

How Over-Reliance on Contingent Appointments Diminishes Faculty Involvement in Student Learning

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Over-reliance on part-time and other “contingent” instructional staff diminishes faculty involvement in undergraduate learning. It is urgent that we recognize this for two reasons. First, such over-reliance particularly disadvantages the less-well-prepared entering and lower-division students in the non-elite institutions who most need more substantial faculty attention. Second, the diminished learning opportunities are not confined to extension programs, distance education, or other such marginal outsourcing of instructional responsibilities. Rather, the affected programs are the core undergraduate programs—regardless of whether these are defined as general education courses that provide basic college-level skills such as literacy, numeracy, critical thinking, and communication or the liberal education that contributes the information and knowledge fundamental to effective participation in contemporary society.

The change in staffing of these core programs is so obvious and pervasive that the documentation that follows almost seems unnecessary. Yet there has been remarkably little study of the impact of this change on student learning, and a description of the nature and extent of the change in staffing is a precondition to exploring their effects. To be sure, there have been efforts to suggest ways to improve part-time and graduate assistant instruction, as well as the careers of full-time, non-tenure-track faculty (Gappa and Leslie 1993; Roueche, et al. 1996; Baldwin and Chronister 2001). Although the essential, but rarely implemented, reforms recommended by these studies reflect concern for undergraduate staffing policies, none of these studies has directly examined the effects of the increasing

reliance on contingent staff on student learning, and each has accepted the inevitability of increased dependence on contingent faculty.

Indeed, in an effort to respect the efforts and contributions of contingent staff, these studies often offer merely anecdotal claims that contingent faculty are generally able and committed, frequently more devoted to teaching than full-time, tenure-track faculty, easily dismissed if found wanting, and recipients of student evaluations comparable to their full-time, tenure-track counterparts. These comforting presuppositions have enabled institutions and accrediting bodies to rationalize and expand their reliance upon contingent instructional staff and to replace precise “input” standards based on faculty qualifications, appointment policies, and performance standards with vaguely defined requirements for institutionally developed student “outcomes” measures. Consequently, reconsideration of these presuppositions is long overdue.

Changing Patterns of Instructional Staffing

It is widely known that the proportion of all faculty who teach part-time virtually doubled from 22 percent in 1970 to 43 percent in 1997 (National Center for Education Statistics 2001). Yet, even this understates the problem. Indeed, as Table 1 shows, between 1975 and 1995 part-time faculty appointments increased by 103 percent and graduate assistant appointments by 35 percent. Along with a 92 percent increase in non-tenure-track appointments and a 12 percent *decline* in probationary tenure-track positions, these changes reduced the proportion of full-time, tenure-track fac-

ulty to little better than a third of those engaged in faculty work (Table 1). Most part-time faculty and virtually all of the nearly half of graduate assistants who are teaching assistants teach lower-division undergraduates. Consequently, staff with part-time, contingent appointments compose a substantial majority of those staff who provide lower-division instruction.

This is self-evident in the two-year colleges, where almost 50 percent of first-time students begin their higher education and where about 63 percent of instructors are part-time appointees. Yet, even in four-year institutions, nearly half of all instructional staff are either part-time faculty or graduate assistants. The need to consider graduate assistants is clear from Table 2, which contrasts the private university reliance on part-time faculty with the public university reliance on graduate assistants. The substantial role of graduate assistants has been relatively neglected, in part due to the assumption that they worked only as assistants to full-time faculty. But newly developed data showing that nearly half of all teaching assistants have full responsibility for one or more courses demonstrate that they are major contributors to undergraduate instruction. This is especially true in the humanities and social sciences, where almost three-fourths of graduate assistantships are teaching assistantships, in contrast to science and engineering, where only about half are teaching assistantships (National Center for Education Statistics 2001).

Headcount comparisons do not, of course, equate directly with the proportion of classes taught, since most part-time fac-

ulty teach fewer class sections per institution than full-time faculty (except in some doctoral universities). But even a measure of the proportion of courses taught by different types of staff finds that full-time, tenure-track faculty frequently teach a minority of lower-division classes. These observations are confirmed in fall 1999 surveys of department chairs conducted for several core liberal arts disciplines including English, foreign languages, history, philosophy, and anthropology (Townsend 2000). The surveys revealed that the majority of staff held contingent positions in most of the disciplines, and only three had bare majorities (52-3 percent) on tenure-track. Despite the larger teaching loads of full-time faculty, full-time, tenure-track faculty in the ten disciplines taught only from 16

percent to 64 percent of undergraduate classes (with a median of 59 percent) and from 7 percent (composition) to 55 percent of introductory classes (with a median of 48 percent). The introductory courses included almost half (a median of 47 percent) of all courses taught in these disciplines.

More detailed data from the survey by the Modern Language Association provide a breakdown by type of institution (Laurence 2001). Only baccalaureate college departments had a majority of full-time instructional staff. Full-time faculty did teach 58 percent of all undergraduate sections but, again excepting the four-year baccalaureate institutions, they taught less than half of all first-year English and foreign language sections. Notably, despite the prevalence of part-time faculty in com-

TABLE 1 Changes in Faculty Distribution by Type of Appointment: 1975 and 1995

	1975	1995	% Change 1975 to 1995
Full-Time Faculty (% of faculty)	435,000 70%	550,822 59%	27%
Tenured (% of full-time) (% of faculty)	228,000 52% 37%	284,870 52% 31%	25%
Probationary (% of full-time) (% of faculty)	126,000 29% 20%	110,311 20% 12%	-12%
Non-Tenure-Track (% of full-time) (% of faculty)	81,000 19% 13%	155,641 28% 17%	92%
Part-Time Faculty (% of faculty)	188,000 30%	380,884 41%	103%
All Faculty	623,000	931,706	50%

The data are primarily derived from "Fall Staff in Postsecondary Institutions, 1993" and "1995,"; the 1995 data are based on Appendix Tables B1a and B7a; the 1975 tenure data is constructed from Tables 9 and 10 of "1993."

TABLE 2
Distribution of Faculty and Graduate Assistant Appointments By Type of Institution

	All Faculty and Graduate Assistants	Full-Time Faculty			Part-Time Faculty			Graduate Assistants	
		N	% of Faculty	% of All	N	% of Faculty	% of All	N	% of All
ALL INSTITUTIONS									
All	1,164,795	561,206	59.2%	48.2%	386,829	40.8%	33.2%	216,760	18.6%
FOUR-YEAR									
All	858,115	447,029	69.1%	52.1%	199,524	30.9%	23.3%	211,562	24.7%
Public	562,824	291,089	75.7%	51.7%	93,362	24.3%	16.6%	178,373	31.7%
Private	295,291	155,940	59.5%	52.8%	106,162	40.5%	36.0%	33,189	11.2%
TWO-YEAR									
All	295,773	105,984	36.4%	35.8%	185,373	63.6%	62.7%	4,416	1.5%

Based on "Fall Staff in Postsecondary Institutions, 1995," National Center for Education Statistics; Tables A-1, A-2, A-3.

community colleges, students in community colleges, like those in baccalaureate colleges, were far more likely than students in doctoral or MA-granting departments to study with a full-time, tenure-track faculty member in their first-year writing or language course.

A more recent survey of mathematics departments shows a similar, if less extreme, pattern. Between 1995 and 2000, tenured faculty declined by 3 percent and tenure-track by 6 percent; conversely, part-time faculty grew by 35 percent and full-time, non-tenure-track grew by 65 percent. The proportion of core introductory calculus classes taught by tenured or tenure-eligible faculty declined from 61 percent to 52 percent in doctoral institutions, from 79 percent to 66 percent in MA institutions, and from 85 percent to 75 percent in baccalaureate institutions. The proportion of graduate assistant sections declined, but

sections taught by part-time and, especially, full-time, non-tenure-track faculty increased substantially (Lutzer, et al. 2002).

The Cost of Cost-Saving to Faculty Qualifications and Professional Development

The increasing reliance on contingent appointees for undergraduate instruction in fields like English, composition, languages, history, and mathematics obviously shapes the core undergraduate experience. Moreover, unlike the use of part-time appointees in fields like business, journalism, the health professions, and the performing arts, contingent faculty in the basic liberal arts positions are less likely to compensate for their lack of time and academic credentials by providing pertinent “real-world” vocational and practical experience. Yet, even as the proportion of part-time faculty in the humanities, the social sci-

ences, and mathematics has increased, the proportion of part-time faculty in business and vocational training—areas in which part-time faculty do offer some special advantages—has decreased (Table 3). Moreover, the growing proportion of contingent faculty in the core, liberal arts disciplines far exceeds the need for flexibility to meet any plausible expectation of enrollment variations or program changes.

The principal remaining rationale for the increased reliance on contingent faculty in core undergraduate programs is cost-saving. Cost-saving is a reasonable objective but it is not the same as cost-effectiveness—especially if, as is the case, it substantially detracts from educational quality. This is not because contingent faculty lack native ability or classroom skills. The quality cost of contingent faculty derives rather from their relative lack of support, professional development oppor-

tunities, evaluation, and above all, involvement in student learning.

The inadequate salary and benefits of part-time faculty are cause for serious concern even if we focus our attention solely on the consequences for student learning and ignore the implications for the quality of life of part-time faculty and the future of the profession. Part-time faculty teaching in fields such as English, languages, history, and mathematics are far less likely to hold full-time employment elsewhere than are those part-time faculty who teach in the professional and vocational areas (Benjamin 1998b). So the typical lack of institutionally provided health, life, and retirement benefits often means these benefits are lacking entirely. Their median earnings per course, which range from \$1500 to \$2500 (Townsend 2000), lead many to seek work at multiple institutions and spend time commuting that might better be spent with their students and potential colleagues. Low earnings and a lack of health benefits are handicaps likely to interfere with their work. Dedicated and motivated though many of these faculty may be, and most do report high levels of commitment and overall satisfaction, many are understandably dissatisfied with their compensation and opportunities to keep up with their fields (Benjamin 1998b). And, as I argue below, all this has a demonstrable effect on their involvement in student learning.

In fields such as English, foreign languages, history, and math, part-time faculty in four-year institutions are about one-third (English, languages, and math) to one-half (history) as likely to have Ph.D.s as full-

time faculty; in two year schools, they are about two-fifths to two-thirds as likely to have Ph.D.s (Benjamin 1998b). Of course, the graduate assistants who contribute more to lower division instruction than part-time faculty in public doctoral institutions also lack terminal degrees. It is also noteworthy that, in many specialized disciplines, two-year part-time faculty are more likely than their full-time counterparts to have Ph.D.s or other terminal degrees as well as valuable vocational experience. This suggests that the absence of terminal degrees in basic liberal arts fields—the very fields in which there has been much concern about a “Ph.D. glut”—may have more to do with cost-saving than either the availability of qualified candidates or the allegation (contrary to repeated survey findings) that Ph.D.s are not interested in teaching undergraduates.

Contingent instructional staff, especially part-time appointees, also lack the professional evaluation, compensation, support and, often, collegial involvement of the

full-time, tenure-track faculty. The latter are appointed based on a highly competitive national search and teaching demonstrations as well as scholarly records, recommendations, and peer evaluation. The former are often selected by an over-burdened chair from a local list at the last moment and subject to a perfunctory review of their vita and, perhaps, student evaluations. Full-time, tenure track faculty receive recurrent evaluation and substantial support: logistical, professional, and collegial. Contingent faculty are fortunate to share an office space or computer access and are unlikely to be eligible for professional development grants, research support, or even participation in collegial meetings either to benefit from peer evaluation or to share information about student learning and adapt curricula to student needs.

The case of graduate assistants is less certain. Many graduate departments have begun to offer increased training and supervision of their teaching assistants. And teaching assistants often compensate for

TABLE 3 Changes in the Percentage of Part-Time Instructional Faculty and Staff in Postsecondary Institutions by Program Area from Fall 1992 to Fall 1998

PROGRAM AREA	PERCENTAGE PART-TIME		
	1992	1998	Percent Change
All Program Areas	41.6	42.6	2.4%
Business, law, and communications	49.9	47.8	-4.2%
Humanities	44.8	47.8	6.7%
Natural sciences and engineering	36.3	35.4	-2.5%
Social sciences and education	40.4	43.2	6.9%
Vocational training	51.9	50.5	-2.7%

Based on Data from the National Survey of Postsecondary Faculty (NSOPF: 93 and 99)

TABLE 4 Comparative Productivity of Full- and Part-Time Faculty by Type of Institution

TYPE OF INSTITUTION	Classroom Instructional Hours		Non-Classroom Instructional Hours*		Ratio of Non-Classroom to Classroom Instructional Time		Number of Refereed Articles	
	F-T Faculty	P-T Faculty	F-T Faculty	P-T Faculty	F-T Faculty	P-T Faculty	F-T Faculty	P-T Faculty
Research	6.6	5.6	14.8	5.5	2.2	1.0	28.5	5.7
Doctoral	8.5	6.1	15.0	3.6	1.8	0.6	16.2	5.4
Comprehensive	10.6	6.5	17.7	2.7	1.7	0.4	5.9	1.6
Liberal Arts	10.8	6.1	20.5	3.3	1.9	0.5	3.8	1.6
Community College	15.7	7.4	12.9	1.2	0.8	0.2	1.0	1.0
Institutional Average	10.4	6.3	16.2	3.3	1.7	0.5	11.1	3.1

Note: Non-classroom instructional time is calculated by subtracting the reported classroom instructional hours from the reported overall instructional time which consists of reported work hours multiplied by the percentage of time spent teaching, grading papers, preparing courses, developing new curricula, advising or supervising students, and working with student organizations or intramural athletics.

Based on data from the National Survey of Postsecondary Faculty conducted for NCES in fall, 1992.

their lack of experience with youthful enthusiasm and the latest training. The average of 15 hours a week in direct contact with students in class or office hours or grading papers for faculty-taught courses reported by doctoral-student teaching assistants does not seem excessive. But this does not count overall work-time such as preparation and grading in those courses for which they had primary responsibility. Notably, the 70 percent of all doctoral students who worked, reported an average of 29 hours per week; the 64 percent who were enrolled full-time worked an average of 26 hours per week (National Center for Educational Statistics 2001). This substantial demand on the time of these student employees clearly pressures them to choose

between sacrificing the quality of their own education and that of their students. Moreover, the common defense of the reliance on graduate assistants, which many graduate students themselves endorse—that teaching experience is essential to their own education as prospective faculty—clearly contradicts the argument that they are already effective faculty. Hence, although the discussion of contingent faculty involvement in learning that follows cannot offer as much evidence concerning graduate teaching assistants as part-time faculty, similar concerns may apply.

Involvement in Student Learning

We know from the work of Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) that “net of precollege

characteristics, attending a private or a small college tends to have positive effects on educational attainment. . . . attendance at a small college rather than a large one tends to facilitate social involvement with faculty and peers that in turn positively influences persistence, college graduation, and graduate school enrollment” (417). Similarly, Alexander Astin (1993) has reported that “the private universities are not as large as the public ones and have lower student-faculty ratios and more-student-faculty interaction. These differences may well explain why private universities, unlike the public universities, influence positively student retention and interest in graduate school” (319). Even controlling for student ability, SES and the like, there may be many reasons for these findings. There can be no doubt, for example, that student time for on-campus involvement with faculty and, as Astin emphasizes, for peers is at least as essential as faculty time devoted to student learning. That is why the classic report on “Involvement in Learning” recommended that students spend more time learning, including at least one year of full-time study, as well as recommending that “academic administrators should convert as many part-time teaching lines into full-time lines as possible” (Study Group 1984, 36). Unfortunately, although we have continued to acknowledge the importance of “involvement in learning,” the only substantive recommendation of this important report that has been widely, if ineffectually, pursued is assessment of student outcomes.

Regardless of other factors, however, these basic studies of undergraduate learning agree that faculty involvement with students is a critical factor in student completion and success. Full-time faculty devote substantially and proportionally more out-of-class time to student learning than part-time faculty. As Table 4 shows, full-time faculty generally report two to four times as many out-of-class student-related hours per class hour as part-time faculty. In public two-year colleges, where full-time faculty spend eight-tenths of an hour outside class for every hour in class, part-time faculty spend only two-tenths outside to each hour inside. In sum, part-time faculty spend at best half the out-of-class student-related time per class hour of full-time faculty, and the vast majority of part-time faculty devote 25 percent or less as time per class hour to out of class student-related activity (Table 4).

These self-reported estimates are consistent with more specific survey findings regarding full- and part-time faculty involvement in student learning. Moreover, they hold true especially in the core, liberal arts disciplines. For example, when I compared the use of essay exams in a cluster of liberal arts disciplines (history, English and literature, foreign languages, fine arts, philosophy and religion, sociology, biology, and political science) at two-year colleges, some 37 percent of part-time faculty—compared to 25 percent of full-time faculty—reported that they did not use essay exams. In four-year institutions, the percentages were 38 percent for part-time and 23 percent for full-time. In the same fields,

50 percent of part-time faculty at two-year institutions and 31 percent of part-time faculty at four-year institutions reported holding no office hours, while only 2 percent of full-time faculty at two-year institutions and 7 percent of full-time faculty at four-year institutions held no office hours (Benjamin 1998b).

The lack of part-time faculty time devoted to out-of-class instructional activities is, of course, consistent with the widespread practice of paying by the class hour rather than, as less commonly occurs, the fraction of overall faculty responsibilities. The recently accelerating increase in the employment of full-time, non-tenure-track faculty represents an effort to ameliorate this problem, while still minimizing costs and long-term obligations. Comparing those full-time faculty who report that teaching is their primary obligation, non-tenure-track faculty do tend to report devoting similar percentages of time to teaching as do full-time, tenure-track faculty. However, they report 5 to 10 percent less time working for the institution overall and so their similar percentage of instructional time actually involves somewhat less absolute time devoted to student learning—contrary to the assumption that non-tenure-track faculty are more student-oriented (Benjamin 1998a).

This marginal time deficiency is probably less significant, however, than other costs more difficult to measure. As with part-time faculty, non-tenure-track faculty are generally subject to less thorough selection and evaluation, are less likely to have advanced degrees, and are less

involved in current scholarship (Benjamin 1998a). They represent a lost opportunity to appoint a more able faculty member even at institutions that routinely deny tenure to better-qualified probationary faculty. Perhaps even more important, faculty collegiality is fractured in institutions where non-tenure-track faculty constitute a “second tier” and “first-tier” faculty occupy better compensated tenure-track positions with greater professional opportunities. A faculty in which some have opportunities to participate in academic governance and reliable protection of academic freedom—or at least the prospect of achieving these after a reasonable period of probation—and others do not is unlikely to cooperate effectively in curricular development or even in sharing instructional experience. Faculty involvement in learning includes involvement with colleagues as well as students, and this involvement is damaged by the spread of a two-tier system.

Staffing to Enhance Faculty Involvement in Undergraduate Learning

The data and analysis presented here are not sufficient to prove definitively that the increased reliance on contingent appointments is substantially damaging undergraduate learning. But, I think they are sufficient to shift the burden of proof to those who have accepted the expanding reliance on contingent faculty based on anecdotal observations about the teaching commitment of contingent faculty or derisive and unsupported comments about the teaching commitment of tenure-track faculty.

Full-time, tenure-track faculty are, in fact, not only demonstrably better qualified but also devote proportionally more time to their students than do contingent faculty. Of course, this is not really news. For, as Astin (1993) has observed, it is the institutional devaluation of teaching, not the faculty orientation to research, that impairs student learning. We would not devote the time and resources we do to selecting tenure-track faculty, even in predominantly teaching institutions, if we did not believe it made a difference. Nor could we continue to argue that graduate assistants should serve as teaching assistants as part of their own education, if we truly believed they were already fully prepared. Hence, I offer three concluding suggestions.

First, we do, of course, need more systematic and thorough research on the effects of faculty staffing patterns on student learning than I have offered here. I hope only to have shown that there is

already significant evidence available and that it does point to a serious problem.

Second, accrediting bodies need to acknowledge that faculty qualifications and the procedures for faculty selection, appointment, and support do affect “involvement in learning” and, thereby, student outcomes. Since we lack adequate outcomes measures applicable to specific courses or even to systematically compare institutions, this general effect of faculty “inputs” and procedures on student outcomes should at least create a presumptive standard. That is, those institutions that rely substantially on contingent staff should be expected to show that their procedures for faculty selection, appointment, evaluation, and re-appointment are consistent with assuring the extent of faculty involvement in learning with students and colleagues out of class. Further, they should be expected to provide opportunities for faculty to participate in academic governance and reli-

able protection of academic freedom.

Finally, even in these economically difficult times, we need to acknowledge that excessive dependence on contingent appointments is detrimental to undergraduate learning—especially for the majority of students unable to attend the few selective institutions that still staff their core programs with full-time, fully-supported faculty. Those among us—whether policy-makers, faculty, administrators, or educational researchers—who have urged that tenure-track faculty devote more attention to undergraduate learning need to recognize that this requires that there are, in fact, tenure-track faculty assigned and committed to core undergraduate instruction. We need to begin promptly to make the resource commitments or reallocations necessary to assure that all undergraduate students benefit from involvement with full-time, fully qualified, fully supported, and fully committed faculty. ■

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