

Paradigm Shift: A New Look at Contingent Faculty Members in Higher Education

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Over the past 30 years, many US colleges and universities have prided themselves on their reputation as institutions of tolerance and open-mindedness, bastions of liberal thinking where new ideas can be explored and people can feel accepted. On an annual basis, our institutions of higher learning spend millions of dollars and thousands of programming hours promoting diversity and attempting to broaden the minds of young students, teaching them that actions such as stereotyping, marginalizing, and discriminating are harmful. Indeed, many universities have entire departments devoted to supporting inclusion, and the notion of acceptance is at the heart of many departmental and institutional mission statements. Ironically, as higher education institutions increasingly spend more time and funding supporting efforts to promote inclusion among their student populations, it's possible that faculty members and administrators have lost sight of their own commitment to these values, particularly in relation to contingent faculty members (CFM).

The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) defines CFM as both part and full-time faculty who are appointed off the tenure-track, and the term also includes adjuncts who are generally compensated on a per-course or hourly basis (Curtis and Jacobe 2006). Over the past three decades, across the landscape of the US higher education system, a shift in the academic labor force has become increasingly visible. In particular, the rise of a majority non-tenure track, contingent faculty has become a reality that colleges and universities must learn to deal with. Since the late 1970s the percentage of college and university teaching done by CFM has risen substantially (AAUP 2003; Baron-Nixon 2007; Curtis and Jacobe 2006; Gappa

2008; Kezar 2012). In 1975, 58 percent of all faculty members were in tenure-line positions but by the year 2000 only 27 percent of all new faculty members were on a tenure-line (Gappa 2008). The academic labor shift is aptly demonstrated by recent data from the U.S. Department of Education's 2009 Fall Staff Survey, which indicates that

of the nearly 1.8 million faculty members and instructors who made up the 2009 instructional workforce in degree-granting two- and four-year institutions of higher education in the United States, more than 1.3 million (75.5%) were employed in contingent positions off the tenure track, either as part-time or adjunct faculty members, full-time non-tenure-track faculty members, or graduate student teaching assistants. (Coalition on the Academic Workforce 2012, p. 1)

Despite changes to the academic labor force, and the reality that CFM now make up the majority of people who teach on college and university campuses, these individuals are still frequently (1) underpaid and offered no benefits, (2) viewed and treated as semi-professional laborers, (3) hidden within complex organizational structures, and (4) offered minimal job security (Coalition on the Academic Workforce 2012). There are several explanations as to why these marginalizing behaviors exist, but two of the primary reasons are (a) CFM pose a threat to historical notions of how professionalism in higher education should be defined, and (b) research surrounding this segment of the postsecondary workforce does not provide a clear picture of their impact on students and institutions.

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Tenure Defines Professionalism

As previously stated, the first reason institutions or individuals may marginalize CFM is because non-tenure track faculty have historically not been viewed as true academicians. A multitude of preconceived notions about CFM permeate the literature on higher education and overall these deficit model assumptions depict non-tenure track faculty as partially skilled laborers and not as professionals (Kezar et al. 2006; Purcell 2007). Kezar and Sam (2011) indicate that the deficit model of CFM creates the assumptions that

In effect, non-tenure track faculty lack qualities that are important to a functional workplace such as commitment, satisfaction, social capital, agency, the ability to learn and form collegial relationships, and the ability to integrate students on campus. (p. 1421)

Authors such as Chait (2005) suggest that the deficit model is based on the fact that the majority of those who research CFM are themselves tenure-line faculty who may see the emergence of contingent positions as a threat to tenure and the traditional role of the faculty within the academy. Some scholars (Baldwin and Chronister 2002; Kezar et al. 2006; Kezar and Sam 2011) assert that beneath the deficit model and the negative assumptions that it creates, there is an ideological struggle about the appropriate role and nature of the professoriate, including arguments over the merit of tenure and what it represents.

Within the academic community there is a long held belief that tenure helps define professional status with regards to teaching and scholarship (AAUP 2006; Baldwin and Chronister 2002; Chait 2002; Tierney 1998). Kezar and Sam (2011) state

Tenure is tied to the notion of being a professional who has internal control of his or her work and autonomy; professionals are granted freedom from external accountability and control in exchange for serving the greater public good. (p. 1422)

Indeed, many authors (Finkin 1996; Kezar et al. 2006; Rhoades 1998) note that scholars are socialized to see tenure as the standard mark of an academic professional who has earned distinction from others (i.e., contingent faculty) via a rigorous peer review process.

From this perspective comes the ideological assumption that faculty members who accept non-tenure track positions are deviating from the norm because they lack the same professional capabilities or knowledge as tenure-line faculty (Baldwin and Chronister 2002). Kezar and Sam (2011) argue that this ideological belief system gives rise to the belief that because CFM

are not professionals in the same way, they will not participate in professional development nor continue to advance their skills in teaching and research. Because they are not part of the academic guild, vis-à-vis the tenure process, they cannot be as productive or perform as well as tenure track professionals who have a higher mission to serve. (p. 1423)

The widely accepted assumption that tenure is the defining mark of professionalism for faculty members has led to the development of a hegemonic ideological system within higher education, one that marginalizes and diminishes the contributions of CFM instead of recognizing their abilities to contribute to the university community in multiple ways.

Incomplete Picture of CFM

In spite of their growing presence, and despite the fact that many institutions cannot function without them, CFM remain a population which has been sparsely researched, yet still negatively stereotyped and marginalized. In response to the growing number of CFM throughout the landscape of higher education, over the past decade there has been an increased number of studies (e.g., Ehrenberg and Zhang 2005; Jaeger and Hinz 2008; Landrom 2009; Ronco and Cahill 2004; Umbach 2007) and publications (e.g., AAUP 2003; Baldwin and

Chronister 2002; Baron-Nixon 2007; Benjamin 2002; 2003; Herman and Schmid 2003; Kezar and Sam 2011; Kezar 2012; Thedwall 2008) exploring the role of these individuals and the positive and negative effects they have on undergraduate students. While studies on the impact of contingent faculty have increased, several contemporary observers (Kezar and Sam 2011; Levin and Shaker 2011; Tam and Jacoby 2009) argue that there is still limited meaningful information and research on this emerging population.

The research which does exist on CFM is bifurcated and often offers a negative perspective of these instructors. For example, some authors (Benjamin 2002, 2003; Eagan and Jaeger 2009; Jaeger 2008; Umbach 2007) suggest that overutilization can have negative consequences for undergraduate students; however, research in this area presents conflicting evidence. For example, some studies (e.g., Ehrenberg and Zhang 2004; Harrington and Schibik 2001; Jaeger and Hinz 2008) found that students who were primarily taught by contingent faculty members, often part-time, were less likely to be retained and graduate. In addition, other researchers (Schuster 2003; Schuster and Finkelstein 2006) have concluded that part-time faculty members are often less accessible and less available to students which can have a negative impact on student retention rates.

In contrast, in their study of 3,700 first year students from multiple disciplines at a four-year, public research intensive university, Ronco and Cahill (2004) found little evidence that retention rates were linked to instructor type; rather, that student retention and achievement were tied to educational background and experience. Kehberg and Turpin (2002) studied the effect of exposure to contingent faculty on GPA and retention and found that the negative relationships that existed disappeared when academic preparation was taken into account. In relation, several studies (Maynard 2000; Maynard and Joseph 2008; Outcalt 2003) have demonstrated that contingent faculty members at both two-year and four-year institutions often display high levels of emotional commitment to their institutions which can lead to prolonged employment and increased engagement with colleagues and students. Finally, Landrum (2009) explored instructional differences be-

tween full-time and part-time faculty within eight academic units at a four-year institution and found no significant differences in instructional capacity or student satisfaction. Based on this short list of research projects alone, it's clear that the evidence on the impact of CFM is inconclusive and more research should be performed in order to promote an increased understanding of this population of instructors.

Conclusion

Stereotypes involve generalizations about typical characteristics of members of a certain group, and discrimination and marginalization are the actual positive or negative actions towards those individuals who have been stereotyped. CFM are often typecast based on inconclusive evidence and preconceived notions about their qualifications, commitment, and impact on students and the university community. A primarily contingent faculty represents a cost-effective solution to college and university budgetary restraints but that does not mean they embody a lower-caliber of professional. As increasing numbers of CFM are employed within the U.S. higher education system, the majority who hold advanced and terminal academic degrees, a paradigm shift in how they are viewed will become imperative. Instead of using stereotypes to marginalize this population of instructors, tenure-line faculty and administrators should concentrate on the positive contributions these individuals can make to the university community along with increased ways to support this group of instructors. In doing so, the doors for increased collaboration and improved teaching can be opened and CFM may finally feel that they are members of a community, instead of outsiders always looking in.

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