What You Can Do: A Position Paper by the MLA Committee on Contingent Labor in the Profession

A Supplement to Professional Employment Practices for Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Members: Recommendations and Evaluative Questions

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Issues for Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Members and the Institutions That Hire Them

The reality of today’s academy is that roughly two-thirds of the teaching faculty is ineligible for tenure (American Academic; see Laurence, in this issue). The ratio of tenure-track to non-tenure-track (NTT) instructional staff has been increasing at least since the 1980s and likely will continue to increase for the foreseeable future. There are many and diverse problems associated with the status quo, which are detailed in the MLA’s 2011 Professional Employment Practices for Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Members: Recommendations and Evaluative Questions, put together by the Committee on Contingent Labor in the Profession (CLIP), and in the contributions to this issue. Of these problems, three in particular stand out as pervasive and consistent across many institutions: compensation, working conditions, and marginalization.

While compensation and benefits for NTT faculty members vary widely by institution, as a rule they are paid significantly less than tenure-track and tenured faculty members. Many institutions have opted to navigate the lean years since the recession by increasing the ratio of NTT to tenure-line faculty members, as well as by increasing the ratio of part-time to full-time NTT faculty members (see Laurence, in this issue). To address these shifts in the faculty composition, administrators need to assess and understand the importance of paying a fair salary for the expert work NTT faculty members do, and NTT faculty members need to communicate across the campus about all aspects of pay and equity and, where feasible, organize so that they can negotiate with the administration on a more equal footing, whether as a consortium or through a formal structure such as a labor union. For institutions that already have unionized or those that don’t allow for unions, cross-campus alliances, such as a contingent faculty association that meets once a month, may help ensure that NTT faculty members feel heard, make their concerns public, and receive updates on the treatment of their colleagues in different schools. As an extension, regional alliances could be envisaged afterward that may eventually result in a conference.

The second issue, working conditions, covers many aspects and areas of life for NTT faculty members, from the widespread practice of hiring NTT faculty members on very short notice and the frequently nebulous ways of rehiring them to inadequate office space and access to campus resources. Many of the contributors to this issue of the bulletins address circumstances that affect NTT faculty members’ quality of life and the quality of their work: the lack of paid medical leave or retirement
benefits, exclusion from departmental affairs, little or no visibility, commuting between several campuses, grading in multiple venues, and seeking access 24/7 to student populations across the globe are only some of the difficulties encountered by our NTT colleagues in the profession.

While the severity of problems with working conditions for NTT faculty members varies immensely from campus to campus, and even within campuses, the marginalization of NTT faculty members is perhaps the most insidious aspect of the status quo. Seldom are NTT faculty members integrated into the life of a department or college, and, although they often are teaching a disproportionately high number of a department’s students, they rarely are included in decision-making or planning processes related to curriculum and instruction. By and large NTT faculty members, including those employed full-time, are little more than fill-ins hired to cover core courses that need to be taught. The widespread change from a collegial culture in favor of a managerial one is felt first and foremost by them.

Working from the conspicuous effects of the interaction of compensation, working conditions, and marginalization on adjuncts’ experience, we should probe deeper to attempt a comprehensive strategy for intervention in a systematic dynamic. In doing so, we may encounter local issues such as the functioning of institutions’ economics and the accessibility of such information. How do short-term positions created with soft money “count” toward the overall budget of a department? How can surplus funds be reallocated toward instructional budgets? For example, how many part-time faculty members’ per-course compensation comes from soft-money funds created from salaries that actually, in an accounting sense, belong not to their positions but to lines held by tenured faculty members, half of which can be recaptured when those faculty members go on sabbatical at half pay? Half the salary of a tenured faculty member who teaches two courses a semester can be leveraged into several deliveries of those two courses.

Some more general issues would be the widely varying processes and standards used for hiring, both on and off the tenure track; the discrepancies among the processes in place; and the inadequate means to evaluate them. For example, an NTT faculty member hired on a per-course basis at the last minute will hardly have the same privileges as a tenure-track faculty member hired in a national search. The lack of parity is usually perceived by the NTT faculty member as an unspoken institutional standard. Instituting guidelines for hiring NTT faculty members would help remedy such imbalances, so as to promote some sense of consistency among the NTT and tenure-track faculty populations of an institution. Such guidelines would suggest to NTT faculty members that they are welcome not only to fulfill their contact hour and grading obligations but also to contribute to departmental life, without laying the burden of remedying the institutional standards on them. The more inclusive environment would then enhance the quality of instruction and student learning.

In view of this complex dynamic, the widespread and insidious marginalization of NTT faculty members and their unsatisfactory working conditions would appear to be insurmountable hurdles to a healthy, productive new academic order. And yet there is much one can do, as this MLA committee as well as several advocacy groups and individuals have shown. In this supplement to our 2011 publication we make
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explicit the links among marginalization, working conditions, and the quality of the education institutions provide, suggesting that positive reforms regarding the NTT faculty can contribute to the improvement of overall instruction.

Current Reports on Instructional Integrity

Apart from cost savings during bad budget years, of paramount concern to department chairs and colleagues in the modern languages and to administrators is the quality of the education provided to students. A robust and growing body of scholarly work has begun to unpack the myriad negative effects of the increased use of NTT faculty members on the quality of students’ education. Ronald G. Ehrenberg and Liang Zhang found that increased usage of NTT faculty members adversely affects graduation rates of students at four-year colleges. Eric Bettinger and Bridget Terry Long reported that having a part-time faculty member as an instructor in the humanities is associated with a decreased likelihood that a student will take subsequent classes in that subject (see also Benjamin). Roger Baldwin and Matthew Wawrzynski found a notable difference in instructional strategies reported between part-time and full-time faculty members, with full-time NTT faculty members approaching instruction similarly to tenure-line faculty. All the studies to date that highlight the negative impacts on instructional quality associated with the use of part-time faculty members attribute the negative effects not to the quality of the instructors but to the quality of the conditions under which they must work. Indeed, the studies to date suggest that negative associations may have to do with students’ access to faculty members and with faculty members’ investment in the life of the department vis-à-vis participation in activities and initiatives outside the classroom. Two campaigns sponsored by the American Federation of Teachers focus on the significance of these associations to instructional integrity: FACE (Faculty and College Excellence; http://www.aftface.org/) and Just Ask (http://www.aft.org/pdfs/highered/justask0309.pdf).

Such studies and efforts add to the now very clear imperative for institutions to initiate reforms at all levels. The threefold purpose needs to remain explicit and in focus throughout all initiatives, as institutions work to do the following:

1. improve all aspects of working and professional conditions for NTT faculty members, using as a guide what we now know can bring about that improvement
2. integrate NTT faculty members into a systemic and articulated approach to academic programs
3. ensure that there are optimal conditions for all NTT faculty members to offer outstanding instruction at all levels and in all instructional settings, including online instruction

There are many ways to bring about change that will allow institutions to retain the cost-saving advantages of employing NTT faculty members while acknowledging the realities of today’s academy, and each institution must approach change in the context of its idiosyncratic characteristics, goals, and plans. Yet a fairly simple and user-friendly framework for change can be identified, namely along two axes. The first axis
runs from minor changes that imply little or no cost increases, or indeed involve cost savings, to major reforms that would require cooperation and decision making across disciplines and colleges within the university or across campuses in multicampus systems. The second axis articulates vertically, from the program or departmental level, which would include cooperative efforts or collaboration among NTT faculty members, through the levels of chair, dean, and upper administration. As ideas are generated and initiatives discussed, participants can identify where these fall along the two axes in order to help set priorities and sequence activities. Changes along these two axes would take place within an institution, but all parties involved in change should also make use of external initiatives and information, such as those from advocacy groups like the New Faculty Majority or CLIP. In addition, institutions might also consider the advantages of creating or joining multicampus consortia, such as the Consortium for Language Teaching and Learning (http://www.languageconsortium.org/), the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (http://www.cic.net/), or the recently eliminated University of California Consortium for Language Learning and Teaching (http://uccllt.ucdavis.edu/). The University of Southern California’s Rossier School of Education, the New Faculty Majority, the American Association of University Professors, and others have also taken up the task.

Of particular interest in this context is the Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success (http://thechangingfaculty.org), founded by New Faculty Majority members Adrianna Kezar and Dan Maxey, of the University of Southern California (Changing Faculty; Delphi Project). The Delphi Project examines the causes of the increased use of NTT faculty members and analyzes the impact of this change on the teaching and learning environment. The first phase of the project is a policy study intended to provide a robust framework of ideas to be shared in the second phase, which will include the dissemination of ideas in partnership with the Association of American College and Universities and potentially other organizations. The Delphi Project resources pages can be used in conjunction with the MLA’s 2011 Professional Employment Practices for Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Members, which also details questions for discussion, planning, and reform. Among the available Delphi Project resources are the Imperative for Change and The Path to Change, a compilation of eight institutional case studies. Together these resources call attention to consequences of current arrangements and employment practices for NTT faculty members that make them institutionally problematic, including the following:

**Adverse impact on student learning.** Poor working conditions and a lack of support diminish NTT faculty members’ capacity to provide a high-quality learning environment and experience for students.

**Employment inequities.** Human resources professionals, tasked with examining issues of equity and fairness in employment practices, need to examine carefully several key issues on college campuses, such as salary, benefits, governance, professional development, and rehiring.

**Risk management.** In examining the potential risk-management factors related to faculty members and their working conditions, many administrators may have overlooked the legal issues that can arise from the current working conditions of NTT faculty members.
Some Practical Steps

The data reveal some very clear steps that should be taken to improve working conditions and facilitate better integration of NTT faculty members into the life of the department. Where these fall along the two axes will vary by institution, but here we arrange them from least to most costly and from lowest to highest administrative levels.

- Provide sufficient orientation and access to professional development for all NTT faculty members.
- Include NTT faculty members in curricular planning, revisions, and decision making, particularly regarding the courses they teach.
- Provide NTT faculty members with adequate office space, equal in quality to that of tenure-line faculty members. In addition, ensure that NTT faculty members have equal access to instructional resources, including technological resources.
- Include NTT faculty members in departmental meetings. Where possible, allow NTT faculty members to be voting members of the department, at least on matters related to curriculum and planning. Create recommendations for specific types of involvement in faculty governance. Promote adjunct involvement in outcome assessment and curricular decisions. Develop a statement on adjunct involvement in governance and department issues.
- Encourage advocacy efforts among NTT faculty members (e.g., how to petition, how to use CLIP recommendations to start a conversation on campus, how to reach across departments and campuses, how to form alliances with professional organizations).
- Reward NTT faculty members’ creative activity and achievements through reviews and promotions and annual awards.
- Set aside funds for NTT faculty members to present at regional or national conferences, so that they can remain engaged with their respective fields. Participation in conferences for the purpose of professional development (e.g., ACTFL) should also be supported.
- Make hiring and contract renewal transparent, fair, and equitable processes for all NTT faculty members, with clearly articulated rules and guidelines for all parties.

Works Cited


The Changing Faculty and Student Success: Selected Research on Connections between Non-Tenure-Track Faculty and Student Learning. University of Southern California. Pullias Center for Higher Educ., Rossier
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