of current trends to the classroom, their teaching acumen must be developed and nurtured through effective professional development (Rich, 2017). This statement is also supported by Eagan et al. (2014), who acknowledged the fact that the majority of online adjunct faculty receive very little formal preparation or professional development in effective teaching practices.

With an increase in the number of students taking classes online, along with the additional number of online courses being offered in colleges and universities, more focus should be placed on promoting professional development skills and collaborative learning among online adjunct professors (Seaman et al., 2018). It has been recommended that scholars expand their research to include studies on pedagogical training of adjunct faculty to enhance job satisfaction and advanced education (Rich, 2017); this research study sought to expand this field based on these recommendations. Professional development for online adjunct professors may vary from the standardized curriculum used by traditional professors due to the unique challenges presented by a virtual environment, such as maintaining collaborative learning and technology awareness (Burns et al., 2015). Therefore, further research is needed to explore exactly what struggles adjunct professors encounter in their pedagogical tasks and how professional development can be catered to address these struggles.

Methods

This research used an exploratory case study design to further understand the pedagogical struggles and corresponding professional development needs of online adjunct professors. Case study applications provide the ability to describe real-life contexts and accounts of the participants and how their experiences may be explored and applied to the research problem (Yin, 2013). This methodology was appropriate for the stated problem because it enabled the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding of a problem using multiple sources of information and allowed the researcher to examine themes and patterns that emerged throughout the sources of data, all of which are essential to understanding the experiences of online adjunct professors (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research possessed the appropriate characteristics best suited for this study because it relied on the encountered experiences of real people, sought to understand the world from a person's perspective, allowed the researcher to personally gather data, and enabled understanding of the participant's perspective. In this study, the overarching goal was to capture descriptions of the experiences of the professors, which could not be sufficiently accomplished using a quantitative design.

A case study was used as an exploratory method of investigation of the specific problem and circumstances, which were bounded by the experiences of online adjunct professors as participants (Yin, 2013). It should be noted that a case study methodology has specific limitations that limit the generalizability of the results, especially considering the small sample size used in most case studies. However, thick, rich descriptions employed in case study research allow the context of the study to be understood and decreases the impact of the limitations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, the researcher simply sought to explore the experiences of the participants who were recruited for this study. The results are meant to provide an in-depth understanding of this set of participants and may not apply to all adjunct faculty in other contexts. Instead, it is the hope that the results of this case study will continue to add to the

literature surrounding adjunct professors and their struggles and professional development needs in an online educational environment.

Data Collection

Potential participants were solicited and recruited through the researchers' email contacts as well as distribution methods such as social media and personal contacts, with a link for them to participate in an online questionnaire. The study only recruited online adjunct faculty who taught at an accredited institution of higher education and were actively teaching online courses. Participants were also encouraged to solicit other informants through a snowball approach to reach an appropriate data saturation point. The online questionnaire included questions about the participants' background, such as how many online courses they have taught as well as open-ended questions about their pedagogical struggles and professional development experiences. The final question on the online open-ended questionnaire contained a space for informants to include their personal contact information if they were interested in participating in a follow-up interview. Twenty-one participants completed and submitted the questionnaire in the first phase of the research.

The group of participants who volunteered their contact information through the questionnaire received another letter asking for their participation in a follow-up interview. This study had approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and once informed consent was obtained, an interview was scheduled with the participant. An interview protocol was developed by the researcher that focused on using open-ended questions to allow participants to respond using their own perspectives and descriptions of their experiences. To develop the protocol, the researcher relied first on the previous review of literature to highlight major topics and ideas in the field in which further exploration was needed, such as further understanding of challenges adjuncts face (Rich, 2017; Seaman et al., 2018). Besides the literature review, the answers received through the online questionnaire helped guide the development of the interview. By building the interview based on the questionnaire responses, the research was able to go deeper into participants' experiences.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted using open-ended questions that further elicited details surrounding the participant's experiences. These interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes in duration and, with permission from the participant, were recorded with an audio device, and a verbatim transcript was produced using the transcription service Rev (<https://www.rev.com/>). Six participants volunteered for and participated in the follow-up interviews. At the conclusion of each interview, the participants were asked for any documents, such as examples of academic schedules, training workshops, or other documents related to the research purpose. The researcher then gathered the documents and removed all identifying information to protect the privacy of the individuals. The documents were classified using pseudonyms for each informant that provided the data.

Following data collection, the researcher analyzed all sources of information including questionnaires, interview transcripts and notes, and documents to understand the nature of the participant's experiences as it related to their professional development as an online adjunct professor. The data was coded for salient categories of information using the constant comparative approach, which is the process of taking information from data collection and comparing it to emerging categories. The researcher began open coding the data for its major categories, which created a core from which to expand the prescribed list of categories. The researcher developed an axial coding paradigm to visually display the interrelated categories to

help develop the connections between patterns and ideas (Creswell, 2014). By applying a practical data collection method and properly categorizing the information, the researcher ensured value, gained perspective, and attempted to eliminate extraneous and repetitive data. The following sections provide the thematic presentation of the findings from this research.

Context of Participants

The 21 online adjunct professors who participated in this study varied in acquired teaching experience and skills, levels of education received, and number and type of course subjects taught. The 21 respondents who completed the questionnaire and provided pertinent data were active and experienced online adjunct professors who met all prerequisites. The respondents varied in age, gender, ethnicity, geographic location, and were employed by different educational institutions. However, each professor was gainfully employed by an accredited university and possessed valuable knowledge that provided extensive data for this study.

The majority of the 21 participants, 14 (67%), had taught between two and ten online classes; two participants (10%), had taught between 11 and 20 online classes; one (5%), had taught between 21 and 30 classes; one (5%) had instructed between 31 and 40 classes; and three (14%) of the professors had taught between 41–50 online courses. These 21 participants, who were actively instructing online, collectively taught approximately 300 online courses, averaging over 14 each throughout their adjunct professor careers spanning more than fifteen years. This broad range of participants as well as the higher number of online courses taught by the participants supported the purpose of this study as an exploratory case study of online adjunct professors

Findings

The analysis of the collected data rendered four major themes pertaining to online adjunct needs and professional development. These themes were triangulated across the different sources of data to provide trustworthiness for the findings as well as to ensure that the data represented the intentions and purpose of the study. Only themes that were well supported by the coding process and data collection are presented here. These major themes will be further examined and supported by the collected data in the following sections.

Unprepared to Teach Courses

Professors consistently reported that they struggled with the fact that they were routinely expected to teach courses that they were not properly trained or educated to instruct. Though the participants admitted that they enjoyed teaching an array of courses within their respective career fields, they were often required to teach subjects that were not related to their specialties due to their institution's needs. Many of the participating professors admitted that they did not feel fully qualified to teach certain subjects or were required to instruct courses that full-time professors preferred to not teach. Several questionnaire respondents stated that they were expected to teach unanticipated courses without sufficient notification and preparation time, which created undue hardship and stress.

Besides in the questionnaires, multiple interviewed participants echoed the same idea of being unprepared to teach courses. One interviewee even stated, "So, in some ways I feel like a fraud because I haven't been educated in certain fields of study, but in other ways, I'm like, no, management is management, and I can apply those concepts to whatever things that students need to see," which indicated that he feels conflicted about teaching courses outside his area of

expertise. Another also agreed that he feels like the courses he is assigned are the ones that full-time professors do not want to teach and not necessarily the ones for which he was the most qualified or trained. One interview even offered the following advice which supports this theme: “If you want to be an adjunct, then you need to be current in the subjects you are teaching, because that gets you in the mode of understanding the students you’re going to be teaching along with their concerns.” Overall, the participants consistently reported their concerns regarding unexpected teaching requirements, which resulted in their lack of preparedness.

Need for Time and Resources for Course Preparation

Another major theme identified by the data concerning pedagogical struggles is that online adjuncts were not necessarily afforded proper course preparation time, nor were they provided sufficient professional development concerning online teaching resources. This was especially noted when this lack of time and resources corresponded with a course in which they felt unprepared to teach, such as was discussed in the prior section.

The lack of time and course preparation assistance among the questionnaire respondents and interviewees was evident throughout the data. Many participants stated that they were often asked to teach classes that they were not ready to teach due to insufficient preparation time. This needed preparation included understanding the course material and familiarity with the IT requirements. Participants stated that educational institutions should help ensure that all professors are provided with all required supplies, textbooks, and course materials, as well as training needed to apply them, prior to each class beginning. Additionally, online adjunct professors must receive the appropriate training to properly engage online students, which often represent a diverse set of students. One interviewee commented, “One of the challenges that we face all the time, especially online, is that we’ve got to be able to provide materials that all students can work from. I’m talking about IT in particular, for instance...”, which indicated a challenge working with providing online materials that were sufficient for all students.

Participants noted that their teaching skills were inhibited because they were not fully provided with required resources such as course materials, training for students with special needs, and training for student communication engagement and interaction methods that would help them prepare for their courses. The accessible resources offered to the online adjunct professors were either unavailable or inconsistent, and varied depending upon their employing educational institutions. Many participants noted that they felt they were not offered the same level of development as full-time faculty. Participants even offered suggestions in their responses that might assist school leaders in helping adjuncts. Participants suggested ideas such as ensuring that adjuncts are provided with all required supplies such as textbooks and other course materials prior to each course beginning and that adjuncts are offered development opportunities to enhance course preparation. Other ideas such as professional development opportunities for learning how to engage students in an online environment as well as adequately teach the diverse set of students often associated with online education were also suggested.

Learning Management System Technology Training

Along with the previous theme concerning the lack of time and resources for course development in general, many participants specifically described the need for significant computer technology training to mitigate problems associated with course delivery and mishaps that routinely occur. During their interviews, professors stated that instruction materials specifically relating to the universities’ learning management system (LMS) platform and other

technologies are needed to mitigate problems and ensure proper information sharing. One respondent stated that she relied heavily on her university's IT support team because her knowledge concerning the course delivery system was limited. She recommended that more attention be given to this issue and that IT support functions be added to faculty orientation courses. Other participants stated that while they did receive an overview of the university's online systems, they needed further and more consistent training to increase their skills in using the different platforms.

All participants relayed the importance of understanding the computer technology aspects associated with teaching online courses. Most respondents stated that they received some form of introductory training from their education institution such as one interviewee who commented, "I am thankful for the introductory IT symposiums provided by my university; however, I need more training to improve my computer skills;" however, many noted that this training was limited and did not necessarily meet their professional development needs.

Improved Communication Methods

Another theme supported consistently by the data was the need for improved communication methods with other professors and faculty, which was very important for these participants. As one interviewee lamented, "My college does not fully support adjuncts as they do full-time faculty." The ability to discuss academic issues and lessons learned with fellow faculty was noted as valuable to many participants in this study and a necessary part of continuing to improve their pedagogical skills. Another interviewee even noted, "It would be great if we could get a breather, a post-mortem, a hot-wash of what went right in the course, what went wrong in the course, and how we can improve the course." Several respondents identified the need for faculty engagement to not only enhance their understanding of academic policies and procedures related to teaching but to also help them improve their teaching abilities. One questionnaire respondent even specifically stated that she valued the opinions of her peers and tried to learn from others mistakes so that she could be a better teacher. Almost all respondents indicated that promoting effective communication was vital to their success as online adjunct professors.

Discussion

The online adjunct professors who participated in this study consistently stated that they face several common pedagogical struggles which, in turn, correspond with their professional development needs to mitigate these struggles. Many of the professors reported that they struggle with the fact that they are often expected to teach courses that they were not prepared to instruct because their roles are expanding to fill certain academic voids. The participants admitted that they did not feel fully qualified to teach certain subjects because they were expected to teach unanticipated courses without sufficient notification and preparation time. The participants within this case study also stated that their teaching skills were inhibited because they were not fully provided with required resources such as course materials and student communication engagement and interaction methods.

Many of the adjunct faculty reported that they were provided with insufficient instruction venues concerning online instruction. The participants also stated that professional development opportunities remain inconsistent for online adjunct professors, and that they did not typically receive the faculty development support needed to promote their pedagogy including LMS training. These assertions are consistent with findings of several other studies that address inadequate professional development opportunities for adjunct faculty (Bojarczyk, 2008; Eagan et

al., 2015; Gehrke & Kezar, 2015; Keehn & Martinez, 2007; Meixner et al., 2010). These results indicate several challenges that online adjunct professors should be prepared to face including the need to prepare to teach courses they may not be experts in with little professional development to assist them. In turn, school leaders and administrators should constantly be aware of these issues and mitigate these struggles by developing methods to improve these conditions and the overall educational environment.

The majority of participants agreed that educational institutions should ensure that all professors are provided with all required supplies, instructions, and course materials prior to each class beginning (Windes & Lesht, 2014), and they should receive proper training regarding student engagement using online resources. The participants described the need for LMS training to mitigate problems associated with course delivery and issues that routinely occurred in their courses. The professors stated that instructional materials specifically relating to the universities' LMS platforms and other online resources are needed to mitigate problems and ensure proper information sharing. These are also important implications for administrators who facilitate online learning because they must predict, plan for, and schedule courses that can be properly sourced in a timely manner; thereby enabling professors' ample time to prepare and confidently teach such courses. Administrators should also be prepared to provide development opportunities for adjuncts that reflect the same requirements as full-time faculty as well as reflect the student-centered environment in which adjuncts teach. These results also have implications for other departments such as human resources who should be aware of adjuncts' qualifications including prerequisites of knowledge with the institution's LMS. Issues such as these should be addressed as higher education institutions continue to monitor and assess student population trends to meet their educational requirements and evolving needs (Stack, 2015; Nash, 2015).

Since this was a small, exploratory case study, the results raise a number of opportunities for future research. Future research should begin to examine the specific types of professional development available to online faculty and the potential impact of these professional development opportunities. This study also pointed to some specific areas of concern, such as LMS training and communication. These could be potential areas for more focused research to further identify challenges and needed support for online adjuncts. Further research could also consider the differences in professional development across different types and sizes of colleges and universities.

Conclusion

The participant responses concerning perceptions of important professional development were overwhelmingly consistent with one another within this case study. Such consistency among the participants implies that they share common concerns regarding their pedagogical needs and professional development. Although these results may be limited in their ability to generalize to other groups of professors, they do provide some specific findings that help shed light on the pedagogical struggles and professional development needs of online adjunct professors. First, the participants reported that initial and continuous professional development is important for all instructors, especially training related to technology awareness and capabilities. Second, access to course materials is vital for all online adjunct professors. Third, improved and constant communication methods with other professors and faculty are very important for online adjunct professors. The implications of these findings for leaders and faculty include additional training provided to adjunct professors regarding specific LMS requirements of the course and ensuring that online faculty have access to required course materials before and while conducting

the class. Institutions of higher education should invest in professional development to support online adjuncts in these areas which in turn has the ability to impact student engagement.

These findings and implications add too existing literature in the field surrounding professors and how they fulfill their academic responsibilities to students (Eagan et al., 2015; Gerk & Kezar, 2015; Rich, 2017). As online education continues to expand to an increasingly diverse set of students, the faculty that interact and teach these students on a daily and weekly basis, whether full-time or adjunct, must continue to be at the forefront of this academic movement. Educational researchers must continue to expand on the growing research surrounding these faculty members and what they need to meet the needs of the diverse set of students they teach, while academic leaders must be willing to provide the development opportunities necessary to continue to promote and maintain a high level of professionalism in the higher education online environments.

Declarations

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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