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HERE TODAY, GONE TOMORROW? THE INCREASINGLY CONTINGENT FACULTY WORKFORCE*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The use of non-tenure-track and part-time faculty in U.S. colleges and universities is on the rise, altering the composition of the academic workforce in fundamental ways. Who, then, are contemporary faculty? In what ways do they differ from their predecessors? In which institutions and sectors are the trends most pronounced?

This project investigated the “contingency movement” using a variety of analytic approaches, including extensive literature review, quantitative analysis of over two decades of national institutional data, and onsite interviews with contingent and non-contingent faculty at a research university, a private liberal arts college, and a public masters-level institution.

Examining descriptive trend data, we found that for-profit colleges have been especially committed since the 1980s to contingent hiring, while the more “elite” liberal arts and research university sectors have been slower to make such moves. The move to contingency has been virtually universal across postsecondary education, however. To investigate these trends more systematically, we undertook longitudinal quantitative modeling of our panel data. These analyses produced several striking findings. First, less historically “institutionalized” postsecondary sectors have been the most likely to adopt contingent hiring, but barriers to such hiring have been eroding progressively over recent years. Second, different kinds of contingent employment have somewhat differing roots. For example, research universities have aggressively begun employing full-time non-tenure-track faculty in recent years, but have not been nearly as committed to part-time hiring as institutions in other sectors. And finally, private institutions are moving more speedily than their public counterparts toward resembling for-profit institutions in their employment profiles.



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Our interviews with faculty at different institutions suggest that these developments have not come without some costs. Although recent national surveys of tenured and non-tenured faculty consistently suggest rather high levels of satisfaction, our interview respondents often voiced unease over recent developments, and contingent faculty frequently expressed anxiety and a sense of professional compromise.

With no evidence that any part of U.S. higher education is immune to the contingency movement, the established nature of governance, leadership, decision processes, and careers in higher education will require substantial rethinking. Ideally, the work reported here will contribute to the conversation.

INTRODUCTION

Dramatic transitions are taking place in the faculty workforce in U.S. colleges and universities. Iconic images of the beloved faculty member as an enduring fixture on ivied campuses, mentoring successive generations of students, are becoming less and less representative of the realities across the nation's diverse range of postsecondary institutions. Today, about one-third of all college faculty are off the tenure line (Lee, 2008). As Finkelstein, Seal, and Schuster (2011) noted in a recent report in this series, heavy reliance on full-time tenured and tenure-track professors charged with teaching, research, and service responsibilities constituted an "integrated, institutionally based" model that is now fading relative to a more differentiated model in which different people perform different roles, often in varied sites and with varied time commitments. Thus, the notion of the faculty career is shifting in important ways. In effect, career responsibilities are being unbundled, lodged across multiple actors (research associates, clinical instructors, adjunct faculty, program directors) rather than centered in single professionals.

Who, then, are contemporary faculty? In what ways do they differ from preceding generations of faculty? What are the implications of the "dis-integrating" movement for their work roles and reward structures? In which institutions and sectors are these trends most pronounced, and what organizational factors are associated with, and influencing, the institutional transitions away from long-term, career-oriented employment patterns toward more flexible, time-uncertain workforce arrangements? We have been investigating such questions about the "contingency movement," using a variety of analytic approaches. Our particular focus has been on the how those changes have influenced not only workplace contexts but also the views of faculty members themselves.

Our project has encompassed three major components. First, we reviewed the existing research literature regarding recent developments in the contexts of faculty work to establish a baseline for our new empirical analyses. Second, we quantitatively analyzed organizational and financial data on colleges' and universities' employment of faculty, with particular attention to faculty hired through something other than traditional, tenure-line arrangements. Third, we conducted numerous onsite interviews with contingent and non-contingent faculty at a private liberal arts college, a public masters-level institution, and a public research university. In this report, we discuss the emerging research evidence from our own work and that of others, leavening this discussion with illustrative comments drawn from our interviews.

THE EMERGING CONTEXTS OF FACULTY WORK

The most immediately visible sign of the recent changes in academic workplace is demographic. Once a profession mainly for white men, the American professoriate has dramatically diversified since the 1970s. Increasingly, institutions are hiring women and, to a lesser extent, faculty of color; although both groups tend to be disproportionately concentrated in "softer" disciplines, lower ranks, lower pay grades, and less prestigious institutions (Toutkoushian & Bellas, 2003; Toutkoushian & Conley, 2005; Toutkoushian, Bellas, & Moore, 2007). This increasing diversity by gender and race/ethnicity has been accompanied by increasing homogeneity by age: in 1969 over one-third of all full-time faculty were age 35 or under, but by the late 1990s that number had shrunk to under one tenth (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006), with little reversal in more recent years.

But more dramatic than the demographic changes have been the changes in employment terms. In higher education's remarkable era of post-World War II growth, from the 1950s through the 1980s, faculty in a unit could usually assume that the positions of retiring faculty would be refilled as originally structured. That is, a tenured senior professor would most often be succeeded by a newly hired tenure-line junior professor. In subsequent years, however, "position control" has drifted upward from academic units toward deans and provosts, and administrators seeking flexibility and marketplace adaptability are often eager to hire in new ways. Notably, the use of contingent faculty is on the rise: faculty hired off the tenure track, on time-delimited contract, and sometimes at less than full-time. From 1970 to 2001, the number of part-time faculty increased by 376%, just over 5 times as fast as the full-time faculty increases (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). At the same time, the proportions of faculty hired full-time but off the tenure track have grown remarkably, as well. Today almost two-thirds of the faculty members are non-tenure-track, and that number is likely to grow (Lee, 2008).

There are striking differences in the work lives of faculty off the tenure track. Financially, full-time non-tenure-track faculty members generally earn 26% less than their tenured full-time counterparts (Curtis & Jacobe, 2006). Similarly, part-time faculty members earn a substantially smaller salary than full-time non-tenure-track faculty, and part-time faculty tend to be ineligible for benefits or promotion (Toutkoushian & Bellas, 2003; Hollenshead, et al., 2007).

Contingent faculty members often also work in more austere environments. Institutions often exclude non-tenure-track faculty from orientations and mentoring programs, and often have limited access to office space, supplies, and administrative support (Gappa & Leslie, 1993; Outcalt, 2002; Baldwin & Chronister, 2001; Gappa & Leslie, 1993). Opportunities for professional development and funding for research are also less common (Hollenshead et al., 2007; Outcalt, 2002; Baldwin & Chronister, 2001; Gappa & Leslie, 1993).

To the extent that institutional effectiveness is dependent on faculty commitment to, and engagement in, faculty governance (Birnbaum, 1988; Weick, 1979; Williams et al., 1986), the growth of contingent faculty hiring raises significant questions. Contingent faculty are provided fewer opportunities for governance participation, have less autonomy in academic choices such as course planning, and less ability to effect change in academic operations (Fairweather, 1996; Gappa & Leslie, 1993; Hollenshead et al., 2007; Baldwin & Chronister, 2001).

In the end, educational quality may be influenced. If contingent faculty are reluctant to grade rigorously, for fear of accumulating negative student reviews and thus shaky prospects for contract renewal, then educational outcomes may deteriorate as contingent hiring increases (Benjamin, 2003). Reflecting this suggestion from the research, one of our interviewees commented:

When you are a lecturer I mean you live and die by those course evaluations by students. It's really weird. Nobody goes and watches you teach or anything. And so it's kinda odd, and I mean in a way bad, because lecturers are really at the mercy of their student evaluations. And so want to be easy enough that they're not going to ding you. So, yeah it definitely changes your attitude about how you respond to the students and how you are making your test up and the kinds of demands you are making on them.

What is more, the marginal working conditions noted above may make contingent faculty less prepared for class, less available for meeting with students, and less likely to hold office hours (Eckler, Field, & Goldstein, 2009; Benjamin, 2002 & 2003; Jacoby, 2006; Umbach, 2007).

Beyond their generally inferior working conditions, contingent faculty often have something else on their minds: securing their next jobs. Several of our non-tenure-line respondents said as much: "I still apply for a lot of jobs every year," one noted, and another stated "I spend time drafting letters and I would otherwise do other things." Because lack of faculty interaction with students has regularly been associated with less favorable undergraduate outcomes (Pascarella

& Terenzini, 2005), it is not surprising that several studies have found lower graduation rates at schools with higher proportions of non-tenure-line faculty (Ehrenberg & Zhang, 2005; Ehrenberg, 2006; Jacoby, 2006; Umbach, 2007).

Many rationales have been developed for the trend toward contingent hiring, and most are connected directly or indirectly to finances. With public demand for higher education growing and public support for government spending on higher education declining (Cross & Goldberg, 2009; Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006), institutions hiring off the tenure line can reduce costs for faculty benefits packages, can avoid locking institutions into long-term employment commitments in financially unrewarding fields, can reduce space needs, and can adaptively offer courses with high demand, generating more revenue. Sometimes, contingent hiring can also reduce salary costs, but there can be offsetting cost rises owing to repeated searches to fill regularly re-opening positions, and contingent faculty can cost more per course than tenure-line faculty in some high-demand fields. Overall, though, there is little question that part-time and non-tenure-track faculty usually increase institutions' staffing flexibility and often save money. As Fairweather (2007) has suggested, the shift reflects a "conscious choice by academic leaders to shape the professoriate in a more market-responsive (and cheaper) way."

Our interview respondents reflected these growing realities. A lecturer in history at a public research university said "They're gonna get people like me to save a few grand... I generate three times my salary in tuition. So you know, there we are." At the same institution, a tenured faculty member saw what he wryly termed an "institutional irony:"

Students, undergraduate students, really like graduate student instructors, part time instructors, and full time lecturers. And my theory of why they really like these people is one: they are closer in age and they can relate better to them. That's one theory. The other theory is that because their futures are dependent on those evaluations they are going to grade more generously and more lightly. Students like that. From a student point of view, it's become quite popular with people. From a departmental or instructional or university point of view, students are not getting what they are paying for. We are not delivering quality education that I believe we should be.

Interestingly, contingent faculty are split on whether they want greater engagement in departmental and university governance. One lecturer at our public research university observed that while contingent faculty in her unit had votes on undergraduate curriculum, they did not get to vote "for example, for a chair of the department which, frankly, I strongly disagree with since that would impact, very strongly, me here. So I feel like we should have a voice in that." But another noted that, "As long as I've got a 4-4 load and a year-to-year contract, no, I'm not willing to do that extra level of service." And another said "I just don't have the time. In some ways, I think one of the great things about this job is that I don't have those requirements, to be honest. I think if they put committee requirements on me, if that came down from on high that I had to do that, it would be a nightmare." Some anger came out in one lecturer's comment that "In this position, frankly, I wouldn't want to be [involved in governance]. I feel like I'm not getting the perks, why should I put in the extra work?"

Whatever one's views on appropriate levels of engagement for non-tenure-line faculty, the ambiguities of the emerging workplace are ever-present. One respondent noted that "it felt very awkward sitting in those faculty meetings when a vote would happen and I would kind of go, 'am I supposed to be able to vote on this or not?'" In reality, most units likely have not addressed, much less resolved, all the basic governance questions emerging with contingent labor, most notably including the question of exactly who is empowered to vote on which questions.

TRENDS IN INSTITUTIONS' FACULTY EMPLOYMENT PROFILES

Figures 1, 2, and 3 provide graphic representation of the dramatic trends in faculty employment over the recent decades. The data are from the Delta Cost Project [DCP], which synthesizes the National Center for Education Statistics' Integrated Postsecondary Data System [IPEDS]. The DCP database contains over 500 indicators for the years 1987-2008

for every U.S. postsecondary institution participating in federal financial aid programs (DCP data are available at <http://www.deltacostproject.org>). The figures reflect, respectively, the growth of part-time faculty as shares of all faculty (all such hires are off the tenure track), the growth of full-time non-tenure-line faculty shares, and the growth of contingent hiring in general (the combination of the two kinds of non-tenure-line shares).

Figure 1 presents the share of part-time faculty employed by institutions from 1988 to 2008. As suggested by the figure, the growth of part-time faculty shares has been dramatic in many institutional sectors, and especially in the less “elite” sectors such as baccalaureate-associates institutions and more specialized masters-level institutions. Conversely, in the liberal arts colleges and in research extensive institutions, such as state flagship universities and the elite private universities, the growth in part-time faculty ranks has been less aggressive.

FIGURE 1
SHARE OF PART-TIME FACULTY 1988-2008, BY INSTITUTION TYPE

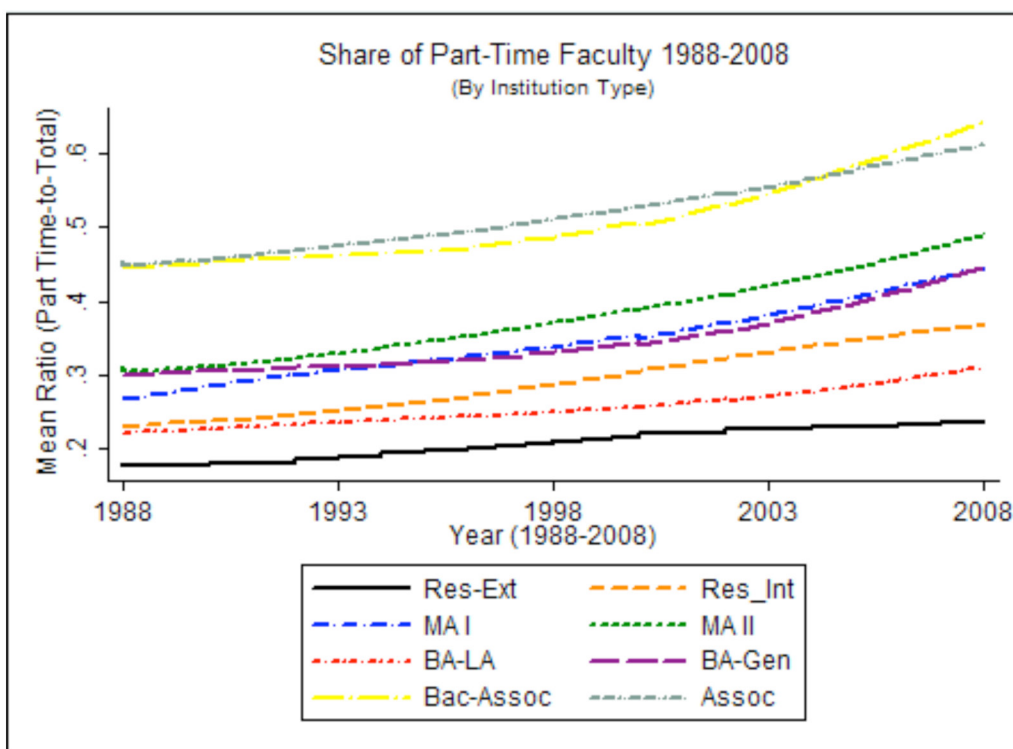


Figure 2 presents the share of full-time non-tenure-line faculty shares by institutions from 1988 to 2008. Changes in this form of contingent faculty hiring have varied more strongly across institutional sectors. In fact, proportional growth has leveled off or reversed in all sectors except the research extensive institutions, where this form of employment has skyrocketed since the mid-1990s. Conversely, in baccalaureate-associates institutions, shares of this kind of employment are now lower than in 1988.

FIGURE 2
SHARE OF FULL-TIME, NON-TENURE-TRACK FACULTY 1988-2008, BY INSTITUTION TYPE

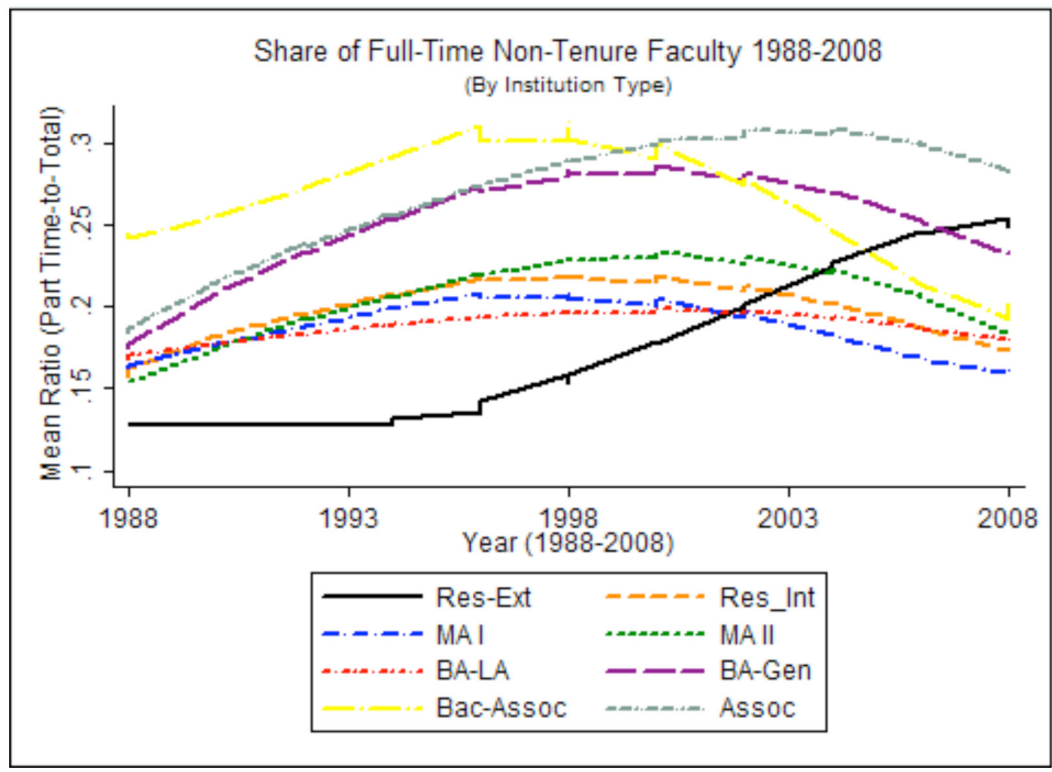
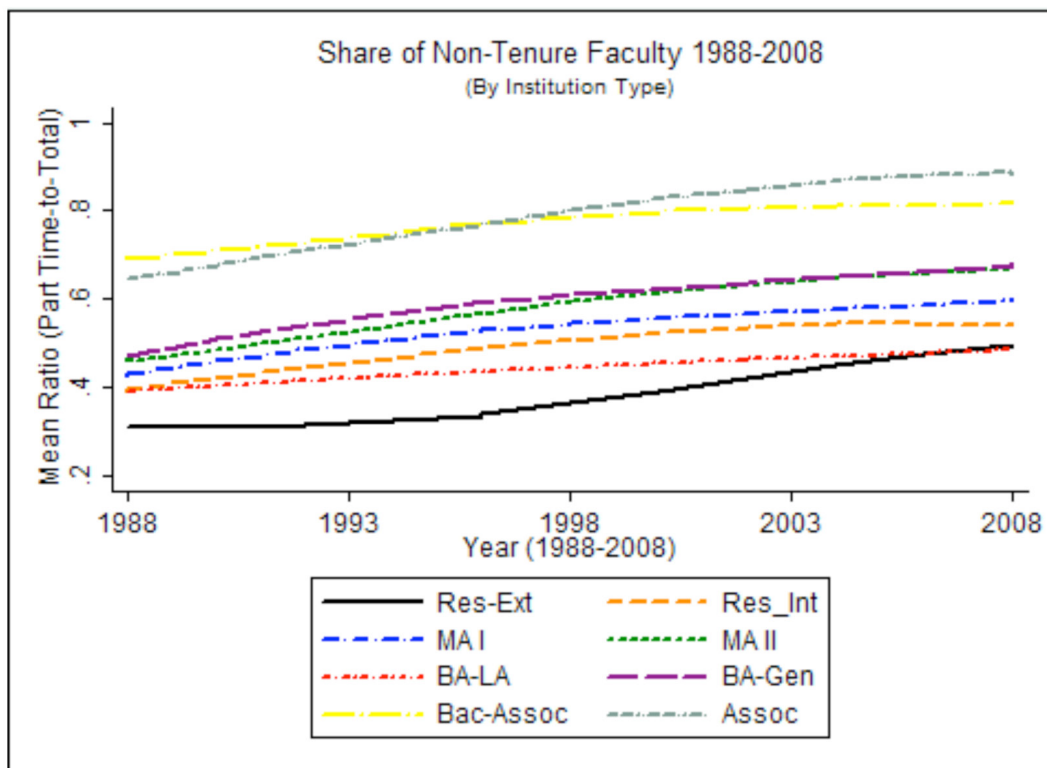


Figure 3 considers these two kinds of employment together, presenting the share of all part- and full-time non-tenure-line faculty employed by institutions from 1988 to 2008. Looked at conversely, these trends represent the declining share of employment on traditional tenure lines. Changes in overall contingent faculty shares are rather consistent across institutional sectors. Blending the backing away from full-time non-tenure-line hiring in all but research extensive institutions with the aggressive growth in part-time hiring in many institutions, the overall picture is one of steady erosion of tenure-line employment shares over the 20-year period. That erosion is most visible in the research university sector, where trend lines point to tenure-line faculty being less than half of all faculty within the next decade.

FIGURE 3
SHARE OF NON-TENURE-TRACK FACULTY 1988-2008, BY INSTITUTION TYPE



What factors, beyond the institutional sectors highlighted above, seem most critical in shaping the movement toward non-tenure-line shares, both full- and part-time? For example, are there differences in private institutions, for-profit institutions, and public institutions? To examine these issues, we incorporated additional data from the Delta Cost Project and used more advanced statistical techniques to discern the major influences driving institutions to adapt contingent employment.

Our modeling results were striking in several respects. First, in the context of a variety of controls for confounding factors, *less historically “institutionalized” postsecondary sectors were the most likely to adopt contingent hiring*. Contingent shares of any kind were consistently associated with large part-time enrollment shares, with for-profit status, and with an institutional focus on associate-degree offerings (as in community and technical colleges). Thus, the less embedded in long historical higher education traditions (full-time students, non-profit status, baccalaureate degrees) an institution was, the more likely it was to adopt non-traditional employment.

Second, however, the *different kinds of contingent employment have different roots*. Institutions with low administrator- to-faculty ratios employed larger proportions of part-time faculty, while higher administrator/faculty ratios were associated with full-time non-tenure-line faculty employment. Part-time faculty employment was associated with large proportions of part-time students, while full-time non-tenure-line hiring was associated with smaller part-time student proportions. Institutions with lower revenues per student were especially likely to hire part-time faculty, but showed no special tendency to hire full-time non-tenure-line faculty. And, intriguingly, dating to the late 1980s, private institutions have shown a stronger commitment to part-time faculty than their public counterparts, but only in recent years have they begun to show a stronger commitment to full-time non-tenure-line faculty as well. When institutions’ commitments to contingent hiring are not differentiated between the distinctive kinds of contingent status, these differences are submerged.

Finally, *private colleges and universities are moving more speedily than public institutions toward resembling for-profit institutions* in their employment profiles. In this context, it is important to bear in mind that, with their greater pricing and spending discretion, and greater dependence on marketplace success, private institutions have always more closely resembled for-profit institutions than public-sector institutions, which all receive substantial state subsidies. To the extent that private institutions are more sensitive to marketplace demands for rapid programmatic adaptation and improved educational efficiency (e.g., see Morphey & Eckel, 2009), the finding here of more rapid employment transition, and more rapid retreat from the arguably inflexible tenure-track system, may not be surprising.

FACULTY VIEWPOINTS

Surveys of satisfaction among tenured and non-tenured faculty tend to show consistently rather high levels over recent decades, both with working conditions and compensation. That is, the proportions reporting themselves either very or somewhat satisfied were easily in the majority through the latest surveys, conducted in the late 1990s (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). There are variations, of course, among different fields and different demographic, financial, employment, and seniority levels, and the numbers reporting being “very satisfied” declined some in the 1990s, but overall there is no evidence of major declines among faculty in satisfaction since the late 1980s (*ibid.*).

With the contingency movement gaining speed over this same period, the absence of rising dissatisfaction is heartening. But interviews with specific individuals in specific professional circumstances can usefully supplement what can be learned from aggregated responses to broadly phrased survey items distributed across the wide population of higher-education faculty.

Our interview respondents’ comments reflect the increasing centrality and importance of non-tenure-line faculty in contemporary higher education:

Frankly, if they got rid of the lecturers, the department couldn’t function.
-Lecturer at a public research university

We hire some non-tenure-track faculty sometimes if they’re trying to reevaluate a program...I have a friend who was hired...and it was non-tenure-track...and then...they decided, “Well, we’re not going to offer Special Education anymore, which was her field,...because we can attract a lot more students by replacing our Special Education major with Elementary Education, so she was just out of a job altogether...She was just gone.
-Assistant professor at a private four-year college

At the same time, our contingent respondents often expressed alienation from their training and from more traditionally positioned faculty:

[Doing research] won’t affect my job but I do it because I was trained to do it. I do it because I respect research. I do it because my colleagues respect it. I want them to respect me. I want to put myself in a position that maybe someday, should we ever get money again, which apparently may never happen, that there might be an opportunity to shift me over to a tenure track position. If that will be the case, then I will have the book, which is everything in this business, the book, the book, the book. So if I have one of those, the chances are better. I’m trying to set myself up for the future.
-Lecturer at a public research university

But this discipline, academia as a whole, no one respects the lecturer, do they? It's tenure or nothing. And often it's a research one or nothing. And that's really a shame. I almost disrespect myself for somehow not having succeeded.... There's a logical part of me that's down on his knees and thankful that I have this job and can't believe that I have a permanent job at a place this good. And at the same time, it's like if you don't have tenure, you're a chump.

-Lecturer at a public research university

I would honestly say through the end of the last year, that three quarters of the department would not have known my name when they passed me in the hall.

-Lecturer at a public research university

I've gone to interview elsewhere like last spring I had an on-campus interview at one of the smaller Wisconsin universities in the Wisconsin system and they were talking about the tenure process and I was thinking that would be so nice. You know, ... your colleagues and peers respect you and say "Yes, we respect her, respect her work." So, that would be really nice.

-Lecturer at a public research university

Unless you have tenure, you're not quite certain that the university is invested in you. They could easily cut you loose without a problem. They don't seem to be vested in you like you are in them.

-Lecturer at a public research university

It is important to note that nationally, many contingent faculty report being content in their roles: they work in positions largely of their choosing and are not seeking promotion or additional responsibility. As Baldwin and Chronister (2001) report, there is substantial variation among contingent faculty nationwide in goals, attitudes, and values. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the contingent faculty we interviewed did not always emphasize a sense of disadvantage or discrimination. But that does not gainsay the clear inference from our data that, for this particular set of interviewees, contingent positions can leave much to be desired. From our respondents in contingent positions, we consistently heard of anxiety and a sense of professional compromise.

SOME IMPLICATIONS

It is hard not to view the contemporary faculty workplace as fraught. Arrangements, roles, and responsibilities are in flux, and the faculty are both agents and targets of fundamental shifts in the business models of higher education. Disciplines vary in the degree to which they are moving away from traditional hiring arrangements and in the degree to which familiar employment patterns are disrupted (Hearn & Gorbunov, 2005). Departments vary in their pay arrangements, and in their entrepreneurialism and flexibility (Hearn, 1999 and 2008). Indeed, in some units, contingent faculty earn as much in base salary as other faculty, albeit with different responsibilities and different levels of security. But, across the board, the changes are apparent and ongoing.

It is hard to imagine the contingency movement in the various sectors of higher education not fundamentally reshaping institutional functioning as well as faculty life, for both contingent and "traditional" faculty. As virtually all U.S. institutions move toward majorities of contingent faculty, the established nature of governance, leadership, decision processes, and careers in higher education will require substantial rethinking.

From our analyses, what seems of greatest interest is the nature of the spread of the contingent movement through the nation's diverse institutional ecology. The movement emerged outside the traditional, highly institutionalized core of U.S. higher education, and thus has had an "outlaw" aspect from the beginning. Notably, the for-profit sector was and still is

the most committed to this approach to labor arrangements. The movement has spread relentlessly closer and closer, however, to the historic hearts of the enterprise, the long-established research universities and the traditional liberal arts colleges.

Our project's findings suggest, at least tentatively, that the greatest inroads of the contingency movement into these highly institutionalized sectors have come at the schools most on the edge financially and academically. Institutional stress may beget greater willingness to part from academic traditions. In these evolving contexts, the traditional hegemony of faculty may currently remain, but its future seems uncertain. With no evidence that any part of U.S. higher education is immune to the contingent movement, faculty and leaders in all settings are confronting the strong possibility that new forms of governance, management, leadership, and organization may become increasingly imperative.

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