Examining the Needs of Adjunct Faculty in a Distance Education Framework in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper introduces a study designed to better understand the challenges adjunct faculty face and to instigate continuous improvement processes relevant to the administration, quality and sustainability of adjunct faculty in distance learning programs. It aims to identify and investigate, among key stakeholders, prevailing interests and concerns which are organized into four dimensions- (1) Faculty Onboarding, (2) Course Assignments, (3) Faculty Performance and (4) College Communication. Results show that adjunct faculty would like more feedback, more course information available prior to the course becoming accessible in the learning management system, increased lead time and frequency for the courses they teach, and more effective communication with the academic units and its points of contact. Based on these findings and a review of the literature, a list of short-term and long-term opportunities to foster adjunct faculty efficiency, effectiveness and other identified concerns is presented.

I. Introduction

Changes in technology, social climate, global health and general availability of other resources have created a unique landscape ripe for distance learning. Incidents like the global COVID-19 pandemic have caused rapid adaptation of online learning from early childhood education to higher education. While some organizations are faced with a plethora of challenges including transitioning from traditional face-to-face learning at brick and mortar institutions, other organizations are challenged to optimize existing distance learning capabilities to sustain and improve its online offerings and market position.

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University Worldwide (ERAU-W) recognizes the importance of leveraging human resources effectively and efficiently to meet global demand. It offers many face-to-face, online and blended courses during condensed, nine-week terms year-round. As a national leader in online undergraduate education rated by U.S. News & World Report [1], the University aims to provide the flexibility and availability online students crave. However, this model results in a massive workload shared by full-time and part-time (or adjunct) faculty. Similar to statistics that show that about half of the instructional faculty in the United States are adjunct faculty [2], the University has established an extensive adjunct faculty pool consisting of individuals from a range of demographics, professional backgrounds and phases of their career.

The College of Aeronautics (COA), which houses engineering and engineering technology programs for both undergraduates and graduates, employs nearly 700 adjunct faculty to extend far-reaching breadth and depth in each program area and to enable effective allocation of the resulting workload. To better understand the unique challenges the adjunct faculty face in this

distributed working environment and instructional modality, a study was sponsored by the College aiming to:

- Identify and investigate prevailing interests and concerns among key stakeholders
- Understand factors facing adjunct faculty
- Define short-term and long-term opportunities for improvement

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. We will present a brief literature review in Section II, the approach to the study in Section III, and the results in Section IV. Finally, we will outline specific recommendations that foster adjunct faculty efficiency and effectiveness and positively affect the university ecosystem in Section V.

II. Literature Review

Two developments in the education landscape will shape the discussions and relevant research in higher education for the foreseeable future. First, online education has experienced explosive growth over the past decade. According to reports from the Education Department's National Center for Education Statistics [3], the number and proportion of college and university students taking classes online grew solidly by 5.7% in 2017, even as overall post-secondary enrollments fell by 0.5%. The proportion of all students who were enrolled exclusively online grew to 15.4% (up from 14.7% in 2016). The share of all students who mixed online and in-person courses grew to 17.6% in 2017 from 16.4% in 2016. And the proportion of all students who took at least one course online grew to 33.1% in 2016.

Second, shrinking budgets and the rapid growth of online education have stimulated an increase in adjunct faculty in higher education. Disparities in available full-time faculty and other resources have resulted in controversial scenarios where adjunct faculty can make up an entire department's faculty [4]. Though adjunct faculty have been the majority in community colleges for some time, they assumed the majority position in undergraduate and graduate level institutions collectively between 2005 and 2007, pointing to a "structural shift toward contingent labor" previously predicted by [5].

In engineering specifically, adjunct faculty representation is far less, but no less critical. Data shows the adjunct faculty full time equivalence (FTE) represents about 7% (2,940 FTE of 36,776) of all engineering instructional positions [6]. Similarly, the National Science Foundation's National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics reports that about 10% of Science, engineering, and health doctorate holders employed in universities and 4-year colleges were adjunct faculty in 2017, i.e. 19,800 of 212,700 faculty positions [7].

III. Methodology

The College of Aeronautics at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University Worldwide expressed an impetus to ensure that adjunct faculty's concerns and challenges are understood and discussed, fair evaluations are conducted, prompt communication is fostered and the standards and expectations of the University, the College and the respective academic department are clear. The study of adjunct faculty status was sanctioned by COA leadership and carried out by a team of full-

time faculty from several departments. The main research relied on two data sources: Database Analysis and Stakeholder Perspective.

A. Database Analysis

The College maintains a database of all adjunct faculty. It contains personal information such as demographics, location, contact information and data about the individual's academic preparation. In addition, the data shows faculty rank, University training completed, time with the university, course assignments, course clearances (or approved to teach) and faculty evaluation dates.

For the purpose of this study, the database was used to identify adjunct faculty, determine their training levels, gather insight about the last time the faculty taught a course, completed a training or was evaluated, and to gauge the number of courses adjunct faculty were typically cleared to teach.

B. Stakeholder Perspective

College-Level Insight

College administrators were asked several contextual questions to understand processes for adjunct faculty selection, rating and course assignments. In addition, full-time faculty provided input about their experiences related to adjunct faculty during a college meeting. The results of these queries were a 22-question instrument to obtain adjunct faculty perspectives in key areas of interest (See Appendix for full instrument). Each survey item was mapped to the administrator questions asked below:

	Survey Items (#) Alignment
Dimension 1- Faculty Onboarding Who hires individuals for the adjunct faculty pool? Does adjunct faculty go through College-level hiring processes or does a central entity such as Human Resources make the decision based on apparent qualifications? How do we ensure faculty is prepared to teach for the College?	*17*
Dimension 2- Course Assignments Who and what determines which course(s) adjunct faculty will teach and which specific adjunct faculty to assign to a specific course?	**10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16**
Dimension 3- Faculty Performance Are adjunct faculty rated? If so, by whom? How often?	**18, 19, 20**
Dimension 4- College Communication Who is tasked with informing adjunct faculty of course assignments and other needs? How are they contacted? For what reasons would they be contacted? What is the expected lead time between course assignment and course launch?	**1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12**

Questions 21 and 22 were open-ended questions that allowed the participants to include additional comments as needed. Similarly, most items allowed participants to expand response beyond given choices via open-ended response fields.

Adjunct Faculty Survey

Purpose: The survey was designed to obtain adjunct faculty input on College communication, course assignments, preparation to teach courses, feedback and unmet needs.

Participants: Sixteen percent of the total adjunct faculty population (n=107 of 684) were randomly selected for the study. These individuals represented different performance ratings and overall service time with ERAU-W. Nineteen percent of faculty receiving the survey responded and 11% of email requests were returned by the server due to invalid email addresses stored in the adjunct faculty database.

Dissemination: The survey was distributed online via ERAU-W email. All participants were sent an email using their University email address per University policy. A custom link was generated using SurveyMonkey.com and anonymity was ensured.

Period of Collection: Data was collected from September to October (1 month total). A reminder email was sent to all non-respondents after the first and third weeks.

IV. Results

The administrator query confirmed that processes were in place for adjunct faculty selection and designation to teach each course. Though the University's Procedures and Operating Manual (POM) is available, the absence of a centralized location featuring real-time maintenance of the faculty database and other key information needed led to inefficiencies in the College's ability to meet the standard operating procedures for selection, rating and course assignments. The data also raised the question of whether the total number of adjunct faculty (684) outweighed the College's need.

Results from both parts of the study are combined and discussed in the following subsections.

Faculty Onboarding

ERAU-W requires all faculty teaching distance learning courses to take a specialized series of up to six faculty development courses, termed FACD herein. Each course is a 4-week combination of synchronous and asynchronous instruction and activities aiming to develop skills specific to the University's student body, distance learning pedagogy and technology. The specific number of required courses varies by modality but taking the full training series is optimal. For adjunct faculty, these courses are taken in good faith, and without compensation. Figure 1 shows that many adjunct faculty have not completed the full training series despite the common comment

that the courses are invaluable to their preparation. Notably, more than 50% have completed at least 4 FACD courses. This highlights missed opportunities to leverage existing resources to better prepare the current, adjunct faculty pool.
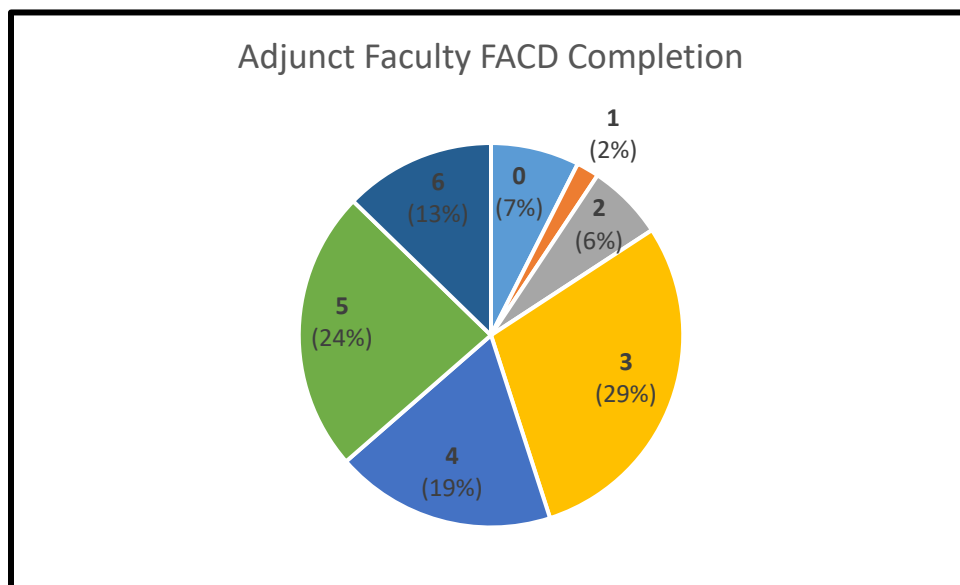

Figure 1. Number of FACD Courses Completed by Adjunct Faculty

Additionally, participants noted a need for improved access to course materials for planning and preparation purposes. One participant suggested that the availability of an online syllabi repository accessible by adjunct faculty, on-demand would allow them to not only prepare for future course assignments earlier but also suggest additional courses they would like to become cleared to teach. Others suggested that the contact with the course monitor (or course-specific POC) for any issues or questions related to the courses can be difficult.

There were also several comments that scheduling related issues impacted adjunct faculty preparation- i.e. short lead time between assignment and class start, frequency of assignment for specific courses and payment-to-man hours imbalance, especially for those courses requiring more preparation but having smaller class sizes.

Course Assignments

Specific course assignments are not completed by the College, but rather a centralized entity representing all of ERAU-W colleges. After the process is completed by the College to add an individual to the adjunct pool or to add course clearances for that individual, much of the course assignment process is left to scheduling. Forty percent of participants reported being contacted at least once per quarter to teach a course, while others reported as much as once per year (30%) and years between contact (5%).

Table 1 shows the number of courses adjunct faculty were cleared to teach, from one course to

more than 100 courses. About 21% were cleared for up to 5 courses, while 11% were cleared for 6 to 10 courses. It was also significant to note that 14% (or 98) of the listed adjunct faculty were not cleared to teach any course, requiring further investigation as to the root cause.

Table 1: Number of Courses Each Adjunct Faculty is Approved to Teach

Number of	Approved	Number of Courses	Approved
1	51	$10 < x <= 20$	85
2	31	$20 < x <= 30$	57
3	18	$30 < x <= 40$	30
4	22	$40 < x <= 50$	27
5	19	$50 < x <= 100$	97
$6 < =x <= 10$	76	>100	73

All but one of the participants had a favorable experience teaching the last course taught. They were asked if they would like to be cleared to teach more courses and which modes they were now cleared to teach. Thirty-five percent were satisfied with the current modes they teach but 30% would like to be cleared to teach in all modes. Forty-five percent were cleared to teach in all modes, 10% blended, 25% face-to-face and 55% were cleared to teach online. Fifteen percent would like to be cleared to teach face-to-face, 15% blended and 35% online. Then, 75% of the participants would like to be cleared to teach more courses with most listing specific courses of interest.

Moreover, thirty-five percent of the participants had not been notified of a future teaching assignment while 55% had been notified and 10% were on standby or currently teaching. Some participants expressed some concern that they had not received an assignment, even though they had completed the FACD series. Others also stated that significant time had lapsed since completing the series or being assigned their last course that new training would be needed.

Figures 2 and 3 show the time since the start of the last course assignment for adjunct faculty in COA. Table 3 is the same data, with the time scale changed to remove outliers from the view. Notably, there were faculty with as little as 1 day since the start of their last class to those with nearly 8,000 days (or approximately 22 years).

Faculty Performance

Ninety percent of participants reported receiving feedback concerning how well they performed but many noted that this was the result of student end-of-course surveys. When asked about University feedback concerning job performance, 75% said they received it, 10% said they rarely received any, 10% did not receive any feedback from the University and 5% said that they sometimes received feedback from the University concerning job performance. Thirty percent would like to receive additional feedback.
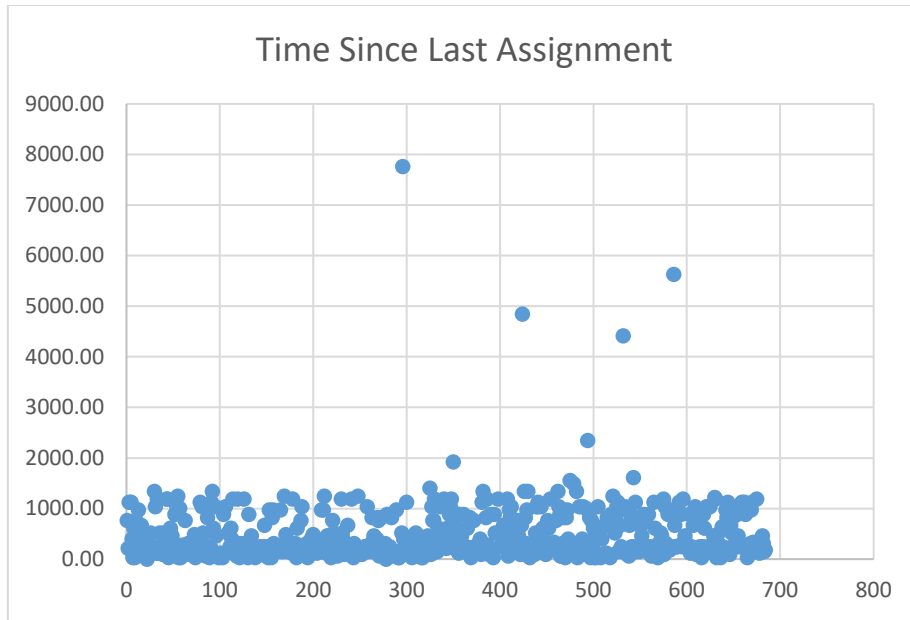
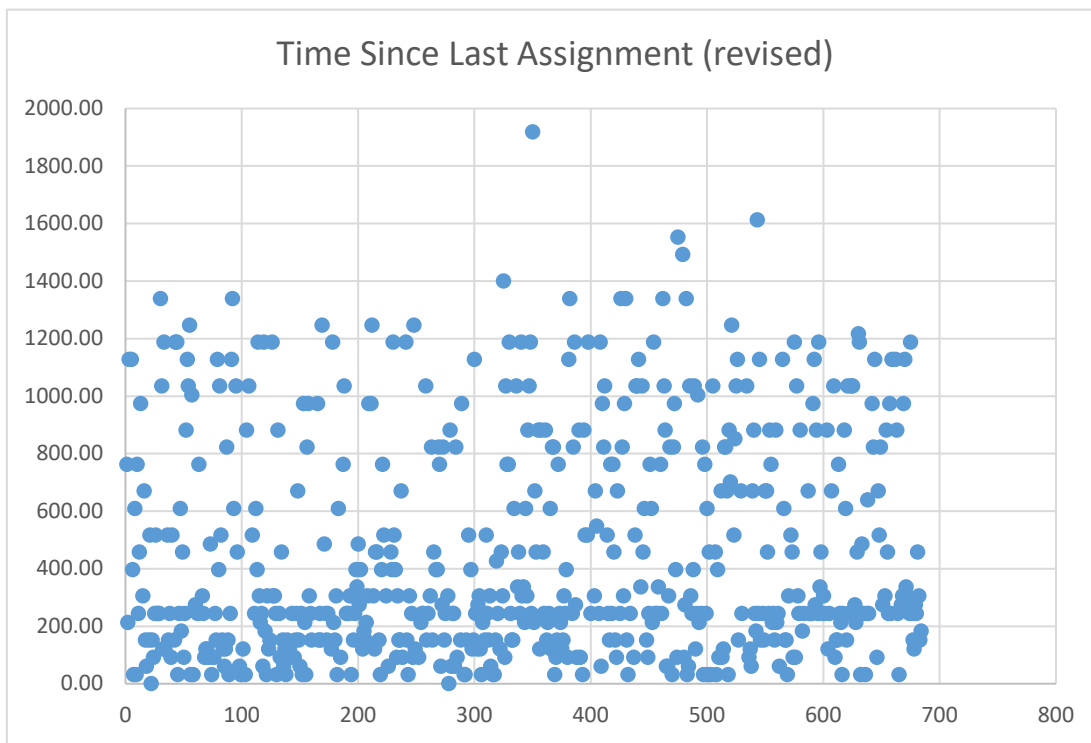Figure 2. Time Since Adjunct Faculty Course Assignment

Figure 3. Time Since Adjunct Faculty Course Assignment (revised view)

In addition, participants expressed substantial variance in the frequency and nature of the evaluation. Evaluations were reported as much as multiple times in a single term to a single evaluation over the full time at the University. Other times reported included annually, each term teaching and only when issues were raised by others. Based on the adjunct faculty

database, about 44% (or 261 of 589) of faculty that had taught at least one course had a formal evaluation by the College (not including student evaluations).

College Communication

Given the rather distributed and discontinuous nature of adjunct faculty engagement with the University, communication between adjunct faculty and the College is challenged, leading the way for weakened commitments and a low sense of community [8].

Each participant felt that email was the best form of contact with some concern mentioned of using the University email (as required per University policy) versus personal email or phone. Fifty percent of the participants did not have or know their point of contact (POC). Yet, 15% of participants reported having more than one.

Sixty-five percent were satisfied with the frequency in which they are contacted by their POC but fifteen percent were not, adding comments like "it would be nice to have at least one POC". Reported contact was usually concerning an assigned course and being more frequent at the beginning of the term.

Some participants referenced a desire to engage with one of the ERAU-W's 120 regional campuses on a more frequent basis. Recently, the central contact at these campuses was strategically eliminated and adjunct faculty must find other ways to identify and engage on-the-ground POCs in their local area.

IV. Recommendations

Results ultimately showed that adjunct faculty would like more feedback, more course information available prior to the course becoming accessible in the learning management system, increased lead time and frequency for the courses they teach, and more effective communication with the College and its points of contact.

A list of recommendations was developed by synthesizing the literature related to these findings:

Faculty Onboarding	
• Collect, organize and distribute information about available support systems, structures, controls, resources and contacts showing deliberate synthesis for target population	*[9, 10]*
• Provide faculty support resources and repositories for continuous learning, teaching tools and technology assistance	*[9]*
• Continuously examine institutional policies to address inherent and unintentional effects	*[10]*
• Employ more intentional information systems that can handle more coordinated storage, tracking and dissemination of information	*[11]*
• Examine opportunities to standardize certain expectations like time on task, student interaction requirements and training needs	*[12]*
•Ensure formal and informal training and education is available on both a voluntary and required basis	*[11]*

Course Assignments	
• Examine alternative institutional structures and policies that encourage adjunct faculty to invest their time, effort and resources beyond their contracted course	*[10]*
• Ensure that course templates and overall course design help to maintain consistency and quality of courses but also allows some level of autonomy to adjunct faculty in the delivery of that course	*[12]*
Faculty Performance	
• Create process controls and evaluation measures that promote teamwork among all faculty	*[4]*
• Provide detailed, written guidelines and expectations of adjunct faculty in the totality of their role that can be formally traced to the reward system, consistency of contracts and recognizes valuable contributions	*[9, 11, 12, 13]*
• Employ an open loop evaluation system that allows ongoing tracking, analysis, communication and synthesis and communication of findings for continuous improvement of the faculty and the institution	*[12]*
• Require more equitable scrutiny and evaluation among various faculty groups to communicate the need for quality irrespective of faculty status	*[13]*
• Allow time for active learning for adjunct faculty including reflection, writing and self-improvement audits	*[12]*
College Communication	
• Integrate the use of two way communication platforms and powerful technological tools into processes to help build rapport and preserve the personal attribute of communication	*[4]*
• Provide constant and consistent faculty-institution contact and disseminate information to adjunct faculty that acknowledges professional, timely and available support and opportunities are available	*[4, 12]*
• Multiple points of contact should be established with adjunct faculty including staff interaction and full-time faculty interaction	*[9, 11]*
• Foster reciprocal communication	*[4, 12]*
• Communicate institutional and program goals, priorities, policies, beliefs and culture that foster a holistic understanding of the collective vision and mission of the institution and how individual contributions impact the larger system	*[4, 10, 12, 14]*

Additionally, a brainstorm of more specific short-term and long-term initiatives to exploit these recommendations is captured in Table 2.

VI. Conclusion

Adjunct faculty have become an essential part of the higher education system, especially given the rise of distance learning. These educators have a direct impact on the quality of the education that students receive. Whether adjunct faculty are adequately trained to teach in available modalities effectively, actively engage with the College they serve via course assignments and ongoing communication or gain sufficient feedback to gauge and improve their performance directly impacts many aspects of the university ecosystem.

This paper introduces a study to understand various factors impacting adjunct faculty within College of Aeronautics at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. The results have led to a list of recommendations and several specific initiatives that could be adapted with varying levels of resources. While this study was conducted in the distributed learning space, it provides broad implications for traditional learning modalities as well.

Table 2. Prospective Initiatives

Extend invitations to school functions, faculty meetings and workshops, including pinning ceremonies	Develop a newsletter containing pedagogical strategies, teaching and general resources on campus and calendar items
Ensure department wide recognition of adjunct faculty	Give adjunct faculty preference for full-time positions
Centralize hiring, assignments and evaluation	Reading circles, brown bag lunches, informal and formal sessions
Set limits to the number of adjunct faculty an institution could hire or setting full-time/part-time faculty ratios	Schedule specific times for all faculty to meet, plan, share resources and discuss different topics
Consider consolidating more consistent adjunct needs into full-time positions	Appoint a liaison to serve as the voice of adjunct faculty
Send personalized thank you from leadership	Increase the lead time for course assignment
Send regular communications from administrators and colleagues that are both meaningful and relevant to their teaching	Consider diversity in the orientation and FACD modality-e.g. an online orientation CD, a meet and greet, etc.
Develop an incentive program that offers priority scheduling for adjunct faculty that demonstrate an ongoing commitment to professional growth through participation in faculty development initiatives	

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Appendix. Survey Questions & Results

Survey Item	Fixed Response Results
1. How does the Department of Aeronautics usually contact you?	100% Email
2. Is this the best way to contact you?	90% Yes
3. Who is your point of contact at ERAU?	15% Identified; 50% Didn't have one; 35% Unknown
4. Do you have more than one point of contact at the University?	15% Yes
5. How often are you contacted?	*20% Once a Year; 25% Once a month; 5% Everyday; 5% 2/3 times week; 45% As needed (class)*
6. Are you satisfied with the frequency of contact?	65% Yes; 15% No; 20% Other
7. What is the context of your contact with ERAU?	Teaching (majority); technical difficulties; curriculum approvals; upcoming events; newsletter and other University generic information
8. Are you satisfied with the frequency of contact?	75% Yes; 20% No; 5% Other
9. How often are you contacted to teach a course?	*30% Once year, 40% Once a quarter, 5% Years between contact; 25% Other*
10. Would you like to be asked to teach courses more often?	80% Yes, 5% No, 15% Other
11. What was the last course you for ERAU and when?	N/A
12. Have you been notified of your next teaching experience?	10% Other (on Standby or currently teaching a course), 35% No, 55% Yes
13. Which additional modes would you like to be cleared to teach in?	15% Face to Face, 15% Blended, 35% Online, 35%; Are satisfied with the current modes they teach in- 30% Would like to be cleared to teach in all modes
14. Which modes are you cleared to teach?	45% Are cleared to teach in all modes, 10% Are cleared to teach in blended, 25% Are cleared to teach Face to Face, 55% Are cleared to teach online
15. What course are you cleared to teach?	N/A
16. Are there any additional course you would like to be cleared to teach?	N/A
17. What, if anything, could the University do to help you better prepare to teach a course?	N/A
18. Were you made aware of how well the students/course observer felt you performed after you taught your last course?	90% Yes; 5% No; 5% Other
19. Do you receive any feedback from the University concerning job performance? What kind?	75% Yes; 5% Sometimes; 10% No; 10% Rarely
20. Would you like to receive additional feedback concerning your performance?	30% Yes; 70% No

21. Additional questions you feel are missing from the survey	N/A
22. Additional comments including your name if you would like it included	N/A