

Addressing the Needs of Contingent Faculty

One of the most pressing issues in higher education today is improving support and recognition of our contingent faculty. These are the lecturers, instructors, adjuncts, part-time, or non-tenure track faculty that are hired on a "contingent" basis to teach a single class or for a single semester, but overall play an increasingly critical role in higher education. One 2006 American Association of University Professors (AAUP) study found that these academics account for 48 percent of teaching faculty at doctoral and research universities, and 68 percent across all U.S. degree granting institutions. Despite their importance, these faculty are often treated as if they are invisible and their needs overlooked or underplayed—they receive low wages, lack job security, don't qualify for benefits offered to full-time faculty, and often have little say in department governance or curricular planning and sometimes even fail to receive access to basic clerical services and office space. When tenure track positions become available, they are likely not to be considered as viable candidates. To me, the very term "contingent" serves as a euphemism which allows many tenure-track faculty to downplay these disparities.

One reason it is hard to change this situation is that contingent faculty are seen, like their contracts, as a temporary issue. But I think the status of contingent faculty is also a sensitive one because it is tied to two hot-button issues—tenure and money. Too often I think contingent faculty are viewed as a threat to the institution of tenure—"If we recognize and support contingent faculty it will probably be at the expense of tenured positions like ours." Not only does this view ignore the fact that contingent faculty have played a key role in American higher education from the very beginning, but framing the issue in terms of an arbitrary, oppositional dichotomy between contingent and tenure-track faculty misses the point that many of the same issues are faced by all academics, not just those on and off the tenure track. Respecting the needs of contingent faculty doesn't mean that tenure will disappear, but it does mean that departments can consider their staffing and program needs more realistically.

Money (and declining budgets) also inhibits discussion—"How can we pos-

sibly meet our budget and teaching goals if we offer contingent faculty more than we already do?" This sense of financial strain—even duress—often seems to color attitudes and policies toward contingent faculty. I think it has an additional consequence in that it allows many of us on the tenure track to sidestep responsibility. By claiming that the causes transcend the department and are imposed by administrative exigencies dictated by contemporary economic and political policies, we can continue our present practices without feeling a need to question or address them at the departmental level.

I don't want to discount the magnitude of the changing economic and political realities of higher education in the U.S., but I feel that there are many steps that can be taken to improve upon the current situation, even at the department level. The first is to consider recent research indicating when and why faculty take contingent positions. Some take such appointments for only a short time because of a difficult job market, while others continue in such positions for long periods for many different reasons. Some individuals like to focus their attention on teaching, rather than the research and service obligations of tenure-track appointments. Others enjoy the part-time scheduling flexibility because they have other personal, professional or family responsibilities. Many faculty take contingent positions to follow a spouse or partner to a particular place or university. Overall, contingent positions are held more often by women than men, and this may be another reason why reliance on contingent faculty is sometimes a sensitive issue.

A recent study by Inger Bergom and Jean Waltman of the University of Michigan's Center for the Education of Women suggests a number of steps that can be taken to support contingent faculty (*On Campus with Women*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2009). Issues of hiring and employment are at the top of the list including: offering multiyear appointments whenever possible; providing timely notification of contract renewal

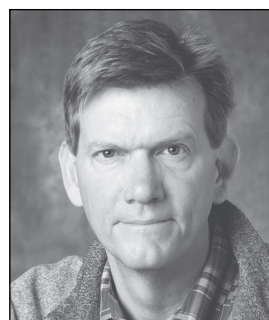
or nonrenewal; creating equitable policies covering employment terms, benefits, titles, and promotion criteria; and making policies clear and easily accessible.

But Bergom and Waltman note two other important areas for improvement, ones which can be addressed quite readily: career development and advancement; and integration into departmental and institutional life. As examples of the former, they suggest offering: 1) career development opportunities like workshops, mentoring relationships and conference attendance; 2) an increasing breadth of teaching assignments through time; 3) roles and responsibilities on departmental and university committees; 4) release time and career development leaves; and 5) eligibility for teaching awards and grants.

For better integration into departmental and institutional life they suggest: 1) encouraging collaborations between contingent faculty and their tenure-track colleagues, say in planning or teaching courses; 2) including non-tenure track faculty in departmental and institutional-level governance; 3) providing social networking opportunities including participation in retreats and other departmental events; 4) arranging opportunities for contingent faculty from an entire campus to come together to learn from one another; and 5) creating an collegial environment where all staff feel engaged with and connected to each other and to the department's work.

Until I worked with many contingent faculty as part of the Geography Faculty Development Alliance, I failed to recognize the many barriers to professional recognition and support they encounter. Now I see Bergom and Waltman's suggestions as important steps forward in recognizing and acknowledging the important roles contingent faculty play in contemporary higher education. Our educational programs cannot flourish, or even survive without these qualified colleagues. They merit our respect and support. ■

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