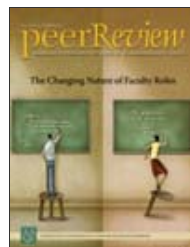




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## The Effects of Contingency on Student Success and the Professoriate

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I have spent over three years as a contingent faculty member at two institutions (a community college and a private liberal arts institution) over the course of my academic career. Graduating with a PhD in a recession has proved challenging and I imagine my entrée into contingency was similar to most: my deep love for teaching college students, in spite of the lack of stable jobs, is what set me on this path. The longer I stayed on the contingent track post-PhD, the more I came to realize that the situation for contingent faculty, as it currently stands, is untenable. I have decided to leave the contingent track in favor of a research career path (another passion of mine), and I wrote this article while pulling away from almost a decade of teaching in higher education. I have much to reflect upon with so many issues currently facing contingent faculty, but I want to start with perhaps the simplest issue—how do we reference this group of faculty members?

In the urgency to better understand the experiences of faculty who are teaching off the tenure track, academia has yet to collectively decide on the best term(s) to use in reference to this group. I find “full and part-time non-tenure-track faculty” and the acronym NTTF useful and I will use that terminology, along with “contingent faculty,” throughout the rest of this piece. Not all institutions use this terminology, however. For instance, at an institution that I taught at for two-and-a-half years, all NTTF were publicly referred to as “affiliate professors.” My title was “affiliate assistant professor,” since I joined the institution shortly after receiving my PhD. A colleague of mine, who started teaching at the same institution after receiving tenure at another institution, was titled “affiliate associate professor.” Some institutions simply prefer “instructor” or “adjunct.” Although I don’t think one term can capture the full range of experiences for all full and part-time NTTF, I do think that too many terms are confusing. If the academy could agree on appropriate titles, this could help the academic community get on the same page about the realities facing this group of faculty members and the impact contingency has on student success.

### Prioritizing Student Success in an Era of Contingency

In order to address the impact of contingency on undergraduate student success, I would like to first underscore some of the limitations and constraints that NTTF face. Full-time NTTF currently make up 18.8 percent of all faculty, while part-time NTTF currently make up 47.7 percent of all faculty (The Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success 2012), and the two faculty groups deal with issues that are particular to their separate experiences. Although both groups face job instability and are frequently divorced from the larger campus culture, part-time NTTF often teach at multiple institutions or are balancing their courses with employment outside of the academy, while full-time NTTF are often constrained by contract limits that can range from three to seven years at their institutions. These circumstances create untenable career paths and too often prevent NTTF from adequately serving undergraduate students due to their limited presence on and involvement in our nation’s campuses and their campus

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communities.

Part-time NTTF are especially limited in their availability to students, not only because they are balancing multiple employment positions, but some institutions are also now placing limitations on the number of hours (and, therefore, classes) that part-time faculty can work (and teach)—all in response to the Affordable Care Act. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reports that institutions in some states, including Ohio, Virginia, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, are limiting part-time NTTF work hours to under thirty hours a week “in advance” (Dunn 2013) of a January 2014 implementation date for the Affordable Care Act, which will require employers with more than fifty employees to provide health benefits to those who work at least thirty hours a week. These limitations are also being instituted in response to the Internal Revenue Service’s recent proposal that colleges and universities take into consideration the work hours that contingent faculty accumulate both inside and outside of the classroom in determining eligibility for healthcare benefits (June 2013). These work hour limitations are becoming a “trend,” according to Maria Maisto of New Faculty Majority (Straumsheim 2008), and all of this equates not only to a decrease in full-time NTTF (in favor of more part-time NTTF), but also decreased faculty availability for student interaction, and decreased availability for grading. One NTTF member interviewed by *The Chronicle* stated that she “considered reducing the number of pages she requires for her essay assignments, to cut back on the grading time” (Dunn 2013). Administrators who are pushing for work hour limitations are using the rhetoric of institutional budget crises to effectively de-center student work, devalue high-impact practices (such as writing-intensive courses), and de-prioritize faculty well-being.

AAC&U argues for the implementation of high-impact practices (HIPs), including writing-intensive courses, undergraduate research, and service learning, which emphasize “cumulative educational achievements across the multiple levels of the college curriculum” and foster institutional learning outcomes for the purposes of student success (Kuh 2008). As a contingent faculty member who was not involved in the development or monitoring of the institutional learning outcomes at the two campuses where I taught, AAC&U’s list of HIPs and Essential Learning Outcomes were invaluable in helping me craft my own learning objectives. I specifically prompted students to focus on critical thinking, analytical thinking, civic knowledge, integrative learning, and intercultural knowledge in my courses, which focused heavily on writing. At too many institutions, however, the connection between campus priorities for student success and contingent faculty work is tenuous—and this is not the fault of NTTF. Institutions need to provide NTTF with the necessary resources (access to faculty workshops, for instance) that engage faculty in campus teaching and learning priorities—and this work needs to be incentivized.

AAC&U’s own work on student learning outcomes is partly organized through the Quality Collaboratives (QC) project, which seeks to align high-quality education with degree completion by beta testing mapping and assessment of student learning outcomes using the Degree Qualifications Profile (or DQP—see [www.luminafoundation.org/publications/The\\_Degree\\_Qualifications\\_Profile.pdf](http://www.luminafoundation.org/publications/The_Degree_Qualifications_Profile.pdf)) in the context of transfer between two- and four-year institutions. The learning outcomes presented in the DQP—broad and specialized knowledge, intellectual skills, applied learning, and civic learning—are structured to support cumulative student learning across the curriculum. Some of the institutions in the QC project are working with tenure-track, tenured, *and* non-tenure-track faculty through project assessment of DQP learning outcomes. In fact, the QC project specifically recommends engagement with “professionals, including contingent and part-time faculty...” on “expected learning outcomes across both general and field-specific areas of learning.”

In addition to engagement with student learning outcomes, AAC&U’s measures of student success includes nationwide evidence about access, retention, completion, and learning achievement of underserved student groups in higher education. Campus resources that affirm underserved students’ particular race, class, gender, sexual, and immigrant identities support student success initiatives—and so do faculty, including NTTF. Numerous NTTF teach about

issues that have a direct impact on marginalized student groups, and these faculty members often serve as resources for these students. In fact, many underserved students approach NTTF for mentoring, and the longer these faculty members remain on campus, the more students identify these individuals as mentors. Campus administrators generally do not recognize or reward mentoring relationships between NTTF and marginalized students, and when contingent faculty-mentors leave their posts (either on their own accord or via contract limits), they leave a gap in student support.

### The Current Employment Landscape

Now that I have explored some of the issues currently facing NTTF, and the impact of these issues on student success, I want to address the employment landscape for newly minted PhDs in the economic downturn. The 2011 *Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities* report, released by the National Science Foundation (NSF) in December 2012, highlights shifting trends in doctoral education since 1958, with a particular focus on individuals who received research doctorates during the 2010–2011 academic year. In the report, NSF describes a worrisome decline in postgraduation employment opportunities for PhD recipients:

“The proportion of doctorate recipients with definite commitments for employment or postdoctoral (postdoc) study fell in every broad science and engineering (S&E) field in 2011, the second consecutive year of decline. ...The proportion... [also] fell in every broad non-S&E field of study in 2011, the third consecutive year of decline in each of those fields” (National Science Foundation, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics 2012).

The report goes on to describe the decline in jobs for PhD recipients in “every broad S&E field” as being “at or near its lowest level of the past ten years.” Additionally, PhD recipients in the humanities are facing their lowest level of job opportunities “since 1997,” while PhD recipients “in education and other non-S&E fields” are facing a decline lower than “any point in the past two decades” (National Science Foundation, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics 2012). The data clearly point to the negative effects of the economic downturn on employment opportunities, yet the data also confirm that this issue has been trending for some time. From 1969 to 2009, the percentage of faculty off the tenure track has shifted from about 21.7 to 66.5 percent of all faculty members in US institutions (The Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success 2012). Maria Maisto and Steve Street address the increasing reliance on contingency from the 1970s forward: “While the roots of contingent academic employment go back many decades, and surged in the early 1970s (Berry 2005), it was not until the 1980s that the higher education community really began to notice that contingency had exploded to a level of concern” (Maisto and Street 2011). Richard Boris, director of the National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions, also describes the reliance on NTTF from the 1980s forward as “a lure or a drug that” institutions “couldn’t wean themselves from” (Flaherty 2013).

What does this mean, in the current economic context? Although we can look to the NSF data as evidence of a surplus of PhD recipients in the United States, with an accompanied dilemma of how to employ this surplus of individuals, I would rather academic institutions (and other employers) think of these individuals as a pool of available, excellent talent. Academia has had this pool of talented individuals with the skills to teach and mentor our nation’s undergraduates at its disposal for years. Institutions need to start providing these individuals with sustainable career trajectories, which is truly in the best interest of everyone involved (since sustainable careers mean better working conditions, deeper engagement with campus priorities, and decreased faculty turnover). Institutions also need to open up job searches beyond new doctorate recipients —*Inside Higher Ed* described two job ads last year that called for candidates “who earned their PhDs in 2010 or after” (Basu 2012) to apply for open assistant professor positions.

Furthermore, racial and class backgrounds continue to serve as predictors for PhD attainment in the United States, adding a demographic layer to the issue of PhDs with insecure jobs or inequitable access to employment and bolstering the argument for inclusive excellence in the realm of doctorate programs. According to the NSF

“As of 2011, about half of American Indian or Alaska Native, black or African American, and Hispanic or Latino doctorate recipients belonged to families in which neither parent had been awarded a college degree. In contrast, nearly three-fourths of Asian and white doctorate recipients came from families with at least one college-educated parent, and nearly half of Asian and white doctorate recipients had at least one parent with an advanced degree” (National Science Foundation, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics 2012).

Alongside this racial and class inequality in doctorate programs, gender continues to serve as a predictor of salary level for doctorate recipients—men with doctorates currently earn a higher salary than women with doctorates “in just about any field” (Palmer 2013). Further, even though “in 2011, temporary visa holders represented the majority of doctorate recipients in engineering and over 40 percent of those in the physical sciences” (National Science Foundation, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics 2012), these individuals faced bigger obstacles to employment than their US counterparts (Weissmann 2013). Thus, when discussing the issues surrounding contingency, academicians need to additionally address the reality that historically privileged groups continue to have greater access to doctorate programs and (higher-paid) employment than do historically marginalized groups.

### **Moving Beyond a Seeming Impasse**

The picture may look bleak, but there are productive things happening to address the contingency issue and there are plenty of opportunities to shift the current academic culture. Part of this shift includes changing the way that institutions prepare future doctorate recipients for employment, both inside and outside of the academy. The American Historical Association (AHA) is trying to do just this, partially through a mini-conference on “the malleable PhD” held at its 2013 annual meeting, where participants discussed “a range of job opportunities outside the academy for historians, the role of graduate education in preparing students for those opportunities, and practical suggestions for history PhDs hoping to broaden their employment horizons” (Jones 2013). The AHA has refreshingly prioritized the contingency issue, and at this mini-conference, participants took exception to academic culture that has tended to “disparage employment outside the academy” (Jones 2013).

Many institutions also offer orientation sessions to NTTF, which (in my experience) provide information about the campus culture, campus resources, tips for the classroom, and an introduction to campus technologies. Although these orientation sessions provide a helpful foundation, they tend to reflect a limited, “incremental change” (Maisto and Street 2011) to the campus culture, and NTTF are often left to their own devices thereafter. For example, although I participated in the orientation session at one of the institutions at which I taught, I was never provided with an introduction to the campus technology within the classrooms, leading to numerous phone calls to campus technology services across most of the semesters I taught at that campus (including during actual class time). Institutions should, therefore, construct new (and equitable) ways of bringing NTTF deeper into the campus culture beyond these orientations. Institutions could offer NTTF incentivized workshops on institutional learning outcomes or campus technologies (to be offered at accessible times) throughout the academic year and campus administrators could find ways to recognize NTTF for service outside the classroom (such as speaking on panels about topics that affect the campus community, mentoring students, or writing letters of recommendation).

The increasing reliance on NTTF has also perpetuated a two-tiered system in academia that has produced a divide between those who gain a tenure-track position and those who don't. Maisto and Street further argue that there are "three classes of faculty rather than two," with NTTF split between full-time and part-time (Maisto and Street 2011). While it's true that NTTF and tenure-track faculty have their own particular issues to contend with, I have noted little visible support for issues affecting NTTF from tenured or tenure-track faculty on the campuses at which I have taught. This issue can go both ways—NTTF could also demonstrate more support for their colleagues on the tenure track. I can personally attest that it took an in-depth conversation with a friend on the tenure track to help me understand the pressures that some tenure-track faculty are facing in their efforts to gain tenure in an economic downturn, such as increased demands on research productivity, higher teaching loads, and a decreased sense of governance. Although NTTF research too often takes a backburner amidst the scurry to secure stable income and benefits, NTTF can empathize with high teaching loads and are often left out of faculty governance altogether. These issues, although experienced differently, could become connecting points of solidarity between faculty on and off the tenure track. Both tiers of faculty might consider forming a unified faculty community on their campuses, in order to build empathy and understanding about their respective issues (a starting point for effective change). The American Association of University Professors has campus chapters that foster these types of communities, and faculty can also elect to meet informally. NTTF might also meet separately from tenured or tenure-track faculty, if they can find the time to build a collaborative.

There is too much at stake for academia when it comes to issues involving full and part-time non-tenure-track faculty, including nationwide student success, the "health" of the professoriate, and an "academic democracy" (Maisto and Street 2011) that recognizes that the success of all faculty is critical to success of all students. When I was a first-year undergraduate, I took an Introduction to Sociology course that made me fall deeply in love with the discipline, and I walked away from that course willing to do whatever I could to teach and inspire undergraduate students in much the same way that I was inspired all of those years ago. Yet, we now collectively stand at the nexus of deep cuts to higher education and further instability of faculty roles. How is academia planning to inspire the next generation of faculty, if fair treatment and full participation in campus communities are tenuous dreams, at best?

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