

It's a Situationship: How Online Contingent Faculty Talk About Their Needed Support

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Abstract

This study used critical discourse analysis to examine how contingent faculty teaching in online programs talk about the support they need through the lens of organizational socialization theory. We interviewed 10 online contingent faculty across the United States from a variety of Carnegie-classified institutions using semi-structured interview questions. We used intertextuality as our method of data analysis. Our findings resulted in four overarching themes: our participants are off the radar and not included, their contingent role is a perceived gateway, their role is one of convenience for both the contingent faculty and the institution, and there is an imbalance of power between our participants and their institutions. Online contingent faculty need to feel more included in communication from the program or department and need to have more pedagogical and technical support. Additionally, they need more information to help support their students and professional development for themselves, as well as mentoring.

Keywords: Contingent faculty, online faculty, faculty development, adjunct faculty, online faculty development

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During the last 20 years, the reliance on contingent faculty at institutions of higher education has grown exponentially. In 2005, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) reported that “The increasing number of faculty who are employed in contingent positions, whether full or part time, represents probably the single most significant development in higher education in the last two decades” (p. 25). Almost 20 years later, nearly three-quarters of all faculty positions are now contingent (Colby, 2023) and many of these contingent faculty are teaching in online programs.

Most research on online faculty support focuses on the pedagogical aspects of the online classroom (Martin et al., 2020) and contingent faculty who identify solely as adjuncts (Butters & Gann, 2022; Dailey-Hebert et al., 2014; Mandernach et al., 2015). However, there is a dearth in the research related specifically to the support needs of faculty who are both online *and* contingent. Online contingent faculty’s motivational factors and incentive needs may be different than tenure-track or tenured faculty who also teach online (Chapman, 2011). Therefore, the purpose of our study is to examine how contingent faculty teaching in online programs talk about their support needs. Specifically, we want to know how online contingent faculty discuss needed support for their personal development and inclusion. Using critical discourse analysis (CDA), we seek to address the following research question: how do contingent faculty teaching in online programs talk about their support needs?

Literature Review

In the following section, we define what it means to be contingent faculty within higher education. We also review the benefits and challenges related to online contingent roles from both the institutional and individual perspectives.

Defining Contingent Faculty

There are a variety of definitions for the term *contingent faculty*. Depending on the institution, contingent faculty may be referred to as lecturer, instructor, visiting faculty, clinical faculty, adjunct, or another form. Contingent faculty can either be part-time or full-time employees and, according to the AAUP (n.d.), can also include postdocs and teaching assistants. For our study, we define contingent faculty as anyone who is a non-tenure-track employee working in either a full-time or part-time institutional role. We have chosen not to include postdocs or teaching assistants.

Regardless of how contingent faculty are defined, they hold most of the faculty positions in the United States. “Non-tenure-track positions of all types now account for over 70 percent of all instructional staff appointments in American higher education” (Colby, 2023, p. 2). In the last 40 years, colleges and universities have steadily moved from a majority tenured faculty workforce to majority contingent faculty workforce (Weingarten et al., 2023). In the fall of 1987, 47 percent of all faculty members in the United States were contingent, compared to 68 percent in the fall of 2021 (Colby, 2023). The increase in contingent faculty can be attributed to reduced budgets and financial support for institutions (Dailey-Hebert et al., 2014), and it has created a concern for the “growing reliance on contingent labor and its implications for institutions, the ability of all faculty members to do their jobs, and the future of academic professionalism” (Kezar & Holcombe, 2015, para. 16). However, contingent faculty, and specifically adjuncts, are

seen as more marginalized because they focus on the less profitable areas of teaching and service, rather than on bringing in research dollars to the institution (Kezar & Holcombe, 2015). Furthermore, as Kimme Hea (2009) noted, “this anytime, anywhere position carries risks of exploitation, especially for part-time, nontenure-track faculty” (p. 215).

Benefits of Online Contingent Faculty

There are several benefits to having online contingent faculty, both from the institutional perspective and the individual perspective. Online contingent faculty provide a larger applicant pool for institutions to select from, as well as greater instructional options for administrators seeking discipline-specific knowledge and skills that are often from an applied perspective (Fuller et al., 2017; Lyons, 2007).

There may also be a financial benefit for institutions of higher education related to the employment of contingent faculty (Halcrow & Olson, 2008; Magda et al., 2015). Contingent faculty, particularly part-time, rarely receive benefits from their institution (Hiller, 2024; Nittle, 2022). Online contingent faculty can be hired very quickly as the need arises due to course enrollment (Gappa & Leslie, 1993; Halcrow & Olson, 2008). Institutions can also cancel contracts quickly if enrollment is low or if a tenure-track faculty member can cover the course (Mueller et al., 2013). Online contingent faculty are not required to have a physical office, phone line, or an institution-provided computer. Likewise, online classes do not need a physical classroom, therefore saving the institution money (Magda et al., 2015; Tipple, 2010).

There can also be an individual benefit. Chapman (2011) conducted a study on motivational factors for online tenure-track versus online contingent faculty. Chapman (2011) and Rich (2016) both noted that online contingent faculty often want a flexible schedule. Chapman (2011) also noted that they desired the ability to bring their expertise to the classroom, the opportunity to work with new technologies and obtain new knowledge, and the connection with adult learners.

Challenges Related to Online Contingency

There are institutional and individual challenges related to online contingent faculty. Online contingent faculty may not be as invested or engaged in the institution (Dennis et al., 2022). Onboarding and retaining the online contingent employees who may only be employed by the institution for a semester or a year can be challenging. However, investing in that employee through a “cohesive total rewards strategy” is critical (Chun & Evans, 2016).

Individually, online contingent faculty may be seen as only temporary employees and may feel underappreciated and undervalued (Benton & Li, 2015; Dolan, 2011). They may also experience negative statements from others (Dolan, 2011). Likewise, they may have expertise in the field in which they are teaching but lack the knowledge of how to teach the course material online (Butters & Gann, 2022; Rich, 2017; Slade et al., 2017). Several studies found that online faculty may not interact with the institution’s instructional designers (Jaschik & Lederman, 2019; Magda, 2019; Melonçon, 2017). There may also be a shortage of time in preparing to teach the courses (Butters & Gann, 2022), as well as questions of who owns the online course materials if the online contingent faculty is creating them.

Another challenge is that online contingent faculty may not be physically present on-campus, so there may be a lack of inclusiveness for online contingent faculty (Mandernach et al., 2021; Mueller et al., 2013), as well as challenges related to awareness of policy changes and issues affecting students (Benton & Li, 2015; Dolan, 2011). Mandernach et al. (2021) stated that online contingent faculty are “even more loosely affiliated with their academic departments or programs than their on-ground counterparts, whose presence on campus may grant them more access to participate in department meetings, curricular revisions, or other forms of academic shared governance” (p. 296).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework selected for this research study is organizational socialization (Chao, 2012). Organizational socialization is built upon the premise that there is time needed for individuals to learn and adjust to a new working environment and their roles within that environment. According to Chao (2012), there are four foundational theories that support organizational socialization: (1) uncertainty reduction theory, (2) the need to belong, (3) social exchange theory, and (4) social identity theory. Uncertainty reduction theory (URT) aids in explaining the development of interpersonal relationships between individuals when entering a new working environment with strangers. URT can be used as a lens for “understanding what behaviors are appropriate, expected, or rewarded in a relationship [and] can help individuals move beyond cultural social norms or rules for etiquette, and advance to more meaningful interactions” (Chao, 2012, p. 583). The need to belong relies on two feature components—the need for frequent interactions and the perception of a bonded relationship that will last over time. In the work setting, the need to belong may materialize through social exchanges with fellow employees and a desire to be recognized and/or identified as a member of the organization. Social exchange theory looks at the ways individuals work to exchange goods and services both through direct and indirect exchanges. As individuals within an organization develop their relationships to one another and the organization, exchanges become more predictable, work identities develop, and the work becomes more meaningful for the individual. Tajfel (1978) first introduced social identity theory as the way individuals self-categorize within social groups, and then later noted with their colleague (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) that social identities are relational “to help us identify who we are and who we are not (‘us versus them’)” (Chao, 2012, p. 587).

Collectively, these theories build the organizational socialization process that relies on three stages: (1) anticipatory socialization, (2) accommodation, and (3) role management (Chao, 2012). Anticipatory socialization is the accumulation of knowledge and experience that individuals attain prior to entering their desired role within an organization. In this stage, individuals are looking for a role that will meet their expectations. During the accommodation stage, the newcomer has immediate needs reduced and is able to develop a sense of belonging within their working environment. According to Chao (2012), “if a newcomer is unwilling or unable to learn the lessons needed to assume a new role within an organization, it may be difficult for the organization to accept that newcomer as a permanent member” (p. 589). In the role management stage, individuals must continuously adjust related to their roles within work environment changes (technological, personnel, supervisor, etc.). These changes can be gradual over time or immediate; therefore, at times resocialization may be necessary for role management.

Methodology

We selected critical discourse analysis (CDA) for this study (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; van Dijk, 1995). Van Dijk (1995) refers to CDA as the “study of talk and text” (p. 17) as well as an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary approach to the study of discourse (van Dijk, 1995; 2011). CDA specifically examines the way in which power is “reproduced or resisted” through discourse and how “relations of *power, dominance, and inequality*” are navigated and produced through language by individuals (van Dijk, 1995, p. 18). CDA helps to reveal the hidden power structures in discourse (van Dijk, 1993) and asserts that “power is usually institutionalized and organized hierarchically” (Mullet, 2018, pp. 118–119). Therefore, given the hierarchical power structures within an institution, CDA was the appropriate methodological choice for this research because it provides a way to examine how online contingent faculty who hold the least amount of power in their faculty roles talk about the support they need through the lens of role socialization theory.

Positionality

Both researchers were former contingent faculty in U.S. institutions of higher education prior to becoming assistant professors. The first researcher has been a full-time lecturer at two institutions (both R1 institutions), both face-to-face and synchronously online, in which one was teaching four classes each semester and the other also included a 20% service load in addition to the four classes each semester. She has also been an adjunct faculty for four institutions (two R1 institutions, an R2 institution, and a Baccalaureate institution) all asynchronously online teaching one or two classes each semester. The second researcher has been an adjunct faculty for a community college, a Baccalaureate/Associate College, a Baccalaureate institution, and a visiting assistant professor at an R1 university teaching four courses per semester. She has taught in asynchronous, synchronous, hybrid, and face-to-face formats.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness or rigor within a study refers to the assurance of quality one has in the data that was collected, its interpretation, and the methods used for the study (Polit & Beck, 2014). To establish trustworthiness for this work, the researchers collected data across the United States. This allowed the researchers to triangulate the data (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Recognizing their own positionality to the research and as CDA methodologists, they chose to “reject a neutral, objective stance in [the] research” (Mullet, 2018, p. 120).

Participant Selection and Recruitment

Purposive sampling was used for this research (Robinson, 2014). Purposive sampling is the intentional and iterative process of selecting participants based on their experience with the subject matter being researched. For this research, eligible participants were between the ages of 18 and 89, contingent faculty (visiting assistant professor, instructor, lecturer, adjunct, clinical, professor of practice), and currently teaching in an online program at a public institution in the United States.

The researchers sent a recruitment email through the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) listserv and posted on social media websites within the researchers’ professional networks. The email included information about the purpose of the study, inclusion

criteria to qualify for the study, and a Qualtrics link so potential participants could click to read the informed consent, consent to the study, and provide basic demographic information. Participants were then contacted by the researchers to set up an interview. The semi-structured interviews (Schwandt, 2015) consisted of 18 questions that focused on support, their background, and reasons for being a contingent faculty member, developmental needs, and inclusivity. The interviews were no more than 1.5 hours, recorded and transcribed verbatim using transcription software.

In total, there were 14 respondents, four of which were not eligible. Nine of the participants were female and one was male. Five participants identified as White/European American, three participants identified as Asian/Asian American, one participant identified as Hispanic/Latino/a, and one participant identified as Middle Eastern/North African. Seven participants identified as part-time contingent faculty and three participants identified as full-time contingent faculty. Participants had experience teaching in six Carnegie regions of the United States and the majority of participants had experience teaching at R1 institutions (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.). Pseudonyms were assigned to protect the participants' identities (see Table 1 and 2).

Table 1

Participant Identifiers

Participant Pseudonym	Sex at Birth	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	Race/Ethnicity	Age
Angel	F	F	H/S	H/L	42
Anh	F	F	H/S	A/AA	43
Bo	F	F	H/S	A/AA	50
Dylan	F	F	H/S	W/EA	44
Emery	F	F	H/S	W/EA	47
John	M	M	H/S	W/EA	44
Nora	F	F	H/S	A/AA	51
Nour	F	F	H/S	ME/NA	39
Rowan	F	F	H/S	W/EA	56

Sage F F H/S W/EA 50

Note. H/S (heterosexual/straight), L/H (Hispanic/Latino/a), A/AA (Asian/Asian American), W/EA (White/European American), ME/NA (Middle Eastern/North African)

Table 2

Participant Institutional Identifiers

Participant Pseudonym	Years in Higher Ed	Total Years as Contingent	Years Teaching Online	Contingent Status	Region	Carnegie Classification	Modalities Taught
Angel	17	2	1.5	PT PT	SE ME	R1 M1	Online only
Anh	21	4	4	FT	SW	R1	Both
Bo	1	1	1	FT	SE	R1	Online only
Dylan	20	2	2	PT PT	GL NE	R2 M1	Both
Emery	12	5	6	PT PT PT	NE NE NE	R1 M1 Bacc	Both
John	22	4	7	FT	SW	R1	Both
Nora	25	8	12	PT PT PT	GL PL GL	R1 R1 R2	Both
Nour	5	1	5	FT	SE	R1	Both
Rowan	15	14	14	PT	GL	R2	Online only
Sage	20	4	7	PT PT PT	SE SE SE	R1 R1 R3	Online only

Note. PT (part-time), FT (full-time), SE (Southeast), ME (Mid East), SW (Southwest), GL (Great Lakes), NE (New England), PL (Plains), R1 (Doctoral universities—Highest research activity), M1 (Master’s colleges and universities—Larger programs), R2 (Doctoral universities—Higher research activity), Bacc (Baccalaureate Colleges), R3 (Moderate research activity), Both (Online and face-to-face)

Data Analysis

Intertextuality (Kristeva, 1980) was our method of choice for data analysis. Intertextuality examines the ways in which language intersects to create intertexts, shared speech

or discourse. According to Fairclough (1992, 1995), these intersections can reveal systems of power that perpetuate social problems, as well as communicate how social meanings develop through discursive events. Fairclough (1995) defined discursive events as “instance[s] of language use, analyzed as text, discursive practice, [and] social practice” (Fairclough, 1993, p. 138). Therefore, intertextuality serves to reveal not only how texts are interrelated, but also how they are used in social practice and socially regulated in the interpretation of discourse (Fairclough 1992, 1995). Because no text can stand on its own, an intertextual analysis is dependent upon understanding the intersections or interwoven nature of language where meaning is derived from prior texts (Kristeva, 1980). This can be achieved through the examination of text on both a horizontal and vertical axis. Horizontally, researchers are connected to the research through the examination of each individual text, and vertically through the comparison of each text to one another. As researchers navigate between individual examination and collective comparisons of the texts, intertext or interwoven voices appear that are coded so that themes can arise and meaning be derived. In this study, four themes emerged in relation to the needs of contingent faculty: (1) online contingent faculty needs were often *off the radar* to their institutions, (2) they perceived that contingency would lead to other opportunities within their respective fields, (3) contingency often created a relationship of convenience for both the faculty and their institutions, and (4) online contingent faculty navigate an extreme imbalance of power.

Findings

This study sought to examine how contingent faculty teaching in online programs talk about the support they need. In the following section, we unpack the four themes derived from our analysis. Overall, our findings show that based on the experiences of our online contingent faculty participants, their needs for support are situational—depending upon both their and their institutions’ needs—therefore indicating that there is not a one-size fits all approach to supporting contingent faculty. Their needs are just as unique as they and their institutions are.

Off the Radar

In some cases, our participants felt like they were off the radar to their institutions. This sometimes made them feel as though they were not included or did not belong—a lack of accommodation (Chao, 2012). Though some of our participants had prior work experience or anticipatory socialization (Chao, 2012) with their institutions as a student or employee, they did not have all the needed institutional knowledge for their instructional roles. This, at times, led to their institutions making assumptions about their knowledge of institutional policies and their ability to navigate an instructional role. CDA often exposes hierarchical power structures (Mullet, 2018) that may, at times, dismiss or exclude the voices of those with the least amount of power. This was the case for Angel, a part-time online contingent faculty who had attended the institution as a graduate student and had worked in a non-instructional role for the institution. She stated:

I had an interesting relationship with [institution], because I was a student there for my master’s and my PhD, and a full-time practitioner while I was there. And so I was able to get institutional knowledge frankly, from just my experience there in the time that I was there, so that was a little bit easier, because I was embedded into the fabric of the institution. I will say this, I taught a course for [institution] and I left [institution], and I

can see how it would be difficult to inculcate yourself into the fabric of the institution with the information I was provided. And so, but I also don't want to make assumptions that they didn't give me what I needed because they may have thought, well, she just left recently, and so she has enough information, so I'll say that. I did get an email from the chair of the department the summer after I taught asking me to attend an orientation for faculty, so that was good. But it was after, you know, I taught, and I haven't taught there since, and so there's that piece.

Sage, a part-time online contingent faculty, also noted that she had anticipatory socialization (Chao, 2012) as a former student at the institution and assumed that she was not provided materials because of her prior experience. She stated:

I adjuncted for [institution] and that was right after graduation. And I felt like I didn't have anything. I think I was overwhelmed too, because as a newly minted PhD, even though I had taught for the university, I co-taught [and] this was the first time I was on my own. So, in that instance, I didn't feel a connection. Like, I didn't feel like I knew really where to go or what to do, because there were some student issues. In that case, you know, so yeah, yeah, there wasn't any orientation or anything, because I think it was a kind of, you know thinking back on it, I feel like maybe they thought "Okay, well, she's been in the system for five years, she's been a student, she's been a co-instructor," you know, like, maybe, I don't know, I don't know what the thought process was...but I was on my own.

Rowan, a part-time online contingent faculty, also had anticipatory socialization (Chao, 2012) with prior experience at the institution which helped her to navigate the system. She shared, "But I'm kind of queasy about the lack of oversight. And because there's also, if I didn't have my day-role, I wouldn't know where to get support. And I know our contingent faculty are lost."

Angel and Emery, both part-time online contingent faculty, were so off the radar that they did not know who their supervisor was. Angel said:

I honestly couldn't tell you who the department chair is. I couldn't tell you who the dean of the college is because there has been no communication from them...It's kind of like, you know, you're here, but there's no acknowledgement of you being truly here, outside of that program coordinator [who reached out midway through the semester].

Emery said:

I think it was probably five or six years before I realized that that center director was not my boss. I didn't know that there was a coordinator for the position of the program I taught at. I didn't know that that person was my direct supervisor. I didn't know, even know that that position existed. I didn't know who the person's name was. I didn't understand how that whole thing worked. So, I always went to the center director with anything that I needed. So yeah, it was quite a long time before I even realized who my supervisor was.

In several cases, online contingent faculty spoke about being on the periphery or forgotten about entirely. Dylan, a part-time online contingent faculty, stated, “I really do feel as though I sit on the periphery of, you know, what’s happening inside.” Nora, a part-time online contingent faculty, also spoke about being forgotten. She stated:

I’m just a non-thought once they know that the teacher spot is filled. So, it’s not, I don’t feel excluded. But I know it’s going to be up to me to create feelings of inclusion or to reach out if I have an issue. So, they don’t, yeah, I don’t feel excluded but it’s just, you’re sort of forgotten about.

CDA helps to expose the power relationships between tenure-track and tenured-faculty and online contingent faculty in the distribution of departmental and institutional information (van Dijk, 1995, 2011). Because communications did not apply to them but did not explicitly state whether it applied, this created the perception that tenure-track and tenured faculty held the dominant role. This happened to Emery, a part-time online contingent faculty. She shared:

By not specifically calling us as a group, you know, constantly referring to faculty, but then it’s up to us to figure out, are they talking to us? Are they not talking to us? So, we generally make the assumption, okay, they’re not talking to us, because every time you do ask about something, then, “oh no, that’s for full-time faculty.” So, that’s very dismissive to just have this blanket message where it’s supposed to be [for] you, but it’s really not.

Perceived Gateway

In some instances, participants discussed how they perceived their online contingent role to be a gateway to additional opportunities. Through CDA (Mullet, 2018), this exposed a clear lack of anticipatory socialization (Chao, 2012). Participants perceived teaching to be their entry into a tenure-track position but spoke very little about other major requirements such as research. Dylan had been a finalist for a tenure-track position but after not being offered the position, she realized that maybe she could “enjoy teaching, and it could just be something from my CV, right? Like maybe if I want to be teaching down the road, being an adjunct would be helpful.”

Both Angel and John, part-time online contingent faculty, were looking for additional experience to add to their curriculum vitae to be more competitive when applying for tenure-track positions. Angel stated:

I frankly want to look at being a full-time [tenure-track] faculty member and so [I] thought that being a contingent faculty member would allow me an opportunity to get a grasp of what the full-time work would be, but then to provide me some opportunities in my, in my resume, to demonstrate that I can do the work since I’m coming from a practitioner perspective and not from a like, full-time researcher, full-time educator.

John noted that he wanted to have some additional teaching experience because he believed that is what institutions were looking for when they were advertising tenure-track positions. He stated, “I needed to get teaching experience on my CV because I am actively

applying and hoping to find a full-time faculty position somewhere soon as opposed to continuing [on with current position] day job.”

Convenience

Our participants noted that being an online contingent faculty member can be convenient for both the institution and for them individually. However, convenience sometimes created its own challenges and rewards.

Institutional

In instances where it is convenient for the institution, it may be less convenient for the individual. Often, the institution hires online contingent faculty with little notice or cancels the class with little notice. This can prevent online contingent faculty from reaching the stage of accommodation where they develop a sense of belonging (Chao, 2012), as well as lead to feelings of being expendable. John, Dylan, and Nour shared that they had one of these experiences. John, a part-time online contingent faculty, stated, “I had a week before the start of the class because they didn’t formally hire me until that short of a time before [the] semester.” He also noted:

I’m waiting to hear back from my department right now on do I or don’t I have something for spring...well, let me rephrase that, I was asked to teach something. And then two weeks later, it was yanked away. And then I was asked if I would be willing to pick up a different one, and that is stuck in limbo.

Dylan, a part-time online contingent faculty, stated that she needed, “a little bit more transparency about the schedule of classes. I didn’t find out until recently that I wasn’t teaching in the spring and that would have been nice to know earlier.”

In terms of the hiring process, Nour, a full-time online contingent faculty, was also hired shortly before the semester began and missed the full-day orientation for faculty. She shared:

I missed that part. So, there was like a whole day orientation, and I was in another conference. And I didn’t know that was on that day. So, I was kind of hired late, like July or something...It was directly after I signed my contract. So, I didn’t learn from the department head that it was on that day, and I didn’t figure it out on my own. So, I missed the orientation.

Individual

Being online contingent faculty can also be convenient for the individual. Online contingent faculty can make decisions about when and how to engage. When questioned about attending faculty meetings, Dylan, a part-time online contingent faculty, stated:

Um, it doesn’t feel relevant to me at the time. But I might be a little bit more engaged, if I had students right now, or if I were a voting member of a faculty meeting, but I don’t know that even if I attended the meetings, if I would be a voting member as a contingent faculty and not a full time [faculty].

Many of the part-time online contingent faculty noted that they were working other full-time positions and that being contingent faculty was on the side. Through CDA (Mullet, 2018), we can see that in some instances online contingent faculty spoke about being empowered because there wasn't a permanent commitment and there was flexibility in when and where they would work due to the online modality. Therefore, they are not bothered by being excluded because the expectation as a contingent faculty is that they are not full-time employees. Sage, a part-time online contingent faculty, shared:

There needs to be exclusion, like there's contractual differences between full-time and adjunct, and for me, I've got a demanding full-time job, that if my full-time job excluded me from certain things, I would be totally bothered.

Sage is also able to be selective in where she teaches. She shared, "I wouldn't adjunct for just anybody. So, ...I adjunct for people I already know and want to work with [and] want to work for."

In addition, many of our participants were professional practitioners in the fields in which they were teaching and could bring that experience into the classroom. Their discourse revealed that they found teaching to be empowering (van Dijk, 1995, 2011). Sage, a part-time online contingent faculty, shared:

I'd like to keep abreast of new things... I want my foot still to be in the field that I have received my PhD in and my master's degree in and the field that I had worked on before this current role that I have. And I like being amongst students, and I like teaching and it helps me grow and maintain my credentials and credibility, as well as helping out a rising generation in the field.

Nora, a part-time online contingent faculty, shared similar feelings due to her specialization in an area that is highly sought after.

The reason I continue to do it [be contingent faculty] has to do with what I teach and the specialization...I keep doing contingent, despite the pay...I keep doing it, because I really want these programs to have faculty with [specific degree] who can deliver [field] education that makes sense to students and is going to help them be better practitioners on the tail end. So, it really is that I want to grow the profession, I want to grow professionals.

Imbalance of Power

In other instances, CDA revealed a clear imbalance of power between our participants and their institutions (Mullet, 2018). The power imbalance was based on the structural dynamic or systemic protocol of the program. However, in other cases the imbalance of power was revealed through acts of academic hazing by peers and administrators.

Structural Dynamics

John, a part-time online contingent faculty, shared that the students were coming to him asking for help, yet he had no authority in the decision-making. He shared:

I've had a good number of students come to me asking me for assistance about their progress on their capstone for the master's program, because the course I'm teaching is tied in with generating some of the materials for their capstone portfolio. And I've repeatedly had to refer them back to the program head and say "I'm teaching this course as a lecturer. I don't have the authority to definitively say something or to make any promises." But that does put you in a little bit of a bind, when the students are saying, "Well, you're the one who's most responsive."

Contracts for contingent faculty may often be for the scheduled class time and do not consider the time prior to a semester starting for course preparation or even designing the online course. This reveals a power dominance or abuse of power (van Dijk, 1995, 2011), by the institution where contingent faculty may be uncompensated for their labor when they are working off-contract or before their contracted date.

Anh, a full-time online contingent faculty, shared,

There are really particular sticking points that are not working well in my class, but to have the space to really think about it and plan it out in a way that would work across 16 weeks. Like, I don't get that and that feels exclusionary. You're expected to do it in your own time, like in a summer, and when you're not on contract. So, you want me to do something that's in a time I won't be paid for.

Nora, a part-time online contingent faculty, stated,

I also think it acknowledges how much labor goes into creating a course before you're on payroll. So, I think that part of whether it's in a hiring letter, wherever it is, it's a sign of respect, and it's a professional norm. But I don't know that it's always thought that [the] norm is always followed for contingent faculty.

Nora went on to discuss the issue of class cancellations due to low enrollment after they are designed and receiving no compensation. She shared:

The expectation is that I come with a course to teach...I remember I had been engaged in the work for six weeks and I could have done all that work up front and then had a student drop below 10. And then they could have canceled my class, and I had done all that labor. And it's uncompensated. So, and until the 10th day, they don't guarantee, or whatever their census day is, they're not going to guarantee the course will, they will at that point, but they, you know, they could cancel it two weeks in advance. And you've done all the work already.

When questioned about service expectations, both Nour and Bo spoke about being disempowered (van Dijk, 1995, 2011) as contingent faculty and how they were not able to say no to the service load. Nour, a full-time online contingent faculty, shared that she was sitting on

multiple committees, including search committees, even though service was not part of her contract. She stated:

I am serving at the department level, the college level, the university level, [and] in different committees. So, I am in at least six committees...you know, things kind of add up... So, at some point, they will end... I think that I am doing a lot of service to be honest. It's not required, but I don't know, sometimes, how to say no. I cannot do that, especially if I was asked by someone at a higher position. I would just say yes.

Bo, a full-time online contingent faculty, had experienced a bit more anticipatory socialization (Chao, 2012) and had a better understanding of how additional duties and/or service requirements could negatively impact his role, and therefore, worked to set some clear boundaries to protect his time. He shared:

I've heard from other clinical positions, people with other clinical positions, saying that, be cautious, because the clinical roles...the boundary is less clear, so there could be additional responsibilities on top, and then adding more and more. So, [I] need to be cautious on that. So, I'm vigilant and trying to set a boundary if things happen.

Academic Hazing

In many cases, participants discussed the power dynamics between contingent and non-contingent faculty and how it led to a lack of accommodation (Chao, 2012) with feelings of not being included or being seen as "less than" or even "humiliated" or "bullied." When questioned what made her decide to be a contingent faculty member, Nour, a full-time online contingent faculty, noted that she wanted a tenure-track position but was not granted one and that as a contingent faculty, she received lower priority on resources. She shared:

Because people always think that oh, contingent faculty are kind of, we are a second class or, you're always left to whatever. If there's some amount of resources or anything, probably it's going to be distributed. And then whatever is left, you can have some things...I would have never felt this towards anyone before. But I think that when I am in this position right now, I do feel how others might have felt before.

Anh, a full-time online contingent faculty, spoke about being included in faculty meetings but feeling like she was not respected initially. She shared:

Even though I have been included all of these years, it didn't feel like there was an automatic level of respect at the beginning. I think it has come with time and gaining trust of others and proving that there is, there are things to contribute that are helpful to the program that can alleviate some work from other for other folks. And then they can spend more time on researching or whatever it is that they want to spend more time on. I think in the beginning, I felt like I was there to fulfill a certain need, like a certain teaching need, so everybody else could do their job. And in time getting, like establishing trust with everybody, more has opened up and [I] feel more included.

When questioned about whether the information in the faculty meetings was sufficient to do her job effectively, Anh went on to add:

I think most of the time it is sufficient. There are certainly times where the conversation is veering in some direction that I don't understand...I wasn't included at all. And so, it can be sold as like well, like you have other things to do, and this is not pertinent to you, but it felt very exclusionary...so it kind of baby-stepped its way to be more inclusive... It was like [they] assumed I, that I knew. So, then you have to make a choice. Do I ask questions and maybe look ignorant? Do I sit back and observe and just try to suss this out myself? So, I have to think about the power dynamics of the group and that can be difficult.

Bo, a full-time online contingent faculty, spoke about not being included in faculty meetings for her program where she is not seen as an equal peer. She shared:

But you know, from one perspective, that's [the] kind of thing that I feel excluded. But then on the other hand, I could understand that, that's also kind of a protection for me... It's hard for if I attend and then they talk about some sensitive things, then it might be hard for me to kind of say, like, should I tell my friend or not. So, I think it's okay, I can fully understand the decision of those faculties who decided not to have me in those meetings, and I can have less meetings. So, that's another perk. So, I don't mind.

Nour, a full-time online contingent faculty, also spoke about the imbalance of power between contingent and non-contingent faculty where she felt humiliated. She shared:

I do feel that some people sometimes not only exclude me, but try not, it's not probably only me, but they try to kind of humiliate contingent faculty. For example, there's this service thing, or if you're doing orientations. Well, yeah, because you have more time because all you do is teach and then there are those comments that kind of hurt. So, I'm probably like, that's the way where I felt I'm excluded. But, other than that, I don't feel, it's not that I felt I was excluded. I felt more that I'm not even, they don't consider me as part of the department or anything, like you just teach or something like that.

Rowan, a part-time online contingent faculty, noted that she felt bullied during a situation where she was contacted by an upper administrator (Vice Provost) about taking on additional students in the class that was already maxed out, without receiving additional pay. Here again, we see a power dominance or abuse of power (van Dijk, 1995, 2011), because the administrator did not go through the proper channels of contacting the department chair and instead reached out to her directly. She stated:

Because the Vice Provost actually emailed me...to ask me to do this, went around my department chair, which was unacceptable. They didn't know what they didn't know. And my department chair was furious because you don't do that. You go through the department. You don't bully an adjunct, which is really what this was, was bullying an adjunct. So, he very definitely tried to mediate that. But I couldn't say no, because I was

also going up for senior adjunct that semester. There was no way I could say no. I had to go along with it.

Discussion

Our findings show that the best way to define the relationship between online contingent faculty and the institutions they serve is that of a *situationship*. While our online contingent faculty are not in a romantic relationship with the institution, the structure of their relationship shares situational components that are undefined and inconsistent; it is one of convenience for both parties involved (Gupta, 2023; Langlais et al., 2024). Situationships often lack follow-up, have no future commitment, and are not exclusive, and are often superficial (Gupta, 2023; Langlais et al., 2024). Likewise, there may be some differences in expectation from both parties involved (Stanley et al., 2017). Situationships can be both beneficial and problematic. It all depends on what the parties involved are willing to accept and, in some instances, tolerate as their basic guidelines for the relationship.

As our participants noted, there can be some red flags in the relationship when the benefits are one-sided, they feel undervalued, communication is lacking, or they are not included in ways that could benefit their overall ability to perform in their role. In these instances, their lack of organizational socialization (Chao, 2012) to the institution's policies, procedures, and practice can negatively impact their overall well-being and sense of support. Comparatively, when these elements are in place, and their prior knowledge or anticipatory socialization is met with appropriate accommodations to help them adjust into their roles, they are then better able to achieve role management over time and self-navigate around institutional norms and nuances (Chao, 2012).

However, situationships are not meant in general to be the norm (Gupta, 2023; Langlais et al., 2024). Research tells us that higher education did not start out several decades ago thinking that contingent faculty roles would become the norm in leading higher education classrooms (Weingarten et al., 2023). Just as a situationship can create several shades of gray within a relationship, the contingency can become quite an entanglement for individuals within these positions. For our online contingent faculty, this creates a unique need for support that varies depending on their current and prior institutional knowledge, as well as instructional experience (i.e., anticipatory socialization). There is a clear need and desire for mentorship and training but at varying levels, depending on the individual. In addition, better lines of communication at all levels (i.e., institutional, departmental, programmatically, and policy, procedural, and practice related) is needed. This will provide them with a much-needed sense of belonging (i.e., accommodations). Our participants desired to be recognized and rewarded for the contributions that they were giving to their institutions. Otherwise, the situationship that they have entered through contingent positions with their institutions can lead to a deficit mental health impact and/or them seeking other employment when expectations for more in the relationship remain underdeveloped (i.e., a lack of role management).

Limitations

Our participants taught predominantly in social science fields, which could be a limitation. We suggest that additional research be conducted with online contingent faculty from a broader background. This work is limited to the perspectives of participant experiences within the study. For more generalizable results, a quantitative approach would be needed.

Implications for Practice

Based on our findings, we provide the following six suggestions for practice related to online contingent faculty. First, we strongly suggest that each program and/or department that uses online contingent faculty create a handbook containing pertinent information related to their roles and contact information for a supervisor (program coordinator and/or department chair), technical help desk, and payroll, and information to policies (i.e., academic integrity policy, late work policy, incomplete policy, attendance policy, and communication and grading policies), pedagogical support for how to teach online (through a center for teaching and learning or similar entity), technical support for how to use the learning management system, academic calendar, and bookstore. Many online contingent faculty provide support to their students, so information regarding student counseling services, student disability services, and the library is also beneficial. Second, we strongly suggest that online contingent faculty are evaluated on an on-going basis. Student evaluations at the end of the term are not enough to support contingent faculty and have been shown to not be effective in evaluating any faculty's performance, particularly faculty who teach online (Martin & Kumar, 2021; Marzano & Allen, 2016; Miller & Digges-Elliott, 2021; Piña & Bohn, 2014, 2016). There needs to be regular monitoring of the online course for engagement and mentoring. Third, we strongly suggest that there is a multi-layered approach to mentoring online contingent faculty. This multi-layered approach should come from an individual within the program or department and an online contingent faculty mentoring support group who would help contingent faculty navigate the program, department, and university on a regular basis. Fourth, online contingent faculty must have access to professional development for teaching online. Many contingent faculty are not prepared to teach online and need to have more pedagogical support. This can be offered through a center that focuses on teaching and learning or through an instructional design support office. Fifth, communications coming from the institution/department/program should be deliberate in their inclusion of online contingent faculty. This could be in the way of separate targeted communications for contingent faculty or using inclusive language in all communications. Finally, more accountability needs to exist in preparatory programs. Doctoral programs need to better prepare students for different types of faculty roles.

Implications for Research

There are five recommendations for research that we suggest. First, we suggest that further research be conducted separately related to the differences between full-time and part-time online contingent faculty experiences and support needs. Second, we suggest that research be conducted with tenure-track and tenured faculty on their perceptions of online contingent faculty. Third, we suggest that research be conducted on administrator perceptions of online contingent faculty. Fourth, we suggest that research be conducted related to the implications of using online contingent faculty on the quality of education. Finally, we suggest that further research be conducted related to preparatory programs' faculty perceptions of online contingent faculty and how they prepare their students for these types of roles.

Conclusion

The purpose of our research was to examine how contingent faculty teaching in online programs talk about the support they need. Our research suggests the needs of online contingent faculty are not being met. Online contingent faculty need to be intentionally included in communications from the program or department and have on-going check-ins to support them. In addition, given the online modality of contingent faculty, they need to have the appropriate knowledge and skills (both technical and pedagogical) to be successful in their positions. This includes having professional development focusing on best practices for teaching online.

Declarations

The authors declare no conflicts of interest for this study. The authors declare that approval was obtained from the institution review board at Kennesaw State University and University of Alabama at Birmingham.

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