Non-Tenure Track Faculty: Where Commonly Held Beliefs and Research Diverge

Preliminary findings from a study funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation

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[These findings have also been presented at the Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held in Chicago, May 2006]
American institutions of higher education increasingly rely on non-tenure track faculty. Data reported by the National Center for Education Statistics substantiates the extent of the recent growth of the non-tenure track ranks\(^1\):

- Between 1987 and 2003, the percentage of faculty who were tenured/tenure-track decreased by 15% - a decrease of one out of every seven traditional tenure-eligible positions
- By 2003, three of every five (60%) faculty members held a non-tenure track position

Along with these statistics come discussions of the causes for the increases, including

- Burgeoning student enrollments\(^2\)
- Financial austerity\(^3\)
- Adoption of business models and strategies\(^4\)

These are accompanied by predictions about the positive and (mostly) negative impacts the high numbers of non-tenure track instructional faculty have on academia; and research-based evidence and oceans of anecdotal accounts of the professional and personal lives of people in non-tenure track positions.

**CEW’s Study of Non-Tenure Track Instructional Faculty**

With the support of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, the University of Michigan’s Center for the Education of Women set out in 2005 to learn more about the state of non-tenure track instructional faculty from an institutional-level perspective. We designed and conducted a nation-wide web-based survey that covered a wide range of issues, policies, and practices related to non-tenure track instructional faculty.

*Non-tenure Track Faculty: Where Commonly Held Beliefs and Research Diverge* is the first of several reports that our research team will produce to present the findings from the Academic Workforce Project. It focuses on some preliminary findings that surprised us because they appear to call into question commonly held and often repeated beliefs about the nature of non-tenure track instructional appointments. We chose to examine the following 3 commonly-held beliefs:

1) Non-tenure track appointments will continue to increase
2) The terms “non-tenure track” and “part-time” are interchangeable
3) The contradictory yet simultaneously held ideas that non-tenure track appointments often lead to tenure-track positions OR non-tenure-track appointments never lead to the tenure track.

**Study Sample**

We used a stratified random sample of 551 public and private four-year schools, drawn from the Carnegie 2000 list and representative of institutional types as defined by the Carnegie classification system and geographic region. The survey, meant to capture institutional-level information and perceptions, went out in Fall, 2005 to an administrator—most often in a provost’s office, office of human resources, or division of institutional research—who had been recommended as the official on each campus most likely to have the information we were seeking.

For the purposes of our project, we defined “non-tenure track instructional faculty” as “employees who, regardless of their title, hold positions that do not lead to consideration for tenure; and who have primarily instructional responsibilities, including teaching one or more classes, or advising or supervising students’ academic activities.” We specifically excluded certain categories from the discussion: post-docs, visiting scholars, librarians, graduate student teaching or research assistants, and clinical and research faculty whose primary responsibilities are not instructional. Throughout this report we use the following abbreviations to enhance readability: NTTF – non-tenure track faculty; FT – full time; and PT – part time.

This was a long, complex survey, for which we received a 36% response rate. As Table 1 illustrates, the demographics of our respondent group very closely reflect the sample in several ways. We therefore believe that our data is sufficiently representative to allow for generalization to the population of American institutions of higher education.
Using the same measures (institutional type, geographic region, degree of urbanization, and public/private status) we see that use of NTTF in respondent institutions as a percentage of all faculty are fairly evenly spread across geographic region and public/private status, and somewhat less so across institutional type and degree of urbanization (Table 2).
The next table (Table 3) shows that NTTF comprise nearly half (48%) of the faculty overall. However, use of NTTF varies considerably by institutional type – from a low of 32% at Liberal Arts colleges to a high of 56% of Doctoral-Intensive institutions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution Type</th>
<th>NTTF %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral-Extensive</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral-Intensive</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master I &amp; II*</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Arts Baccalaureate</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Baccalaureate</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average</strong></td>
<td><strong>48%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Due to their relatively small numbers, Masters II type institutions are combined with Masters I institutions into a single group.
Study Findings

**Commonly Held Belief #1: Non-tenure track appointments will continue to increase**

The steep increases in the use of non-tenure track faculty that we reported above are well documented. And the opinion of many administrators and researchers is that institutions will continue to increase their reliance on non-tenure track faculty\(^5\).

Respondents to our survey certainly verify the recent growth in the numbers of non-tenure track instructors. Nearly half (47\%) of institutions reported that, during the past five years, use of non-tenure track instructional faculty has increased on their campuses (Table 4). While two out of five (40\%) told us their use of non-tenure track faculty had remained the same over the past five years, only one in eight (13\%) reported a decrease in usage for that same period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decreased</th>
<th>Same</th>
<th>Increased</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>47%</td>
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</table>

However, in contrast to the conventional wisdom that such increases will continue into the future, our survey suggests that the trend may be flattening. As demonstrated in Table 5, only one in six (17\%) respondents predicted that their use of non-tenure track instructional faculty would increase over the next two years—a 30\% drop from the past five years. More than two thirds (68\%) of the respondents predicted that usage would remain constant, and 15\% predicted a decrease in their use of non-tenure track instructional faculty. In other words, four in five (83\%) of our respondents expect to maintain or decrease their use of non-tenure track instructional faculty in the near future.
Even more surprising was how much difference the presence of a union makes. To provide some perspective, here’s what our respondents told us about unions on their campuses: Approximately a quarter reported that their faculty were unionized and, almost without exception, that both the tenure-track and the non-tenure track faculties were unionized, and were represented by the same bargaining unit.

Responding to the question about the use of non-tenure track instructional faculty in the past five years, both union and non-union schools appeared similar; the percentage of unionized campuses who reported increases (54%) was only 10% higher than the non-unionized campuses (44%). (Table 6)
Table 6: Change in use of NTT – Union vs. Non-Union Schools (past 5 years)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Union</th>
<th>Non-Union</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decrease</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By contrast, when anticipating the use of NTTF over the next two years, respondents from unionized colleges and universities anticipated much greater increases than did their non-unionized counterparts. As demonstrated in Table 7, one in three (34%) institutions with unionized faculty anticipate that their use of non-tenure track instructional faculty will increase in the next two years. Compare this with the mere one in eight (12%) institutions without faculty unions that predict their use of non-tenure faculty will increase.

Table 7: Change in use of NTT – Union vs. Non-Union Schools (next 1-2 years)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Union</th>
<th>Non-Union</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decrease</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Union</th>
<th>Non-Union</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decrease</td>
<td>52%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Eighty-eight percent of non-union institutions, report that they do not anticipate increases in their numbers of non-tenure track instructional faculty within the next two years.

Perhaps multi-year union contracts restrict a school’s ability to change the nature of its faculty composition in the short term future. Or perhaps unionization helps to normalize and institutionalize the presence of non-tenure track faculty, thus making them a more acceptable part of the school’s culture. For whatever reason, however, our data suggests the following:

1) The presence of a faculty union makes a difference in an institution’s prediction about the future use of non-tenure track instructors.

2) The flattening trend in the use of non-tenure track instructors is being driven by institutions that do NOT have unionized faculty.

Therefore, the possibility exists that, overall, the use of non-tenure track appointments will not continue to increase.

Commonly Held Belief #2: The terms “non-tenure track” and “part-time” are interchangeable

Discussions about non-tenure track faculty can become complicated when the terms “non-tenure track” and “part-time” are used interchangeably to refer to that group of faculty employees who hold positions not leading to tenure or “permanence of position.” Of course, not everyone conflates the two phrases, but the research and anecdotal literature often uses them to mean the same thing. The findings from our survey clearly point out the error in doing so. As illustrated in Table 8, a fairly high percentage (43%) of non-tenure track instructional faculty are employed full-time at their institutions.

* To limit the length of this already long survey instrument, certain demographic data about the institutions in our sample was derived from IPEDS (the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, National Center for Educational Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. Washington DC (http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/).
It is enlightening to examine more closely the institutional factors that are associated with whether non-tenure track faculty are employed full- or part-time. For one, institutional use of part-time non-tenure track instructional faculty varies by institutional type. Based upon our respondents (Table 9), Doctoral Intensive and Master’s institutions employ considerably more part-time than full-time non-tenure track faculty. Our findings also show that private institutions make heavier use of part-time non-tenure track instructors than do public colleges and universities.

The location of an institution is also seems to affect its use of full- versus part-time non-tenure track faculty. Table 10 illustrates that schools in large cities make more use of part-time non-tenure track instructors than do schools in rural and small town areas. Perhaps institutions in heavily populated
areas with much larger candidate pools have the option of hiring people who are willing (or forced) to work less than full time, or only able to find part-time opportunities. On the other hand, institutions in less populated areas may find it necessary to offer full-time employment in order to attract qualified candidates from much smaller pools.

The distinction between full- and part-time non-tenure track instructional faculty extends beyond their numbers. Our survey identified several ways in which institutional policy and practice treat people in the two categories differently. For example, part-time non-tenure track faculty are much less likely than their full-time counterparts to be eligible to participate in either department- or institution (senate) –wide governance (Table II).
Table 11: Eligibility for Participation in Governance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Senate</th>
<th>Department</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>full</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>partial</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not eligible</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12: Provision of Resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PT-NTTF</th>
<th>FT-NTTF</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private office space</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to voice mail/telephone</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical support</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Access to institutional resources is another area where distinctions between full- and part-time non-tenure track faculty are evident. For those resources that cost the institution little to provide, such as access to an email account, to the library, and to the computer labs, both groups have almost universal privileges. However, as Table 12 demonstrates, our respondents report that their full-time non-tenure track faculty are much more likely to be provided with office space, and somewhat more likely to have telephones and clerical support—more costly resources, but ones that not only enable instructional faculty to get their work done but also contribute to a feeling of connectedness to their institutions.

In future reports, we will elaborate on other distinctions higher education institutions make between full- and part-time non-tenure track instructional faculty. Our findings suggest that: a substantial
portion of NTTF are employed on a full time basis; and that part-timers and full-timers are treated differently. The point we make here is that such distinctions do exist and, therefore, the terms “non-tenure track” and “part-time” are not interchangeable.

Commonly Held Belief #3: Non-tenure track appointments often lead to tenure-track positions, OR non-tenure-track appointments never lead to the tenure track

Anyone familiar with the narratives and other anecdotal accounts from non-tenure track faculty, such as those that frequently appear in the Chronicle of Higher Education, is aware of the perception that such positions are “dead end” and actually hinder a person’s chances ultimately to attain a tenure-track job. In this view, after years of toiling in the department, waiting for a tenure-track position to become available, a non-tenure track instructor is bound to be overlooked in favor of an outsider, deemed by colleagues to be smarter, better, more cutting-edge.

Conversely, when struggling to find a tenure-track position, a would-be academic is often advised to accept employment as a non-tenure track employee: “Get inside, teach well, publish widely and build your CV, be a good colleague, and you’re bound to be rewarded with a tenure-track offer in this or in another department.”

Though polar opposites, these two pieces of conventional wisdom simultaneously exist within the academic community. Using our survey data, we investigated the extent to which either one is accurate. Recognizing that many academic professionals opt for non-tenure track instructional appointments for a number of reasons (a topic we will explore in future reports), we sought our respondents’ perceptions of the frequency with which their non-tenure track instructors who wish to do so are able to move onto the tenure track.

When we asked with what frequency their instructors were able to move from the non-tenure to the tenure track, the vast majority of our respondents indicated that such moves do sometimes occur. Relatively few indicated that such moves happen either frequently or never (Table 13). Furthermore, only one in twenty (5%) respondents reported their institutions having policies that
explicitly *prohibit* such movement. In fact, nearly one quarter (23%) of them reported that their institutions have policies that explicitly *permit* movement from the non-tenure to the tenure track.

On the other hand, institutional type appears to be associated with whether or not such movements onto the tenure track occur. As Table 14 demonstrates, movement from the non-tenure to the tenure track ranks does occur “sometimes,” in the majority of institutions of all types. However, interesting differences show up at opposite ends of the classification system:

- None of the Doctoral Extensive universities and Liberal Arts Baccalaureate colleges reported that such moves happen “frequently.”

- Among Doctoral Intensive universities and General Baccalaureate colleges such moves are more likely to happen: One in ten Doctoral Intensives and one in eight General Baccalaureates reported that such moves occur “frequently.”

- Master’s colleges and universities are in the middle—such movements taking place not as often as at Doctoral Intensive or General Baccalaureate institutions and more often than at Doctoral Extensive or Liberal Arts Baccalaureate institutions.
The message from these findings seems to be that, if you are a non-tenure track faculty member aspiring to a tenure-track job, your chances are better at Doctoral Intensive and General Baccalaureate colleges and universities. And, in the end, neither of the two opposite beliefs is totally accurate: movement from non-tenure to the tenure track does sometimes happen, though much less frequently than many people would like to believe.
Conclusion

It’s clear that non-tenure track instructional faculty have become a major part of the landscape, and they will obviously continue to be so. As part of the national movement to improve higher education, administrators, faculty members, and researchers must familiarize themselves with the aspirations, work-life conditions, contributions, and challenges these academic professionals present. The University of Michigan’s Center for the Education of Women offers the findings in this report, and in future reports, as our contribution to this important dialogue.

Our survey findings have thus far suggested, for example, that the rate of increase of non-tenure track instructional faculty may be flattening out and the proportion of non-tenure to tenure faculty may be more stable in the future; that the distinction between full- and part-time non-tenure track faculty is meaningful in many ways; and that movement from the non-tenure to the tenure track does happen, though not as often as many aspiring professors might hope.

Further analyses are underway that will:

- More fully describe the academic landscape for non-tenure track faculty by examining
  - Degree of institutional autonomy
  - Terms and conditions of employment
  - Eligibility for benefits
- Further explore the differences that the presence of a faculty union has on various aspects of institutional policy and practice
- Examine constructs important to non-tenure rack faculty, such as ‘respect’ and the extent to which individuals are integrated into the institution
- Describe the institutional-level views of various campus constituencies on issues of importance that surround the use of non-tenure track faculty

We expect to disseminate our findings through various publications, conference and workshop presentations, and in additional pieces on this web site.

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