

A College Where Adjuncts Are Not Just Add-ons

Angela Félix
Rio Salado College

In the real world, providing the necessary resources for full-time faculty to engage in college-wide assessment work is challenging, at best, and integrating an adjunct faculty cohort of over 1,400 members into this work would seem to make the task downright impossible. But at Rio Salado College, that is just what we have done.

Rio's adjunct faculty are at the heart and soul of our instructional model. We were founded in 1978 as a "college without walls," whose mission was to reach beyond traditional boundaries to provide increased access to higher education. From the very start, our structure was built on a small core of full-time faculty who provide leadership to a large cadre of adjunct faculty, most of whom are practitioners in their fields. Rather than considering adjuncts as add-ons, the adjunct faculty were, and are, essential to the success of the institution.

Here are the stats:

Over the last academic year, Rio had 1,418 adjunct faculty members teaching a total of 10,410 sections of 1,071 different courses with a faculty turnover rate of less than 7% from the prior year.

How do we do it?

Inclusion is the key.

Let's start at the beginning. At Rio, adjunct faculty serve as **subject matter experts** that provide valuable input in curriculum development. They are involved in the creation and modification of courses and programs, including designing instructional content and assessments that align with [college-wide student learning outcomes](#).

Throughout the development process, adjunct faculty have access to resources that help ensure that their work supports our interdisciplinary assessment efforts. We offer free, online, [Adjunct Faculty Development \(AFD\) Courses](#), which include offerings in Critical Thinking, Writing, Information Literacy, Reading, and Oral Communication. Developers can earn a Student Learning Outcomes badge by completing all the courses in the track. They

also have access to the [Rio Salado Outcomes Work Lab \(OWL\)](#) website, which is a “one-stop resource” to facilitate student mastery of the five college-level learning outcomes. The site is aligned with the college rubrics, and includes comprehensive library-developed guides ([LibGuides](#)) and additional resources for student learning in these areas. The LibGuides have been embedded in AFD modules that familiarize the adjunct faculty with use of the standardized rubrics for grading assignments.

Support for adjunct faculty to actively engage in the college’s assessment work does not end once a new course or program rolls out. In addition to ongoing access to the **Rio OWL** and the opportunity to earn a **Student Learning Outcomes** badge, adjunct instructors can earn badges in **Online Teaching**, the **Student Experience**, and **Learning Theory**.

And at Rio, we put our money where our mouth is.

Over the last academic year, \$15,608 was awarded in **Rio Learning Outcomes Grant (RioLOG)** funding. RioLOGs are internal college grants dedicated to engaging adjunct faculty in student learning outcomes-based initiatives directly linked to assessment data. Budget is allocated every year to ensure that adjunct faculty remain among the principal drivers of these curricular improvements.

Our ongoing commitment to integrate adjuncts into our assessment work extends beyond funding for specific RioLOG initiatives. We host an annual [Outstanding Adjunct Faculty](#) reception, which honors nominees in **Teaching and Learning Excellence** as well as **Outstanding Contributions to Assessment**. [Criteria](#) for recognition of excellence in assessment include the following:

- Writing and revision of course assessments
- Review of assessments for effectiveness and improvement
- Participation in RioLOGs
- Student Learning Outcomes work at the departmental level
- Contributions to development of assessment interventions, rubrics, or customized grading tools at the departmental level

Adjunct faculty members are invited to two all-faculty meetings each year, which are live-streamed for those who are unable to attend in person. The spring meeting is our **All-Faculty Assessment and Learning Experience**, with a general assembly session featuring an assessment update from the Vice-President of Academic Affairs, and data updates on college-level assessment of student learning outcomes. The general session is followed by discipline-specific discussion of assessment content during individual department meetings. An average of approximately 600 adjunct faculty members attend Rio’s All-Faculty Assessment and Learning Experience each year.

But, we still have work to do...

In the true spirit of assessment, we are continuously seeking ways to improve processes, especially as they relate to the inclusion of adjunct faculty. A recent article referencing the

Association of American Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U) report on assessing student learning has served as inspiration for a next phase of this work. In "[Large Scale Assessment Without Standardized Tests](#)," Flaherty summarizes the results of the first two years of AAC&U's nationwide Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) project. The complete report, titled "*On Solid Ground*," is available at the [AAC&U website](#). Over the next academic year, we plan to adapt their methodology to assess students' performance in relation to our college-wide learning outcomes. However, rather than having faculty from various colleges and universities score sample assessments, we will dedicate resources to training and funding Rio adjunct faculty members from across multiple disciplines to participate in the scoring. Not only will this serve to increase the reliability of our data, but this project will also keep the adjunct faculty members at the center of our assessment work.

Every college and university has their own story.

Though the Rio model was built from the start with the infrastructure necessary to support a large number of adjunct faculty, other institutions that are just now beginning to wrestle with this phenomenon can benefit from what we have learned over the years:

- Include adjunct faculty members in key teaching and learning processes from the very start;
- Provide accessible support throughout the various stages of teaching and curriculum development;
- Offer opportunities for adjunct faculty members to contribute to college-wide assessment efforts; and
- Publicly celebrate their accomplishments.

Ultimately, supporting the success of adjunct faculty supports the success of students, and that's an outcome that benefits us all.

References

Association of American Colleges & Universities. (2017). *On Solid Ground*. Retrieved from https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/FINALFORPUBLICATIONRELEASEON_SOLIDGROUND.pdf

Flaherty, C. (2017, February 23). Large-Scale Assessment Without Standardized Tests. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/02/23/aacu-releases-report-national-large-scale-look-student-learning>