

The exploitative working conditions

experienced by a large and growing number of faculty have been given considerable attention—both in the popular press as well as within the higher education community itself. And yet, surprisingly, there has been very little study of the impact on student learning. This is even more surprising—and alarming—given the likely correlation between what we know about how best to facilitate optimal student learning experiences and what we know about the material conditions of contingent instruction.

According to one possible interpretation, the revolving door on the cover of this issue of *Peer Review* suggests excessive turnover, as a succession of faceless adjuncts cycle in and out of the classroom. Hired on a semester-to-semester basis, many faculty are never sufficiently acculturated to the institution(s) where they teach. They often know nothing about the general education program of which their course is a part, and their knowledge about and ties to the department or division that hired them are often very loose, at best. Further, these faculty may be unaware of the institutional resources available to the students they advise. Those who do know or come to know these things may not be hired back—a significant but unrecognized loss to an institution.

An alternative interpretation suggests itinerancy: a single faculty member in motion, moving in and out of the classroom so quickly that she arrives just in time to teach the class and is gone as soon as it ends, perhaps to repeat the same scene on another campus. Or she could be off to other full- or part-time work elsewhere. While most institutions restrict the number of courses a single instructor can teach, they seldom inquire about the accumulated course load of the part-time or adjunct faculty who teach at several different institutions or about overall workload.

We have come to know a good deal more that is equally troubling about the working conditions of contingent faculty—the lack of protection for academic freedom, for example, or the inordinate dependence on student evaluations for re-appointment. We also know that part-time faculty are less likely than full-time faculty to use essay exams or to hold office hours.

Meanwhile, a related but less visible trend is emerging: The number and percentage of full-time, non-tenure-track appointments are increasing sharply. Clearly, we are witnessing a rapid unbundling of faculty roles and the emergence of a two-tiered system.

While attenuated budgets across all sectors of American higher education may, in part, justify the increasing reliance on contingent faculty, the articles in this issue of *Peer Review* suggest that small, budget-driven decisions too often are being made without reference to the big picture. As Ernst Benjamin points out in the lead article, “Cost-saving is a reasonable objective but it is not the same as cost-effectiveness.”

Contingent faculty members themselves, as well as all of us concerned about the future of the profession, have a great deal at stake in any discussion of these staffing trends. Yet, even as many of the obvious equity issues are redressed through isolated reforms in some cases and unionization in others, the increasing reliance on contingent faculty is more than just a labor issue; teaching conditions are also learning conditions. Given that contingent faculty now teach the majority of lower-division undergraduate classes—classes populated by students making the transition from school to college, by students most likely to benefit from increased faculty-student interaction—the potential for negative impact on student learning, retention, and attrition is great.

This issue of *Peer Review* opens a sustained conversation about the relationship between instructional staffing and student learning—a conversation that will be taken up online, through the new *Peer Review* online forum, and, in collaboration with the Coalition on the Academic Workforce, through a significant content track at AAC&U’s upcoming annual meeting. Information about both venues is available in this issue. Please join us for this important discussion. ■

HAVE YOUR SAY!

Participate in *Peer Review*’s online forum by joining the discussion at www.aacu.org/peerreview. Respond to articles in this issue or share your opinion on this important topic. Have your say and see what your colleagues are saying about contingent faculty and student learning.