

## PLANNING STORY

# Adjunct Faculty Can Increase Student Success

Create opportunities for them to lift graduation and retention rates.

by Ruth Guthrie, Cheryl Wyrick, and Carlos J. Navarrete

*Although the numbers of adjunct faculty members at most institutions of higher education have increased, those instructors rarely are included in programs to improve student achievement. But Cal Poly Pomona, by providing modest resources and mentoring, generates opportunities for adjuncts to positively affect student success.*

## ADJUNCT FACULTY AND STUDENT SUCCESS

The recession of 2007 had a negative impact on virtually every sector of the global economy. In the United States, 8.7 million jobs were lost and unemployment rose to 10 percent over a two-year period (Bureau of Labor and Statistics 2012). Universities implemented funding cuts that affected every aspect of spending, from facilities to faculty hiring. A report from the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities identified the three most common cost-cutting tactics: hiring freezes (53.5 percent), freezes on salary increases (46.8 percent), and cutting institutional student aid (43.7 percent) (Turner 2015, 187). Turner argued that those cost-cutting tactics led to problems with student achievement, graduation rates, and the distribution of faculty among colleges and universities.

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### 3 TAKEAWAYS . . .

#### . . . TO INCREASE STUDENT SUCCESS INITIATIVES

1. Change the role of adjunct faculty to **hold them accountable** for high-failure and low graduation rates.
2. **More readily include adjuncts** in various programs.
3. Offer the adjunct workforce **professional development, coaching, and teaching improvement skills.**

During the financial crisis, numbers of tenure track faculty decreased as universities relied more on non-tenure track faculty (hereafter referred to as adjunct faculty) to meet the educational mission of the university at a reduced cost. At the same time, an increased call for accountability for low graduation rates and high dropout rates emerged, particularly at public universities. The rationale was that a student graduating in four years, rather than six, would save taxpayers and parents important financial resources.

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At the end of the recession, universities moved from cost-cutting to growth in their strategic-planning efforts. Student-success initiatives began to emerge on most university campuses. Although the numbers of adjunct faculty have increased, those instructors rarely are included in programs for student success.

Hiring adjunct faculty presents advantages for colleges and universities: cost effectiveness due to lower compensation and/or benefits packages and lower resource allocation for professional development. Adjuncts help universities maintain a flexible labor pool, especially in times of budgetary crisis or changing student demand. They can supplement the expertise of tenure-track faculty, providing students with a classroom experience that reflects current trends in the field. Adjunct faculty are typically not compensated for or included in curriculum development or in developing strategies for student learning. Research indicates that adjunct faculty members are less available to students, interact with students less frequently, and spend less time preparing for courses (Umbach 2007, 109). Analysis of the instructional behaviors of adjunct faculty shows that they are significantly less likely to use student-centered teaching methods, which have been linked to student success and retention, compared to their

tenure-track peers (Baldwin & Wawrzynski 2011; Umbach 2007, 109).

Kuh (2008) identified 11 high-impact teaching practices (HIPs) that are associated more frequently with tenure-track instructional habits. Methods such as intensive writing experiences, freshman-year experience courses, and undergraduate research are connected to improved retention and graduation rates. However, it is more likely for a tenured faculty member to use those teaching methods.

Schibik and Harrington (2001, 3) found that over 73 percent of first-time freshman had 75 percent of their coursework taught by adjunct faculty. That study also showed that students with higher exposure to adjunct faculty demonstrated non-persistence the following term. Given that many adjunct faculty members are assigned large sections of introductory courses, it follows that they have more contact with first-time freshman. Including adjunct faculty in student success initiatives should be a simple, cost-effective way to improve graduation and retention rates.

Universities are moving away from a sink-or-swim culture toward a culture of support, with a focus on student success defined as improving graduation and retention rates, particularly for first-time college students. It is a cultural shift for faculty; departments once known for gatekeeper courses with high failure rates are now being challenged to reduce those failure rates while maintaining program quality. Often courses with high failure rates delay graduation and create bottlenecks for student enrollment. That new paradigm has implications for academic planning, faculty and staff hiring, curriculum design, and the use of technology to identify and guide students before they experience academic difficulty.

## CAL POLY POMONA: A HISTORY OF FACULTY HIRING

California State Polytechnic University, Pomona (Cal Poly Pomona), one of 24 institutions in the California State University System (CSU), is comprised of eight colleges and has an enrollment of 25,000 students. All faculty and staff are members of their respective unions, which negotiate collective bargaining agreements every four years. The university is a Hispanic-serving institution, ranked fourth in top public schools in *Best Colleges: US News & World Report Rankings (US News & World Report 2018)*. Recently, the school was ranked ninth by the Equal Opportunity Project in helping low-income students become upwardly mobile economically (Equal Opportunity Project 2017).

During the recession, the university froze faculty hiring and implemented faculty furlough days to reduce costs. Between 2008 and 2018, while tenured faculty numbers decreased from 557 to 518, adjunct faculty numbers increased from 570 to 945—all while student enrollment increased. During that 10-year period, adjuncts went from teaching 34 percent of the faculty teaching equivalent (FTE) to teaching 49 percent of the FTE.

The impact of the financial problems from the recession was significant. Faculty and staff hiring stopped, and maintenance and technology improvement projects on campus were delayed. Students struggled to graduate on time because of difficulty getting the classes, financial aid, and advising that they needed. In 2015, all CSU campuses received direction from the CSU chancellor’s office: Meet specific graduation goals, known as Graduation Initiative (GI) 2025.

Cal Poly Pomona’s current graduation rates and goals for GI 2025 are shown in figure 1. The GI 2025 goals include reducing the equity gap where personal or social circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin, or family background result in lower achievement for underrepresented minorities and Pell Grant-eligible college

students. The university also redesigned its institutional research department to provide meaningful data to assist administrators, department chairs, and advisors in informed decision-making. It is committed to increasing tenure-track positions by 3 percent per year, with the goal of getting back to pre-recession levels. However, because of faculty retirements and departures, Cal Poly Pomona has made only a small increase in the numbers of tenure-track instructors, continuing to rely heavily on adjunct professors.

Figure 1 **Cal Poly Pomona Graduation Rates and Goals** (Graduation Initiative 2025; Campus Goals 2016)

Metric	2015	2016	2025 Goal
Freshman 4-Year Graduation	17.8%	21.3%	38%
Freshman 6-Year Graduation	62.9%	68.9%	73%
Transfer 2-Year Graduation	17.0%	18.2%	29%
Transfer 4-Year Graduation	75.0%	72.6%	85%
Equity Gap for Underrepresented Minority Students	13%	12%	0
Equity Gap for Pell-Eligible Students	8%	5.5%	0

## INCLUDING ADJUNCTS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

Adjunct faculty play a large role in student success, but they are given minimal guidance. Yet by the institution providing them with modest resources, adjunct faculty can be more effectively engaged in the student-success mission. By including adjunct faculty in a more intentional way, Cal Poly Pomona creates more opportunities for them to positively impact student success.

## ADJUNCT FACULTY ORIENTATION AND TEACHING WORKSHOPS

The university's Faculty Center now offers an optional adjunct faculty orientation. Adjunct faculty are compensated for attending the full-day workshop, where they learn about teaching practices, policies related to their work at the institution, and the many teaching programs available to them. Teaching-improvement programs include course redesign for high-failure rate courses, Quality Matters certification for hybrid/online courses, and HIPs workshops. Programs requiring redesign of courses often come with a modest stipend for all faculty.

## SUPPORTING ADJUNCT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Professional development opportunities for adjunct faculty exist at several of the Cal Poly colleges. Those with industry-specific accreditation requirements, such as for business curriculum, support adjunct faculty by paying professional fees and providing travel and registration support for conferences on teaching and learning practices. The university offers faculty mini-grants and course-improvement grants to adjuncts who elect to participate in those activities. However, those are mostly awarded to full-time faculty.

## FRESHMAN-YEAR EXPERIENCE (FYE) COURSES

All but one college has a mandatory FYE course, which emphasizes transitioning to college life and building a sense of community within a student's major. Given the number of students enrolled, adjunct faculty teach most of the courses. Adjuncts were also included on committees to develop and plan activities that develop a sense of belonging to students at the university—particularly those who are underrepresented minorities and/or first-time college attendees in their families.

## INFORM ADJUNCT FACULTY ABOUT STUDENT SUCCESS RESOURCES

Services (i.e., academic advising) exist to help students, including those with disabilities, mental health issues, and technology problems. The challenge is that adjunct faculty members typically have very little information about how students can locate the services. Making that information easily available enables adjuncts to assist students in ways that impact their ability to be successful in the classroom.

## DEPARTMENTS AND DROP, WITHDRAWAL, FAIL (DWF) IMPROVEMENTS

New initiatives on data-driven decision-making allow people to easily see where students struggle and which courses have high-failure rates. Having the DWF data readily available is creating a cultural change from gatekeeper to an instructor using improved teaching methods.

## A LONG-RANGE VIEW OF ADJUNCT FACULTY

For some universities, there is no guarantee that tenure-track faculty members will ever reach their previous employment levels. Considering the role that adjunct faculty will need to play in the future, it is practical to conduct long-range planning. Adjunct faculty members are predominantly subject-oriented in their relationship with the university; expanding their knowledge of the emerging student success culture of a university creates a positive impact on retention and graduation rates (figure 2).

Figure 2 **Adjunct Faculty Impact on Student Success**

Inclusion	Potential Impact to Student Success
Adjunct orientation that communicates student success goals	Adjunct culture that is aware of university goals and the shift from gatekeeping to supporting
Professional faculty development workshops that teach the influence of high-impact practices on student success and learning	More engaging classroom experience for students, building a greater sense of belonging
Workshops given at a time when adjunct faculty with other primary jobs can participate	More access creates an amplification of the benefits in other areas
Information about the university resources that support students academically, professionally, and emotionally	Makes it possible for an adjunct professor to directly help a student when they need it
Resources for adjunct faculty professional development that promote classroom behavior that builds a sense of belonging	Creates a culture of teaching among adjunct faculty where their teaching skills are developed
Recognition of adjunct contributions to teaching, student success, and advising	Recognizing and valuing adjunct faculty contributions; a culture of respecting the contributions that adjunct faculty make to the university in teaching and for student success

Figure 3 **A More Inclusive Role for Adjunct Faculty**

	Traditional Adjunct Faculty: Subject Facing	Inclusive Adjunct Faculty: Student-Success Oriented
Recruiting	Recruit discipline subject experts with academic qualifications.	Recruit discipline subject experts with academic qualifications and teaching focus.
Hiring	Background check. Provide keys, office, and a textbook. Minimal meeting on course preparation.	Provide operational necessities and information on professional development opportunities.
Orientation	Optional	Mandatory
Mentoring	Minimal	Provide a faculty mentor who checks on the adjuncts' well-being and guides them in policies and support organizations at the university/college and department level.
Developing	Ad-hoc; unclear or unavailable.	Provide and promote opportunities for professional development to adjunct faculty.
Maintaining	Compensation for teaching only.	Compensation for teaching, attending professional development events, professional licensing, and participation in teaching improvement initiatives.

The adjunct workforce can be—and often wants to be—engaged at a much higher level. Figure 3 is an example of a career lifecycle for an adjunct faculty member. A student success-oriented adjunct is brought more fully into teaching—growing with mentoring and skills development—and toward aligning with university goals. Ultimately, the question is: How do we develop adjunct faculty so that students are served in a way that promotes learning *and* encourages intervention when a student has a problem? Adjunct faculty members play an integral role in educating college students, especially at schools where full-time instructor numbers have been so drastically diminished. The opportunity to engage adjunct faculty at a higher level re-professionalizes teaching, can improve job satisfaction, and has the opportunity to advance graduation and retention rates.

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### WHAT WORKED

- » **Broadening adjunct orientation programs** and compensating faculty for their attendance involved more adjuncts.
- » Providing development opportunities produced course redesigns and increased **knowledge of high-impact teaching practices** for adjunct faculty.

### WHAT DIDN'T

- » **Not communicating in a more intentional way** with adjunct faculty across campus diminished their engagement with the university.
- » **Orientation should have been mandatory or offered online**, so adjunct faculty would have been aware of the university goals for student success.

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