

“A Position Paper on Part-Time Faculty”

forwarded by the

Faculty Advisory Council to the IBHE

Approved 27 June 1997

Reaffirmed March 2005

American higher education is undergoing a transformation that could significantly alter its character and possibly eliminate the professoriate as its leaders, shapers, and primary providers. Subject to escalating costs and limited funding, all but the most heavily endowed institutions are increasingly concerned with marketing and the "bottom line", and less with truth, learning, and academic standards. For those who think that higher education and the society it serves are best served by the values and practices associated with an unbiased quest for knowledge, the present trend can only be greeted with concern, and perhaps alarm.

This transformation has many facets. This report will focus on one, the widespread and increasing practice of displacing full time tenure track faculty with non-tenure track part-time faculty obtained at bargain basement prices. This trend can be documented.

In public universities in Illinois, while full-time faculty increased by 0.2 % between 1991 and 1995, part-time faculty increased by 9.7 %. In community colleges, where faculty numbers actually declined during this period, the decline was 6.6 % for full-time faculty, and only 1.3 % for part-time faculty. In private institutions, where the trend has been somewhat less apparent, full-time faculty increased by 9.1 % from 1991-95, while part-time faculty increased by 13.0 %. All types of institutions thus experienced the same general trend, with variance only in degree [1]. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the trend is nationwide. The National Center for Educational Statistics has estimated that in 1993 over 40 % of all postsecondary faculty nationally were part-time, a proportion that has almost certainly risen since then [2]. In community colleges considered separately the percentage would be higher.

Before we discuss the impact of this trend, let us recognize that some categories of non-tenured part time faculty have made a very positive contribution to higher education. That is most evident in practical or professional fields where it is important to have practitioners in the field providing instruction in the classroom. Here the use of adjunct faculty is not simply a way of saving money; it fulfills an important educational function. (But even these fields must still have a core of part-time academic faculty if programs are to have coherence and fulfill their institutional roles.) Another category of part time faculty, graduate assistants, has provided much needed "apprenticeship" opportunities. Even beyond these two categories, a limited use of part-timers has provided the necessary degree of flexibility in staffing when enrollments are higher than anticipated and additional course sections need to be added. It has only been in recent years, with the introduction of an extensive displacement of full-time faculty by part-time faculty, that their use has become a matter of concern.

Bearing these exceptions in mind, we believe that the present trend toward increasing use of part-time faculty goes well beyond that which is appropriate and poses serious problems and dangers for American higher education.

1) CURRENT PRACTICES ARE EXPLOITATIVE

No one can make an adequate living by piecing together part-time positions at one or more institutions. The pay is pathetically low and benefits are non-existent. While some persons seek part-time positions who cannot or do not wish to work full time (spouses for whom this is a second income, parents combining the care of children with teaching, persons who occupy full-time professional positions elsewhere), and while some part-time faculty do not need the pay at all, there is still no excuse for the low levels of compensation now commonly provided. Many talented, enthusiastic, and fully qualified persons who, were it not for the trend noted above, would be serving in full time tenure track positions, are now forced to live on this income. [3] These "conditions of labor" should be vigorously opposed on moral grounds, if on no other, and brought to an end. It is ironic that institutions that for centuries have upheld a very lofty goal, the quest of truth, are now engaged in a practice that places them only slightly above the "sweat shop".

2) FACULTY PARTICIPATION IN INSTITUTIONAL GOVERNANCE IS DIMINISHED

Aside from the impact on individuals involved, there are several ways in which the increasing trend toward the use of non-tenured part-time faculty does not serve the interests of higher education.

Part-time faculty generally perform no tasks other than teaching specific classes. This places an increasing burden on the reduced core of regular full-time faculty, particularly in those program building functions that typically consume much faculty time. This means, in turn, that, for lack of time, faculty almost have to surrender a portion of their former responsibility for the over-all governance of their institutions, a responsibility which part-time faculty do not normally share at all. Full-time faculty are crucial for maintaining coherence in academic programs. They have a vested interest in the present and future well-being of their programs and institutions; part-time faculty, understandably, generally do not.

3) THE QUALITY OF TEACHING---AND LEARNING---IS LIKELY TO DETERIORATE

Many part-time faculty do a fine job of teaching, but the circumstances of their lives often work against that. For the increasing proportion seeking to make a living from this activity, life is almost bound to be harried and time pressured, taking whatever employment can be found for whatever income can be derived. Since the quality of teaching, and the student learning that results, is related to keeping up in one's field, and even contributing something to it, that will be increasingly difficult. Inevitably the part-

timer has to find the fastest way possible to teach as many classes as possible in order to maximize income. That will mean fewer papers assigned, a more cursory examination of what is assigned, and little, if any, availability for consultation with students, for some of whom such help determines whether they will or will not survive.

But beyond the quality of teaching of part-time instructors, and the learning that results, there is probably a negative effect on the teaching of full-time faculty, as well. As the burden of other essential tasks falls on a diminishing number of full-time faculty, their lives too become more harried. There will be less time left for the classroom---and for creativity, course revision, or careful evaluation of student work.

4) THE PRESERVATION OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM IS AT STAKE

Academic freedom has traditionally been protected by academic tenure. That, in fact, has always been the primary argument for this peculiar practice so inexplicable to most of the rest of society. It will be increasingly difficult to protect academic freedom when an increasing proportion of college and university faculties is not protected by academic tenure, or even the prospect of achieving it. Higher "learning" will be increasingly transformed into a kind of "training" in which important, but controversial, "cutting edge" questions will not be addressed.

If, as appears to be the case, concerns of marketing and finance increasingly become the dominant concerns of academic administration, and if there is no reliable protection of academic freedom, the future direction of things should be evident. The academy will increasingly follow the lead of the society it serves and package its product for maximum marketability. Its traditional role of intellectual leadership and the social criticism which that leadership provides will be gone, and, along with it, the objectivity of scientific research. To risk upsetting supporting constituencies is not good business. With that role gone, the university's unique function in society may go, as well. Other academic vendors who are not bothered in the least by these issues are already on the scene and hungry. More will soon arrive.

5) THE PRESENT TREND CAN "WORK" ONLY IN THE SHORT RUN

We all recognize that if the financial bottom line is the primary consideration, the resort to part-time faculty makes sense. Under the exploitative conditions now in effect, part-time faculty are cheap, and if enrollment patterns change, they can easily be hired and easily let go.

This practice appears to be based on an assumption that it can work in perpetuity, making higher education a highly cost-efficient industry. But can this practice, in fact, endure? There will, of course, always be persons whose life situations make part-time teaching attractive [see #1]. But most of these are in the areas where adjunct faculty have traditionally---and appropriately---been used. For an increasingly large number, part-time positions are sought because this very practice has made full-time positions increasingly unavailable. How many young persons will continue to commit themselves to the

expensive and time consuming process of earning graduate degrees if a future of penury is all that awaits them? While the supply to date has apparently not diminished, surely it will. Some graduate departments will close, with a loss of vital scholarship. Unless by that time technology has replaced virtually all direct classroom teaching, academic administration will eventually discover that much of the part-time help they need---and full-time help, as well---will no longer be available. That "moment of truth" may well come soon, by which point the academic profession will have been decimated and not easily revived. When that happens how can a nation---or a state---continue to compete in a world in which education may be the most important competitive factor?

All of this may appear alarmist. If so, the alarm is probably overdue. In the short run it may appear that only the professoriate's self interest is at stake. That is at stake, but that is not all, even for the short run. Over the long run, the interest of higher education itself is at stake. And that stake will increasingly impact the whole society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above, we make two recommendations:

We should return to the traditional assumption that the teaching staffs of colleges and universities will be composed of full-time tenure track faculty. The use of non-tenure track part-time faculty should require specific justification. The traditional uses of part-time faculty noted above would pass each test; the recent major expansion of the category would not. The practice should therefore be halted. While the need to control escalating costs of higher education is evident, weakening, and possibly destroying, what has been at the heart of that education is not an acceptable way of going about it.

Insofar as some part-time faculty will continue to be a necessary and appropriate part of higher education, they should be compensated fairly. Some will already have basic health benefits due to other employment, but a plan should be developed for those who do not.

REFERENCES

1. Illinois Board of Higher Education, "Staffing Trends in Illinois Higher Education" (02 July 1996). Figures cited do not include graduate assistants.
2. Gappa, Judith M and Leslie, David W, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (02 May 1997), p B10.
3. See Judith M Gappa and David W Leslie, *The Invisible Faculty* (Jossey-Bass Publishers) for a good discussion of the uses and attitudes of part-time faculty.

Source: http://www.uiuc.edu/orgs/ibhefac/ibhefacarch.htm#part_timers