

# Faith Integration in Online Programs: The Role of Self-Efficacy in Fostering Confidence Among Adjunct Faculty

**Lori Doyle**

Concordia University Irvine

**Tanya Tarbuton**

Concordia University Irvine

## Abstract

Most higher education institutions have made a commitment to providing high quality online classes or perhaps even fully online programs in order to keep up with the market demand for flexible learning environments. Administrators, directors, curriculum writers, and full-time faculty members are often very immersed in the work of faith integration and connections to institutional identity while ancillary or adjunct instructors do not always report the same level of confidence in this area of their teaching. A conceptual framework that draws on self-efficacy theory and the community of inquiry model can provide a foundation regarding ways to support adjunct faculty in the direction of confidently integrating their faith in the online classroom. The authors are both directors of online Master of Arts programs in a faith-based institution and have worked to create professional development and assessment measures to bolster self-efficacy among adjunct instructors. Many adjunct instructors lack confidence in the area of faith integration due to primarily and simultaneously working as practitioners in secular workplaces. The authors outline strategies on ways to provide training, integrate modeling, create resources, and give feedback to foster self-efficacy regarding faith integration so that adjunct faculty can confidently represent the institution's faith tradition in their classes.

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The student experience is of utmost importance in higher education institutions (HEIs) as it is related to student attrition and future enrollment influences, which directly impact the economic stability of organizations. This is true for public as well as faith-based universities. Adjunct instructors are most instrumental in this area, especially in online asynchronous programs where students rarely experience the organic connections frequently associated with a brick-and-mortar campus and full-time faculty. Intentional measures must be taken to empower and train adjunct faculty to be forward-facing representatives offering relational and academic support aligned with the mission of the institution. This may be challenging in online settings, but when carefully and deliberately cultivated, it can be accomplished. For adjunct instructors at private, Christian institutions this may be further complicated by the differing expectations between secular and faith-based organizations. Faith integration, a missional component and a cornerstone in many

religious higher education settings, may be unnatural and even uncomfortable for adjunct instructors who are not confident in this area. The authors posit that the tenets of self-efficacy theory can be adopted when implementing best practices for preparing and supporting online adjunct faculty in the area of confident faith integration.

## Problem Statement

Christian higher education institutions are unique in that they have the ability, more specifically the obligation, to share The Great Commission. This may be both exciting and intimidating for adjunct faculty who are Christian yet have worked primarily or even exclusively in secular workplaces and do not show up feeling confident about their ability to integrate faith with students. This is true for many adjunct faculty members, but teaching in online programs presents another level of challenge as instructors are also working to establish the personal relationships necessary for genuine faith integration.

## Context

The authors of this paper have more than fifty years of combined experience in education, serving both K-12 populations as well as adult learners. They have adopted, embraced, and honed what they believe are effective best practices for implementing faith integration in the online higher education environment. In this paper, practical ideas for elevating self-efficacy among adjunct instructors will be shared in order to encourage purposeful paving-the-way strategies for successful and confident faith implementation. These ideas are grounded in a theoretical framework supported by the literature and have been proven by way of authentic experiences.

## Adjunct Instructors

There is an increased need for adjunct faculty in higher education as institutions parcel out teaching assignments in an attempt to shave budget costs and maintain financial sovereignty in an unstable enrollment landscape (Sprinrad et al., 2022). It is no surprise that adjunct faculty working as contingent employees are typically paid significantly less than their full-time counterparts. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labour (2024), the growth rate of adjunct faculty contracts is projected to increase by eight percent from 2022 to 2032, nearly tripling the average growth rate of most occupations. Christian higher education institutions can anticipate this trend and proactively craft pathways for encouraging and leveraging faith integration as an expectation of all ancillary or adjunct faculty. However, as previously stated, this expectation may not come naturally for many adjunct instructors transitioning from secular work settings; therefore, intentional efforts must be espoused at the institutional and program levels to promote this outcome. More will be shared on this topic in the upcoming sections.

## Online Programs

One could argue that the rise in online programs has spurred the increased demand for adjunct faculty, especially those with online teaching experience. Adjunct faculty are essential to the success of higher education institutions, including those with online programs (Fuller et al., 2023). The upswing in online programs can be attributed, in part, to the enthusiasm for flexible and convenient learning environments like those noted with online platforms (World Economic Forum, 2022). Working adults and busy professionals, in particular, are drawn to the online learning environment because of these benefits. The National Center for Education Statistics (2021) concurred with this finding, suggesting that there is an upward trend in the number of online program offerings. With the surging demand for online learning platforms, HEIs must consider

effective ways to adhere to the mission of the organization, which for Christian HEIs frequently includes faith integration, and ensure that this can be accomplished in all learning environments and by way of every delivery modality. Delivering Christ-like service in an asynchronous learning environment can only happen with deliberate and purposeful planning.

## Ministry Opportunity

Christian HEIs typically attract a wide range of students, many of whom are not rooted in faith or identify as religious, and instead choose a program based on factors such as flexibility, program type, cost, timing, etc. The harvest is ripe with opportunities for organizations wishing to share their faith with many. For this to transpire, HEIs must embrace a faith integration approach from the top down. This involves the commitment of executive management and full-time faculty to systematically cultivate faith integration in all aspects of business, thereby nurturing an ethos of faith integration as integral to all operations. In doing so, the outcomes associated with a culture of faith integration spill over to other areas, such as individual school and program departments and adjunct management. The authors appreciate the adoption of theoretical foundation(s) coupled with practical application(s) in advancing institutional faith integration among ancillary faculty.

## Problem Statement

Theoretical foundations are necessary when making connections between the published literature and practical applications that can benefit not only those conducting research, but also those working in the field (Marcionetti & Castelli, 2022). For the current paper, the field of integration is education, specifically higher education, the population of interest is adjunct faculty, and the conceptual framework consists of self-efficacy theory and the community of inquiry model. The goal is to establish a foundation from which to share and discuss practical implications for fostering confident faith integration.

## Self-Efficacy Theory

Bandura (1977) provided a seminal definition and understanding of self-efficacy as a person's personal beliefs regarding their ability to accomplish what is necessary for their role. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2007) expanded on self-efficacy specific to the role of educators to include belief in the ability to carry out the expectations within the realm of education. At Christian universities, the ability to integrate faith with students is often a necessary function of the

faculty role, and this holds true for adjunct instructors. Self-efficacy theory consists of four elements: performance outcomes, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological feedback (Bandura, 1977). These elements will be mentioned throughout the discussions section of this paper as the authors share about one university's approach to fostering self-efficacy among adjunct faculty specific to confident faith integration.

### **Confidence**

Bandura (1986) discussed the role of confidence or self-confidence as a component of social cognitive theory, which is tied to self-efficacy theory. Gomez et al. (2022) studied the link between confidence and self-efficacy when training teachers in the area of technology integration, and that link can be extended to any area of opportunity and growth for instructors. For adjunct instructors working in higher education, one area of opportunity unique to Christian institutions is faith integration. Most adjunct instructors accept their first teaching contract with plenty of self-efficacy regarding content, pedagogy, expectations of the field, etc. Yet, most have worked in secular environments where faith integration was not on their radar or was perhaps strongly discouraged, which can lead to a lack of confidence in this important area or expectation. Anyone can be made to do something, so the goal is not blind obedience regarding faith integration; rather, it is heartfelt ways to make faith-based connections and share their faith with authenticity and confidence.

### **Community of Inquiry**

One framework often applied as a foundation when discussing the connection between meaning and learning is the Community of Inquiry (CoI) theoretical model (Garrison et al., 2000). Additional research has been conducted to illuminate ways the CoI model holds true not only in face-to-face classrooms but in online learning environments, as well (Castellanos-Reyes, 2020; Fiock, 2020). Yildirim and Seferoglu (2021) determined a correlation between CoI and satisfaction and success as reported by online students, which confirmed a place for CoI in the conversation regarding faith integration in virtual settings. Garrison et al. (2000) identified three key components of the framework: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. All three elements have been extended and studied regarding applications in higher education (Garrison, 2009). For the purpose of this paper, teacher presence will be further unpacked with a lens for ways adjunct instructors can fulfill the mission of a Christian university by confidently integrating faith into their classes.

### **Teacher Presence**

Castellanos-Reyes (2020) provided a general definition of teacher presence as everything connected to the instructor's organization and running of the class. When teaching for a Christian university, it is expected that adjunct instructors represent the mission of the university to the same degree as full-time faculty, yet when it comes to faith integration, most adjunct instructors do not receive the same level of training and evaluation. While many online programs have consistency measures in place regarding the overall organization of the class, the instructor must put things in motion and be the student-facing presence on behalf of the organization. Anderson et al. (2001) touted teacher presence as the necessary factor for directing the actual cognitive and social aspects of the class. In other words, teacher presence is not only directly tied to but holds together the educational and relational sides of learning experience. When discussed in light of faith integration, it is not enough to rely on the course content or the student-to-student collaboration to make this come alive. Establishing a strong teacher presence is paramount to an adjunct instructor's ability to integrate faith in ways that create meaning for the students.

### **Faith Integration**

Within private Christian institutions, faith integration could arguably be the most important role of any instructor, including adjunct faculty. Unfortunately, training and support in this area is often overlooked for part-time employees as resources are diverted elsewhere. In the upcoming section, the authors share ideas that can be easily implemented using limited resources to promote adjunct instructor self-efficacy in the area of confident faith integration.

### **Strategies that Foster Self-efficacy**

When it comes to fostering self-efficacy among adjunct faculty, proactive planning and intentionality are key. Much time and effort goes into proactive efforts in areas such as curriculum mapping, content and program assessment, selective hiring, instructor efficacy with grading and applying policies, and professional development, yet faith integration is often left to instructors to figure out on their own or fit in when there is time. Adding faith integration to the list of first-tier considerations can allow for attention to be paid regarding that which Bandura (1977) touted as essential for fostering self-efficacy: performance outcomes, vicarious experiences, social or verbal persuasion, and physiological feedback. Providing training, integrating

modeling, creating resources, and giving feedback are all avenues for putting these key elements into action to support confident faith integration among adjunct instructors.

### **Training**

Training or onboarding new faculty should be a component of any higher education institution; however, at times this effort may be short-changed or even overlooked as HEIs face economic challenges and seek to cut back on unnecessary spending initiatives. In the case of adjunct faculty, onboard training may be neglected due to the extra cost of paying ancillary faculty by the hour and the high turnover rate. According to the American Association of University Professors (2014), adjunct faculty should be held accountable to the same missional standards as full-time faculty, and in doing so, the student outcomes, experience, and organizational governance are elevated. The benefits of this practice are twofold, as adjunct instructors will also experience increased self-efficacy as a result of this achievement (Bandura, 1977). HEIs should consider what faith integration training and support look like for full-time faculty and translate this into a workable and realistic plan for adjunct faculty. It needs to be manageable on all sides, but a proactive plan will accomplish more no matter what. Purposeful onboarding and training offer opportunities for full-time faculty to demonstrate their own teacher presence as they educate new faculty members. Bandura (1977) would argue that efforts to provide training in the area of faith integration is to put the element of social or verbal persuasion to work in much the same way a coach creates low-stress opportunities that are accompanied with early and encouraging feedback. Examples may include asking clear questions regarding their comfort with faith integration, attending one-on-one onboarding sessions to review expectations, and requiring the completion of an individualized learning module focusing on the institution's mission and vision (Tarbutton & Swisher, 2023).

### **Modeling**

The importance of mentoring cannot be overlooked as this practice helps to integrate employees into the inner workings and operations of the organization (Cai et al., 2021). Directors should model faith integration with their adjunct faculty in the ways they wish adjuncts to do so with students, thereby inviting uplifted teacher presence. Modeling is discussed as a vicarious experience and serves as an avenue to enhance self-efficacy among adjunct faculty (Bandura, 1977). In the online environment, modeling needs to be intentionally incorporated as the opportunities are typically less frequent than those in face-to-face settings. Examples of modeling may include opening meetings in prayer or incorporating prayer requests,

reinforcing core values and expectations during recorded professional development offerings, and incorporating a regular schedule for sharing Bible verses via email or other preferred learning management systems.

### **Creating Resources**

It should not be assumed that adjunct faculty will have time or, initially, the drive to come up with ideas and resources on how to share their faith with confidence. When adjunct instructors are new to teaching, it can be helpful to provide user-friendly resources that can be used as prompts or even scripts for faith integration. Physiological feedback is linked to the emotional responses experienced as one moves toward greater self-efficacy in an area of responsibility specific to their role (Bandura, 1977). The hope is that any initial stress or fear surrounding the requirement to integrate faith will be influenced and replaced by feelings of enjoyment as a positive emotional response that follows the experience of success. One example is to provide prewritten Christian Messages for instructors to rely on as they get acclimated to integrating faith. In the online classroom, this might include some additional training, such as how to tie the Christian Message with the content, ways to gradually bring more personal reflection and sharing into the process, and then how to convey the message in the appropriate delivery format, whether that be synchronously or asynchronously. Similarly, a cheat sheet of sorts can be provided with both written and virtual faith integration examples for adjunct instructors to reference as they gain confidence. There are many other ways for faith-based institutions to think proactively about helpful resources for adjunct faculty to utilize as they move through phases of physiological feedback in the direction of greater confidence in the area of faith integration.

### **Giving Feedback**

It is a misconception that faith integration should be considered off-the-table when it comes to faculty evaluations. Directors and supervisors should lean into the privilege and responsibility of providing feedback to adjunct instructors in this area of their teaching. If it is an expectation, then it should be an aspect of the instructor's role that is taken seriously enough to evaluate, and allow for feedback with the goals of support and encouragement. One suggestion is to include either written examples or time to discuss student comments, provided faith integration is an aspect of the student experience proactively included on surveys. Performance outcomes and verbal persuasion, two elements of self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977), collide in the best way when instructors are set up for success through well-planned evaluation processes that include proactive expectations, honest feedback, and plenty of ongoing support. Increased exposure and experience can

lead to greater levels of self-efficacy (Hampton et al., 2020); therefore, feedback should include areas of opportunity for the future so that instructors understand that the expectation is growth, not perfection. Kind feedback fosters self-efficacy and sends a message that faith integration is important enough to elicit time and attention during the evaluation process.

### Future Considerations

The authors have shared their approach towards cultivating faith-integration among adjunct faculty based on their experiences at one Christian institution. Intentional efforts directed toward revisiting and promoting faith-integration among adjunct faculty are of paramount importance for private, religious HEIs. The authors recommend the adoption of a framework incorporating the following components: a) a focus on the Col theoretical model with an emphasis on the teacher presence component, b) adoption of Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory, and c) best practices including; specific training, ongoing modeling, adequate resources, and critical feedback to bolster adjunct faculty's confidence in faith integration. When diligently implemented, these components can render positive outcomes promoting confident faith integration for adjunct faculty, as the authors have witnessed.

### Conclusions

With the influx of online adjunct instructors entering higher education settings, institutions would be wise to invest the time and resources to successfully support and prepare adjuncts to navigate and fulfill the organization's expectations. An upfront commitment in this area can lead to increased confidence and self-efficacy for all employees, including online adjunct faculty. In private Christian institutions, an intentional effort focused on promoting adjunct self-efficacy can result in enhanced faith integration, thereby espousing The Great Commission.

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### Corresponding Author Information

Lori Doyle  
Concordia University Irvine  
[lori.doyle@cui.edu](mailto:lori.doyle@cui.edu)