

Not Me, Not Here: Adjunct Faculty Perceptions of Grade Inflation at U.S. Colleges and Universities

Billy C. Johnson
Richmond Community College, USA

Danny E. Malone Jr.¹
Coastal Carolina University, USA

ABSTRACT

This study examines adjunct faculty perceptions of grade inflation. The research used a qualitative phenomenological study methodology. Twenty-three respondents participated in the research after being recruited using Facebook groups and were interviewed by phone in semi-structured interviews. The data gathered indicated variation regarding awareness and perception of grade inflation in their classes and at their institution. Also, participants did not believe they were participants in grade inflation or that their institutions were contributors to the problem, even though none of them had received training specifically geared to preventing grade inflation. Findings suggest institutions should look for ways to support adjunct faculty given they are the new majority in regards to instructors in higher education.

KEYWORDS: adjunct faculty, grade inflation, higher education, phenomenology and perception.

For nearly a century, the full-time tenure-track professoriate has been the prevailing model in the American university (Kezar, 2013). In the past 35 years, however, the paradigm changed dramatically. Replacing the full-time tenure-track model, the latest model repositions the adjunct at the forefront and situates the adjuncts as the majority among faculty members (Kezar, 2013). An adjunct is a part-time non-tenure-track college or university instructor (Yakoboski, 2016). In four-year institutions, adjunct faculty have experienced a 422.1 percent rate of growth between 1970 and 2003 (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). This increasing dependency on adjunct faculty by American higher education has been coined *adjunctivitis* (Fruscione, 2014). Fruscione (2014) asserted adjunctivitis creates inferior working conditions (lack of office space, little to no faculty rights, little opportunity for advancement) and lackluster compensation (lack of benefits). As a result, adjunct faculty are employed at more than one institution to earn a livable wage, constant pressure to perform due to a lack of job security. Moreover, adjunctivitis can be related to negative experiences of adjunct faculty feeling unheard (Fruscione, 2014), isolation (Dolan, 2011), and marginalization and inferiority from their full-time faculty and administration counterparts.

While adjunctivitis is real, what is also apparent is that without the same status as full-time faculty, over the past thirty years, adjuncts have become the silent majority among university and college professors (Caruth & Caruth, 2013). The percentage of adjunct instructors serving on post-

¹ Corresponding Author: An assistant Professor of Criminology in College of Education and Social Sciences. Coastal Carolina University. Penny Hall, Office 219, Spadoni, USA. E-Mail: dmalone2@coastal.edu

secondary faculties rose by more than 70% from the 1970s into the early 1990s. Charfauros and Tierney (1999) detailed this growth of adjunct faculty as a percentage of the total faculty from 22% in the 1970s to 32-33% in the 1980s to 42% by the early 1990s. According to current research, adjuncts make up approximately 73% of the instructional faculty in US colleges and universities (American Association of University Professors [AAUP], 2018). This would undoubtedly change the dynamics of university classrooms, given that these instructors have very little power in the face of students who could influence their chances of contract renewals. Given that, there has to be a discussion about grade inflation.

A. C. Taylor (2007) defined grade inflation as when “a student’s grade does not reflect what others perceive to be an accurate measurement of knowledge” (p. 1). Grade inflation continues to be a factor on campuses across the United States, including Princeton, Harvard, Duke, Dartmouth, Columbia, and Cornell (AAUP, 2018; Johnson, 2003; Smith & Fleisher, 2011). Similarly, Chowdhury (2018) asserted that grade inflation is a global phenomenon and the norm in many higher education institutions across the world.

Researchers have challenged the idea that grade inflation even exists. Shoichet (2002) claimed that reports of grade inflation may be inflated. There are more adamant takes, such as Adelman (1995) presents evidence that suggests grades have declined rather than increased to shed light on the illusion of grade inflation. Johnes and Soo (2017) research on grade inflation in the United Kingdom suggested that evidence for grade inflation is patchy at best.

While many studies have documented the growth of grade inflation and offered solutions for dealing with the issue, the problem persists in many institutions of higher education. A study at Athens State University investigating grade inflation in their school concluded that grade inflation is pervasive and has permeated the entirety of higher education., (Academic Affairs Committee [AAC], 2014). Of the many studies that researchers have conducted to study the grade inflation phenomenon, only a few have focused on the beliefs, knowledge, and experiences of instructors. McSpirit et al. (2000) dealt specifically with faculty opinions about the causes of grade inflation. And even fewer researchers have singled out the experiences of adjunct instructors as a subject for study (Piscitello, 2006). Schutz (2012) took on this subject in a dissertation that studied full-time and adjunct instructors’ perceptions of grade inflation, while Schutz et al. (2013) dealt with the perception of rigor in grading. Additionally, Schutz et al. (2015) investigated adjunct and full-time faculty attitudes toward grade inflation and expanded upon Schutz’s (2012) dissertation work.

Purpose of Study

The central purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to uncover the essence and meaning of the experiences, attitudes, and interpretations of adjunct instructors related to the phenomenon of grade inflation. This research aimed to understand the perceptions of grade inflation by adjunct instructors, to describe the meaning they attached to these experiences, and to discover how these meanings informed and influenced the practice of grade inflation.

This study addressed a gap in the literature that currently exists regarding adjunct instructors’ perceptions of grade inflation. While some researchers have investigated the observations of full-time faculty towards grade inflation, those of adjunct faculty have not been researched to the same extent (Mantzoukas, 2008). McCabe and Powell (2004) referenced being perplexed by the lack of research that includes university faculty voices when it comes to grade inflation. This gap in the research was even more puzzling in relation to part-time faculty members since the ideas of these adjuncts, the “new majority” of the professoriate, have been overlooked, discounted, or not examined to a greater extent than those of full-time faculty.

Since adjuncts comprise the majority of academic instructors, their opinions and experiences have taken on increasing importance. Because one of the primary duties of faculty, whether adjunct or full-time, is to assign grades and faculty are given enormous latitude in how they assign these grades, it is clear that the grades assigned by adjuncts are significant and affect most students. As a result, adjunct instructors have formed opinions and beliefs about this part of their job (Hermanowicz & Woodring, 2019). The continuing growth of the problem of grade inflation indicates that adjuncts' experiences and knowledge are a necessary consideration in forming a comprehensive picture of the problem and, ultimately, a solution for it.

Literature Review

Causes of Grade Inflation

The most frequently cited cause of grade inflation was consumerism or the commercialization (or corporatization) of education. Corporatization was not just a situation of concern in education; it has also become a source of disquiet in religion (Alston, 2017), utilities (McDonald, 2016), and the management of global health (Marstein & Babich, 2018). Roberts-Mahoney et al. (2016) defined corporate school reform as an interrelated collection of neoliberal policy initiatives that position market competition and business management as fundamental concepts in the improvement of education.

This corporatization in education has resulted in adjunctification (Kirwan, 2013) as well as escalating litigiousness, professors increasingly functioning as the servants of student-customers, and proliferating administrative positions (DeBoer, 2015). The corporatized and neoliberalized university's foremost concern is creating a workforce that can run the machines that drive the future and does not (or cannot) engage in critical thinking. The new corporate schools reject critical thinking skills, intellectual engagement, and other qualities of the traditional education agenda as obstacles to the purposes of University, Ltd. because they exercise no direct economic influence (A. R. Taylor, 2017). A corporate ethos causes instructors to fear negative ratings from their customer-students. Students tend to blame their instructors for grades that do not meet the students' expectations. These situations preclude teachers and students from having significant interactions with one another (Matthews, 2020).

Another frequently cited source of grade inflation was fear of negative student evaluation. Wang and Williamson (2020) investigated the connection between student evaluation scores and course grades and found a clear correlation. These researchers did not determine, however, that the cause of the correlation was due to factors inherent in the courses or actions performed by the instructors in the courses.

There has been a clear connection between student evaluation of teachers (SETs) and the idea of the corporatized college. As many commercial ventures rely on customer surveys to gauge their effectiveness, the corporatized educational institution allows student-customer opinions about the professor to determine whether the adjunct-agent will continue serving the student-customer. Chowdhury (2018) asserted that student opinions are given priority with respect to evaluating instructors' teaching effectiveness which impacts contract renewals so instructors may practice grade inflation to ensure job security. This focus on student opinion has made student satisfaction sovereign and, combined with the tenuous nature of being part-time faculty, puts adjunct faculty in a tough position.

The students who view themselves as entitled to an "A" or deserving of good grades because they pay the teachers' salaries gravitate toward instructors who offer the least work for the highest grade. The consumer-students, as do customers in other corporate situations, feel it is their

right to shop for the professor that will give them the most for their money. Students learn of a professor's leniency through word of mouth or the publication of median grades (Herron & Markovich, 2016). The tendency to shop for easy grades extends even to students choosing majors that are thought to be easier and to offer higher grades with the lower effort expended (Kostal et al., 2016).

Administrators often encourage adjunct to give higher grades and offer more lenient requirements because of their desire to improve graduation rates, increase retention of students, enhance the college or university's reputation, and stabilize the financial standing of the institution (Smith & Fleisher, 2011). Contented, satisfied, and well-served student-customers continue to patronize the institution, communicate their satisfaction to their family, friends, and acquaintances (especially those on social media), and keep paying the costs associated with the institution. Better grades lead to higher student morale, which, in turn, boosts retention rates. Better grades also permit students to continue receiving the required grants, loans, and scholarships and, thus, to have the financial ability to continue their education and to support the college that has offered them satisfactory service (Lackey & Lackey, 2006).

A holistic view of these causes of grade inflation ties them to the idea of the corporatized institution. The opinion that the adjunct has of themselves, the school in which they work, the students, the contract they have with the school, their occupation as an instructor, and the attitudes and actions of the administration all affect the possibility and probability that the adjunct will be amenable to grade inflation. The adjunct, who serves as the agent of the university or college, might consider themselves at least somewhat duty-bound to maintain the grade expectations of the student-customers in order to preserve their own income and place within the institution.

Methodology

Qualitative research was the most appropriate method for answering questions about experiences, perspectives, and meanings from the point of view of the participant. Draper (2004) noted that qualitative research starts with the 'who,' 'what, and 'why' questions to create the context for the everyday lived experiences that create an individual's meanings and explanation for the phenomenon under study.

The qualitative research approach enabled the researcher to focus on the voices and perspectives of adjuncts and how they understand the phenomenon of grade inflation in their academic career and in their unique situations. Ashworth (2015) clarified the focus of phenomenological research as turning the attention to the taken-for-granted meanings by which our experience is constituted. Specifically, findings in phenomenological research aim to answer questions regarding the 'who,' 'what, and 'why' of various people experiencing a phenomenon and develop a set of possible conditions that make the experience possible (Ashworth, 2015). This research, thus, looked for the common elements among the adjuncts who experience grade inflation and worked to clearly delineate that experience.

Heidegger presented the idea that the researcher is as much a part of the research as the participant and that there can be no interpretation of phenomena without the judgment of the researcher (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). For the researcher to access this natural attitude, Husserl advocated the setting aside (bracketing or *epochē*) assumptions by the researcher and for the researcher to investigate an experience that is unique to the participant even though the researcher may have also experienced the phenomenon. Researchers must not only bracket their own suppositions (internal suppositions), but they must also set aside external suppositions, which are those focused on the phenomenon under consideration (Gearing, 2004).

The work of Husserl was the foundation for this exploration of the life-world of adjunct faculty and their experiences of grade inflation. The question of how a researcher can access the life-world of others when the participant takes it for granted himself or herself is of the utmost importance in descriptive phenomenology. This study was designed to understand a human phenomenon and the adjunct's experience of this phenomenon. This research explored the life-world of the adjuncts who participate by bridling the presuppositions of the researchers.

Researcher Bias

The researcher was the primary research instrument in qualitative studies which raised concerns about bias. The researcher was aware of their positionalities and attempted to bridle their own presupposition to enact full transparency throughout the study's duration. The researcher assumed adjuncts would be unaware of the phenomenon and have limited conscious experience regarding the topic. Beyond this, the literature on grade inflation and adjunct awareness was sparse and the researcher experiences with grade inflation themselves were negligible.

Even so, the researcher recognized the potential for the unconscious bias that could impact the interpretation of the data. These could include selecting data to present adjuncts in a particular light, steering interviews in a certain direction, and having a greater knowledge of the phenomenon than the participants could impact the research to project their own perceptions onto the interviewees' experiences. Given this, the researcher must account for this in each step of the research process to minimize bias and maintain the research integrity of the study. The researchers assumed participants would be forthright with the information provided during their interviews because they wanted to participate in the discovery of new knowledge.

Recruiting Participants

For this study, this study selected to use one-on-one, also referred to as Individual In-Depth (IDI), interviews with Facebook as the means of recruiting participants and FreeConference.com as a method for conducting the interviews. Carter et al. (2014) noted that IDI interviews were one of the most powerful tools to explore topics in depth as well as an understanding of human beings. Battistella et al. (2010) concluded that Facebook was a cost-effective tool for the recruitment of research participants, while Barnes (2014) noted that the social media platform created a safe place in which many participants would be comfortable already.

Since members are allowed to post announcements within many Facebook groups and on pages at no cost, the cost per participant was zero. This is compared favorably with free sites such as Craig's List and represents significant savings over costly Facebook and Google ads (Arcia, 2014). Bennetts et al. (2019) used a strategy of searching for groups and pages related to the subject under study. This strategy offered the researcher multiple options for placing announcements in the many groups that exist for adjuncts, university and college personnel, and academics on Facebook. This was a purposive sample in that the researcher sought only adjuncts to be participants.

Solicitation took place in private Facebook groups in which the first author was already a member of: ABD (All But Dissertation) Group, the Adjunct Lounge, the Ed.D. (Doctor of Education) Network, Literature Review Resources, and the Dissertation Support Group. Moderators of each group were consulted about the research, and each was granted permission to post an invitation and recruit potential participants. These five groups have a combined membership of approximately 11, 500. With direct contact and snowball recruitment from several participants who contacted their associates, 23 participants were interviewed for this study.

An introductory letter and the informed consent form were emailed to the adjuncts who responded to the Facebook invitation. Communication was established with the adjuncts who remitted the consent form by email to arrange an interview day and time on FreeConference.com. Since some respondents were slow to send back the consent forms, emails were sent every two weeks to check on their desire to participate. Some initial respondents did not send in their consent forms and were, as a result, not a part of the study. A small number of the respondents who sent in consent forms became unavailable for interviews for a number of personal and professional reasons and did not, therefore, become participants in the research.

To maximize confidentiality, this research took all the necessary precautions. The participants were assured of confidentiality and of the voluntary nature of this study before and during the interviews. Only the researcher has the list of participants. All information, including the personal identifiers of the participants, will remain confidential. All stored consent forms were on the researcher's password-protected computer and on memory sticks. The audio recordings were stored on secured memory sticks that will be erased within three years of the study's completion. The transcripts were stored on the researcher's computer and on memory sticks that are secured under lock. Pseudonyms were used to quote the participants in the research. To enhance a greater degree of anonymity, gender-neutral names were generated from "We Have Kinds" and "Motherly" websites, and participants were given a name when they were interviewed.

Demographics of Participants

The sample of participants in this qualitative study was composed of 23 adjunct instructors working in two and four-year colleges or universities in the United States. All participants volunteered to be a part of the study and agreed to allow their answers to be published in this manuscript. The results are based on in-depth, one-on-one interviews with each participant.

Of the 23 participants, six were male and 17 were female. Several of the participants teach at as many as five separate institutions simultaneously. This combination of adjunct positions afforded participants a living wage, although it does not provide them any fringe benefits, such as retirement, paid time off, sick leave, or health and dental insurance.

The ages of the participants ranged from 25 years to 67 years old. The 34 to 44 and the 45 to 54 age groups were the largest groups and represent 61% of the total respondents. There were no respondents under the age of 25 years. The explanation for this could be that the majority of educational institutions require individuals who serve as adjuncts to have obtained at least a master's degree, and most persons under 25 years of age have not acquired this educational credential.

Procedures

The exigencies of the current COVID-19 pandemic made interviewing by phone or online a necessity. There were distinct advantages to using this medium for interviews instead of the face-to-face method. Oltmann (2016) noted several benefits of using the telephone. The use of phone interviews tend to be more cost-effective and less time-consuming than face-to-face interviewing and it allows for a wider geographic range for obtaining respondents. The use of the telephone correspondingly provided an environment in which there was very little danger, physically, mentally, or otherwise, for the interviewee or researcher, and it was also a less awkward venue for posing and answering penetrating questions. Interviews took place between May 2020 and August 2020. FreeConference.com was the primary online software used to record and conduct virtual interviews, which were later transcribed.

A pre-established script containing demographic and interview questions was used for each interview. These questions were asked in the same order to each interviewee as suggested by Qu & Dumay (2011). In addition to these prepared questions, extemporaneous questions were asked in response to answers given by the participants when necessary.

Interviewee rapport was established through an introduction and small talk, as the interviewer was also an adjunct professor. Common ground allowed for building trust, which allowed the interviewee to be open during the interview.

Extensive field notes were taken for the duration of each interview. Following Mack et al. (2015), there were distinctions between what was observed and heard and between what the interviewer interpreted and what was expected from the interviews. Tuckett (2005) observed that field notes are contributing factors to credibility and dependability because “they contain ‘immediate and later perceptions and thoughts’ about the research participants” (p. 31). The notes made the constant comparison of data possible and furthered the credibility of the research (Tuckett, 2005). Within twenty-four hours of each interview, the interviewer employed an expanding notes technique to trigger interview content that may otherwise be lost if the additional time elapsed (Mack et al., 2015).

Data Analysis

To analyze the data gathered, this study used Colaizzi’s (1978) descriptive phenomenological method. Colaizzi’s (1978) method as a rigorous data analysis that involves a detailed seven-step process that provided all-encompassing participant descriptions of the phenomenon under study.

First, interview data was thoroughly read through several times for familiarization to facilitate a detailed understanding of the data. Through data engagement, coding can commence to formulate the meaning of the interviewees’ experiences. After careful initial coding of the data, a guiding storyline was developed based on the research question. Following Stuckey’s (2015) procedures on coding, as the coding process progressed, data were recoded or even subdivided into more specific subcategories to capture participants’ meaning more accurately. This also helped to crosscheck how all coding corresponded with the research question of the study. Analytic memos were utilized to reflect on codes and coding choices to track the logic and rationale behind the final coding of data.

After coding the data, statements that dealt with grade inflation were identified and reviewed. From there, transcriptions were used to triangulate information to draw meaning from the data. Continuous contact with the data generated meanings into related clusters to make sense of the participants’ experiences (Colaizzi, 1978). As Nowell (2017) suggested, these clusters were composed of fragments that would have been meaningless by themselves but, when brought together, became impactful themes of the data. Themes that arose from the clusters were reviewed by returning to the data and then pulling all the meanings together to formulate an exhaustive description incorporating all the themes identified.

Research Question

How do adjunct faculty members in a four-year college or university perceive grade inflation?

Results

Awareness of Grade Inflation

The estimation of how aware persons on college campuses were of the phenomenon of grade inflation varied significantly among the participants in the study. Their assessments ranged the spectrum from no awareness to “an inkling” of awareness to “everybody is aware.” Nineteen of the 23 participants volunteered their ideas about awareness.

No Awareness

Some participants described a blanket ignorance of grade inflation. Based on experience at “a number of different universities and online,” Wynne asserted there was no awareness of “grade inflation per se.” Umber offered a more casual and less committal “not really,” when asked about awareness. Experience on three campuses led Dorian to assert that there was a lack of awareness on campuses since “people [do not] actually talk about how they grade.” Dallas’ work and studying in two countries led them to assert that grade inflation cognizance was not present in either setting. While acknowledging that grade inflation “is a big item in a lot of articles especially in higher ed,” Emerson admitted a personal ignorance of the subject as well as on the part of other faculty members with whom the participant had worked. Three participants extrapolated their own lack of awareness to those who worked with them. Marlow, who recounted working in four universities “in some capacity or another over the past year,” believed that because of working “with people that have very much tried to hold a high standard and to try to hold students accountable,” they had seen and heard little about grade inflation and, thus, felt that there was not an awareness of it among those with whom they worked. Gray came to the same conclusion as Marlow because the participant had “not heard a lot about it.” Harper similarly admitted to having “never heard of it... and I’ve taught at three different schools.”

Some Awareness

In response to the question concerning the awareness of people on campus (administrators, faculty, and students) of grade inflation, Quincy said, “I did get some inkling that there might be [an awareness].” As one who had served as a secondary teacher, Reese believed that secondary education teachers were “more aware of grade inflation because... grades are scrutinized more than a college level would be.” Nonetheless, Reese also supposed that adjuncts specifically “are somewhat aware of it.” Taylor asserted that “students are not very aware at all ... they don’t really understand grade inflation.” As for instructors, Taylor discriminated between the knowledge level of the “newer ones” and more experienced adjuncts. Less experienced instructors were deemed as unaware of the concept of grade inflation by Taylor, while the more experienced were “pretty aware.” The participant added that from their experience they had observed that universities give the impression of being much more perceptive concerning the phenomenon than either community or state colleges, which, in their words, “don’t really care or at least don’t mention [it].”

Not Me—Not Here

Some participants were eager to claim that, despite what some may believe, not every American college is a sanctuary of grade-inflating adjuncts. Twelve participants adamantly maintained their innocence in the matter of grade inflation, while seven were unwaveringly convinced that their institutions were equally free of grade inflation.

Not Me

The twelve participants who expressed the “not me” idea avowed that they, by one method or another, did not inflate grades. Kendall offered a triadic classification of professors and their relationship to grade inflation and was careful to indicate into which of these categories they were included:

I think there are some professors who are a little bit more lenient than others and don't mind a small grade inflation. Then I think there are other professors who wouldn't round up a 95.5 to a 96. And then I think that you have those of us [emphasis added] who try to be fair both ways.

Sidney expressed the same denial saying, “I’m a pretty challenging grader” and went on to say, “many people believe that grade inflation is something that happens in the other classroom.” Wynne emphatically denied grade inflation stating, “I grade students based on the work they do; there is no make-up work. There is just straight according to your work; what you submit, and the effort that you put into the assignment.”

A general adherence to the “not me” mantra did not impede the two following participants from making some forthright acknowledgments about their grading practices in certain situations. Though espousing the “10% rule,” Aiden asserted that grade inflation “is not done very often, it’s a very rare situation where somebody has really, really, really worked and not passed the class.” Aiden also said candidly that, in the case of a student who was failing their class:

It depends on why they're failing... Honestly, if it was a student that I knew was doing everything they possibly could and they were very close. I mean, I honestly would probably just push them over the edge where they would pass.

Although Quincy knew that “grades [should] be reflective of the work,” they, like Aiden, admitted that in dealing with students who were not majoring in the subject the participant taught, “to be honest ... if it was just a matter of them passing my class, I might slide some. I probably would, in fact.”

Not Here

Some participants stretched the “not me” supposition to the next level by asserting that grade inflation was absent, not only from their own classrooms but also from the campuses on which they have taught. Piper was confident that grade inflation was non-existent in their institution because of several factors. First, the school was “not grade-driven.” The “professional commitment [of my colleagues] to providing accuracy in their grading” was a second basis for their assertion. Finally, the institution’s “very open and transparent culture” inhibited the presence and proliferation of grade inflation, according to Piper.

Kendall, after steadfastly denying any personal involvement in grade inflation, extrapolated it to those who worked at the same institution by saying, “I think most people do it the way I do it... especially experienced ones.” This participant arrived at this inference after overhearing several colleagues discussing and detailing their grading practices. Cameron grounded their conjecture that there was no grade inflation in their university on the circumstance that their institution frequently “has a significant portion of students that repeat [courses].”

Discussion

Perceptions

The participants were asked to respond to questions about their perceptions of grade inflation based on their experiences. They reported perceptions of the meaning of the term “grade inflation,” the absence of the phenomenon in their classes and institutions, and the general awareness of grade inflation on the campuses at which they work and have worked.

Awareness of Grade Inflation

The participants in this study were divided in their opinions as to the general awareness of students, faculty, and administration concerning grade inflation. Harper was an extreme example who had never heard the term and, consequently, extrapolated ignorance of grade inflation to all colleagues in the educational realm. At the other end of the spectrum, Cameron boldly asserted, “everybody is aware” of grade inflation. Other participants fell between these two outlying opinions.

The reported absence of specific grade inflation training has most likely contributed to the broad range of opinions on awareness. Expectation bias has a powerful influence on a person’s awareness of a phenomenon and since these adjuncts are not expecting to witness grade inflation, they are less likely to be aware of it or to feel that others are aware of the phenomenon (Jussim, 2012).

There would be no doubt as to how widely known grade inflation was if everyone who was an adjunct received training of some sort about it. Because the subject was infrequently discussed and never mentioned in any type of formal training provided for adjunct instructors, the study participants were undecided whether their personal level of understanding was shared by their colleagues within the institutions for which they worked. All nine respondents who reported having experienced no pressure from students or administrators to increase grades supported the idea that there was little to no awareness of grade inflation on college campuses. This suggested that not experiencing pressure led the participants to construe an ignorance of grade inflation among all instructors on college and university campuses. These adjuncts projected their lack of experience onto others and conflated the lack of experience with an absence of awareness.

An equal number of participants who hypothesized no awareness of grade inflation and participants who avowed widespread awareness determined that grade inflation was an insignificant problem in colleges and universities. Three of the four respondents who thought there was some awareness of grade inflation saw the phenomenon as a minor situation at worst. All the participants, but one, who held doctoral degrees, felt that there was little to no awareness of grade inflation. The one outlier among the doctoral respondents was a doctor of education with more than 20 years of experience. Of the three male participants who responded to the question of awareness, two favored a wide awareness of grade inflation, while eight of the 18 females believed that there was little or no awareness about grade inflation on campuses in general.

Not in my Class

The self-proclaimed ability of the participants in the study to be able to identify grade inflation bolstered their assertion that grade inflation did not happen in their classrooms. Twelve of the participants made it plain that they were not guilty of inflating student grades. Some participants did not state this fact outright, but their answers were replete with tacit denials of their participation in the inflating of student grades.

McCabe and Powell (2004) corroborated this “not-me” viewpoint among professors in general. Based on interviews with 25 university professors, the researchers found that many of their participants acknowledge that grade inflation was prevalent at the university level but that it was less prevalent in their specific department and *even less so for themselves* [emphasis added] (McCabe and Powell, 2004). They further note that most participants believed that student pressure existed but denied that they were personally influenced by it. It seems likely that the lack of training about grade inflation has contributed to the lack of consistency in its definition among adjuncts.

Many in the “not me” group expressed that they had participated in actions generally considered grade inflation. Class grade curving, which is recognized as a factor that can lead to grade inflation, was acknowledged by some. Others admitted to allowing students to resubmit papers, awarding higher grades to avoid being hassled by students to increase grades when they needed a few points to reach whatever level they desired, and being willing to be less rigorous when dealing with older students or those who had been out of school for long periods. Five of the eight doctoral participants (of whom six responded about their personal participation) emphatically denied that they inflated grades. One of the participants who held a doctoral degree admitted that grade inflation “was not done very often” in their classroom.

Not Here

The suggestion by McCabe and Powell (2004) that instructors consider themselves free from the “sin” of grade inflation also applies to their attitudes about the schools for which they work. The respondents in this study were confident that their schools were free of grade inflation. It is significant that, with one exception, all the participants who denied the presence of grade inflation in their workplace rejected any personal participation in the same.

Although not all respondents who defended themselves from charges of inflating grades were adamant about their workplaces, the ones who did seem to assume that their colleagues acted in much the same way that they did. As Emerson phrased it in relation to the adjunct’s grading practices, “I believe confidently that they [the grading practices of colleagues] are the same [as mine].” Using oneself as a model and projecting personal actions and attitudes onto the larger group is an ecological fallacy and does not allow for the nuance of others in the group.

Limitations

All research has limitations. One of the primary concerns with qualitative research methods, in general, and with interviewing, in particular, is maximizing generalizability while minimizing researcher bias (Qu & Dumay, 2011). As with most qualitative studies, this research is difficult, if not impossible, to replicate and, thus, cannot be verified (Theofanidas & Fountouki, 2018).

The difficulty in distinguishing the genuine voice of the participant from the imposed thoughts of the researcher is a limitation of this study. Shi (2011) explained that while the researcher is the primary vessel of phenomenological inquiry, there is always a risk for the

researcher to conflate their experiences with their participants. In this study, researchers did their best to minimize that risk to offset the limitation of the methodology.

Another limitation is that the data presented was self-reported and thus subject to a fallible human recollection of events and experiences. Schacter (1999) stated that memory is subject to several issues which contribute to decreases in its reliability attributed to transience, misattribution, or bias.

The last noted limitation was the use of phone interviews. While phone interviews provide a voice to answer questions, what is missing is what a person's body is telling the interviewer (Novick, 2008; Oltmann, 2016). Even with those disadvantages, phone interviews have several advantages that do not compromise the study, such as cost-efficiency, the interviewee can feel more freedom over the phone than in person, and a decrease in the conflict between the interviewee and interviewer. Overall, the advantages outweighed the disadvantages of phone interviews, and Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) noted that this method is an established method of qualitative research.

Conclusion

This research was a phenomenological investigation of the lived experiences of adjuncts in universities and colleges in the United States. The study employed social media solicitation methods and semi-structured interviews to collect detailed data about the participants' lived experiences. Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological method was used for rigorous data analysis. The researchers employed bracketing to remove the influence of their own biases and preconceptions. Every effort was employed to ensure the confidentiality of participants through the use of pseudonyms.

Whether grade inflation is a major or minor problem, whether research ever produces a universally agreed-upon definition, and whether there will ever be a solution are questions that only the future can answer. Johnson (2021) asserts that the adjuncts of today have experienced grade inflation and have formed very definite ideas as to how it should be regarded, interpreted, and perceived. These adjuncts have not allowed any of the unknowns to inhibit them from serving as agents for the institutions in which they work and for the students whom they serve.

Evaluation by the students exerts additional pressure on the adjunct to "keep the customer happy." The adjunct is much less likely to see the problem of grade inflation as important because he or she is not trained in the subject (Johnson, 2021). If institutions of higher learning are serious about curbing the tide of grade inflation, they need to emphasize that fact when hiring, training, and offering professional development. An institution can declare the importance of stopping grade inflation but undercut that declaration by relegating the subject to oblivion in its training and professional development. The actions will always overpower the words when they are not speaking the same things.

References

- Academic Affairs Committee. (2014). *Summary of findings about grade inflation*. <http://www.athens.edu/pdfs/faculty-senate/minutes/AAC/2013-14/Grade-Inflation-Report-April-8-2014.pdf>
- Adelman, C. (1995). *The new college course map and transcript files: Changes in course-taking and achievement, 1973-1993*. National Institute on Postsecondary Education, Libraries, and Lifelong Learning
- Alston, E. B. (2017). *Corporatization of the church compromises Christian's priorities, purpose, and practices* [Doctoral Dissertation, Liberty University]. <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2579&context=doctoral>
- American Association of University Professors. (2018). *Data snapshot: Contingent faculty in US higher ed*. <https://www.aaup.org/file/10112018%20Data%20Snapshot%20Tenure.pdf>
- Arcia, A. (2014, June). Facebook advertisements for inexpensive participant recruitment among women in early pregnancy. *Health Education & Behavior, 41*(3), 237–241. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198113504414>
- Ashworth, P. D. (2015). The lifeworld: Enriching qualitative evidence. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 13*(1), 20–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2015.1076917>
- Barnes, N. (2014). *Using Facebook for educational research: Choice, trials, reflection and insight*. In Joint AARE-NZARE 2014 Conference (pp. 1–8). Canadian Journal of Education. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED596735.pdf>
- Battistella, E., Kalyan, S., & Prior, J. C. (2010). Evaluation of successful methods and costs associated with recruiting 600 healthy women volunteers to a study of ovulation. *Journal of Women's Health, 19*(8), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1089/jwh.2009.1751>
- Bennetts, S. K., Hokke, S., Crawford, S., Hackworth, N. J., Leach, L. S., Nguyen, C., Nicholson, J. M., & Cooklin, A. R. (2019). Using paid and free Facebook methods to recruit Australian parents to an online survey: An evaluation. *Journal of Medical Internet Research, 21*(3), Article e11206. <https://doi.org/10.2196/11206>
- Carter, N., Bryant-Lukosius, D., DiCenso, A., Blythe, J., & Neville, A. J. (2014). The use of triangulation in qualitative research. *Oncology Nursing Forum, 41*(5), 545–547. <https://doi.org/10.1188/14.ONF.545-547>
- Caruth, G. D., & Caruth, D. L. (2013). Adjunct faculty: Who are these unsung heroes of academe? *Current Issues in Education, 16*(3), 1–9.
- Charfauros, K. H., & Tierney, W. G. (1999). Part-time faculty in colleges and universities: Trends and challenges in a turbulent environment. *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education, 13*(2), 141–151. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1008112304445>
- Chowdhury, F. (2018). Grade inflation: Causes, consequences and cure. *Journal of Education and Learning, 7*(6), 86–92. <https://doi.org/10.5539/jel.v7n6p86>
- Colaizzi, P.F. (1978). Psychological Research as the Phenomenologist Views It. In: Valle, R.S. & Mark, K., Eds., *Existential Phenomenological Alternatives for Psychology* (pp. 48-71). Oxford University Press.
- DeBoer, F. (2015, September 13). Why we should fear university, Inc. *The New York Times Magazine*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/13/magazine/why-we-should-fear-university-inc.html>
- Dolan, V. L. B. (2011). The isolation of online adjunct faculty and its impact on their performance. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 12*(2), 62–77. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v12i2.793>
- Draper, A. K. (2004, May/October). *The principles and application of qualitative research*. Paper presented at the Nutrition Society and British Dietetic Association and Health Development

- Agency, London, UK.
<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.862.5120&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- Fruscione, J. (2014). *When a college contracts 'adjunctivitis,' it's the students who lose.* <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/when-a-college-contracts-adjunctivitis-its-the-students-who-lose>
- Gearing, R. E. (2004, December). Bracketing in research: A typology. *Qualitative Health Research, 14*(10), 1249–1452. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732304270394>
- Hermanowicz, J. C., & Woodring, D. W. (2019). The distribution of college grades across fields in the contemporary university. *Innovative Higher Education, 44*, 497–510. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-019-09474-w>
- Herron, M. C., & Markovich, Z. D. (2016). Student sorting and implications for grade inflation. *Rationality and Society, 29*(3), 355–386. <http://doi.org/10.1177/1043463117701127>
- Johnes, G., & Soo, K. T. (2017, January). Grades across universities over time. *The Manchester School, 85*(1), 106–131. <https://doi.org/10.1111/manc.12138>
- Johnson, B. C. (2021) *Not me, not here, not bad: A phenomenological study of the experiences, feelings, and interpretations of grade inflation by adjunct instructors at U.S. colleges and universities* (Publication No. 28495127). [Doctoral Dissertation, Gwynedd Mercy University]. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/not-me-here-bad-phenomenological-study/docview/2544876244/se-2>
- Johnson, V. E. (2003). *Grade inflation: A crisis in college education*. Springer.
- Jussim, L. (2012). *Social perception and social reality: Why accuracy dominates bias and self-fulfilling prophecy*. Oxford University Press.
- Kezar, A. (2013). *Changing faculty workforce models*. <https://www.tiaa.org/public/pdf/changing-faculty-workforce-models.pdf>
- Kezar, A., & Maxey, D. (2014). *Student outcomes assessment among the new non-tenure-track faculty majority* (Occasional Paper #21). National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment. <https://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/documents/OP21.pdf>
- Kirwan, T. (2013, November 17). *Adjunctification: Living in the margins of academe*. <https://hybridpedagogy.org/adjunctification-living-in-the-margins-of-academe/>
- Kostal, J. W., Kuncel, N. R., & Sackett, P. R. (2016, Spring). Grade inflation marches on: Grade increases from the 1990s to 2000s. *Educational Measurement Issues and Practice, 35*(1), 11–20. <https://doi.org/10.1111/emip.12077>
- Lackey, L. W., & Lackey, W. J. (2006). Grade inflation: Potential causes and solutions. *International Journal of Engineering Education, 22*(1), 130–139.
- Mack, N., Woodsong, C., MacQueen, K. M., Guest, G., & Gamey, E. (2005). *Qualitative research methods: A data collector's field guide*. Family Health International.
- Mantzoukas, S. (2008). Facilitating research students in formulating qualitative research questions. *Nurse Education Today, 28*, 371–377. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2007.06.012>
- Marstein, E., & Babich, S. M. (2018). The corporatization of global health: The impact of neoliberalism. *South Eastern European Journal of Public Health, 10*, 191–198. <https://doi.org/10.4119/UNIBI/SEEJPH-2018-191>
- Matthews, K. (2020). *Stop treating students like customers and start working with them as partners in learning*. <https://theconversation.com/stop-treating-students-like-customers-and-start-working-with-them-as-partners-in-learning-93276>
- McCabe, J., & Powell, B. (2004). “In my class? No.” Professors’ accounts of grade inflation. In W. E. Becker & M. L. Andrews (Eds.), *The scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education: Contributions of research universities* (pp. 193–219). Indiana University Press.

- McConnell-Henry, T., Chapman, Y., & Francis, K. (2009). Unpacking Heideggerian phenomenology. *Southern Online Journal of Nursing Research*, 9(1), 1–11.
- McDonald, D. A. (2016). To corporatize or not to corporatize (and if so, how?). *Utilities Policy*, 40, 107–114. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jup.2016.01.002>
- McSpirit, S., Chapman, A., Kopacz, P., & Jones, K. (2000, Winter). Faculty opinion on grade inflation: Contradictions about its cause. *College and University*, 75(3), 19–25.
- Novick, G. (2008). Is there a bias against telephone Interviews in qualitative research? *Research in Nursing and Health*, 31, 391–398. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nur.2025>
- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- Oltmann, S. M. (2016). Qualitative interviews: A methodological discussion of the interviewer and respondent contexts. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 17(2), Article 15. <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-17.2.2551>
- Piscitello, V. J. (2006). *Adjunct faculty: Branding ourselves in the new economy* (Publication No. 137356671). [Doctoral dissertation, University of Arizona]. <http://hdl.handle.net/10150/194346>
- Qu, S. Q., & Dumay, J. (2011). The qualitative research interview. *Qualitative Research in Accounting & Management*, 8(3), 238–264. <https://doi.org/10.1108/11766091111162070>
- Roberts-Mahoney, H., Means, A. J., & Garrison, M. J. (2016). Netflixing human capital development: Personalized learning technology and the corporatization of K-12 education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 31(4), 405–420. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2015.1132774>
- Schacter, D. L. (1999). The seven sins of memory: Insights from psychology and cognitive neuroscience. *American Psychologist*, 54(3), 182–203. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.54.3.182>
- Schutz, K. R. (2012). *A comparison of community college full-time and adjunct faculties' perceptions of factors associated with grade inflation* (Publication No. 3541624). [Doctoral Dissertation, Capella University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/comparison-community-college-full-time-adjunct/docview/1115146160/se-2>
- Schutz, K. R., Drake, B. M., Lessner, J., & Hughes, G. F. (2015). A comparison of community college full-time and adjunct faculties' perceptions of factors associated with grade inflation. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 63(3), 180–192. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07377363.2015.1085951>
- Schutz, K.R., Drake, B.M., & Lessner, J. (2013). Do Community College Full-Time and Adjunct Faculties Differ in Their Perceptions of Rigor in Assigning Grades? *American Journal of Educational Studies* 6(2), 59-79.
- Shi, Z. (2011). Dilemmas in using phenomenology to investigate elementary school children learning English as a second language. *In Education*, 17(1), 3-13.
- Shoichet, C. (2002, July 12). Reports of grade inflation may be inflated, study finds. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/reports-of-grade-inflation-may-be-inflated-study-finds/>
- Smith, D. E., & Fleisher, S. (2011). The implications of grade inflation: Faculty integrity versus the pressure to succeed. *Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching*, 4(1), 32–38. <http://www.nu.edu/assets/resources/pageResources/journal-of-research-in-innovative-teaching-volume-4.pdf>

- Stuckey, H. L. (2015, January-June). The second step in data analysis: Coding qualitative research data. *Journal of Social Health and Diabetes*, 3(1), 7–10. <https://doi.org/10.4103/2321-0656.140875>
- Sturges, J. E., & Hanrahan, K. J. (2004). Comparing telephone and face-to-face qualitative interviewing: A research note. *Qualitative Research*, 4(1), 107–118. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794104041110>
- Taylor, A. C. (2007). *Grade inflation: An analysis of teacher perception, grade point average, and test scores in one southeastern Georgia high school* (Publication No. 414)[Doctoral dissertation, Georgia Southern University] Electronic Theses and Dissertations. <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1414&context=etd>
- Taylor, A. R. (2017). Perspectives on the University as a business: The corporate management structure, neoliberalism and higher education. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 15(1), 108–135
- Theofanidas, D., & Fountouki, A. (2018). Limitations and delimitations in the research process. *Perioperative Nursing*, 7(3), 155-163. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2552022>
- Tuckett, A. (2005). Rigour in qualitative research: Complexities and solutions. *Nurse Researcher*, 13(1), 29–42. <https://doi.org/10.7748/nr2005.07.13.1.29.c5998>
- Wang, G., & Williamson, A. (2020). Course evaluation scores: valid measures for teaching effectiveness or rewards for lenient grading? *Teaching in Higher Education*, 27(3), 297–318. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2020.1722992>
- Yakoboski, P. J. (2016). Adjunct views of adjunct positions. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 48(3), 54–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2016.1170553>

Notes on Contributors

Dr. Billy C. Johnson is a full-time lecturer in Adult Education at Richmond Community College. His research interests are in adjunct faculty experiences in higher education.

Danny E. Malone Jr. is an Assistant Professor of Criminology in the Department of Sociology at Coastal Carolina University. His research interests are in criminological theory and sport, faculty experiences in academia, and K-12 IEP team experiences.

ORCID

Danny E. Malone Jr., <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6761-0474>

Manuscript received January 23, 2023
Final revision received March 12, 2023
Accepted March 25, 2023