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Satisfaction and Discontent: Voices of Non-Tenure-Track Faculty By Inger Bergom, research assistant, and Jean Waltman, research specialist, University of Michigan Center for the Education of Women

They go by a number of names: lecturers, instructors, adjuncts, part-timers, and contingent faculty, among others. Whatever they are called, non-tenure-track (NTT) faculty—who represent 48 percent of faculty at doctoral and research universities, and 68 percent at all U.S. degree-granting institutions (AAUP Contingent Faculty Index 2006)—are integral to academia. Higher education administrators value NTT faculty as high-quality, dedicated teachers who not only increase their departments' flexibility "to meet short-term needs for special staffing and expertise" (American Federation of Teachers 2003), but also possess specialized skills, knowledge, and enthusiasm. As an administrator at a liberal arts college explained, "Our best new faculty are non-tenure track faculty. They are dynamic and committed, interested in professional development

and institutional success" (Center for the Education of Women 2007).

Given NTT faculty's large numbers and valuable contributions, colleges and universities must attend to their needs and make efforts to optimize their career satisfaction. Such efforts are particularly pertinent to women, since the contingent faculty workforce has a strong gender component, with the American Federation of Teachers reporting that "women have consistently held fewer tenured positions than men." At U.S. higher education institutions in 1998, for example, 77 percent of faculty jobs held by men were tenured or tenure-track, while only 63 percent of faculty positions held by women were tenured or tenure-track (2003).

For several years, we at the University of Michigan's Center for the Education of Women have studied the experiences of those off the tenure track. With the support of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, we have conducted both an extensive institutional-level survey (Center for the Education of Women 2007) and focus groups with full- and part-time NTT faculty at twelve research universities across the country. We have amassed considerable data about the lives of NTT faculty, and our research has offered insight into a number of questions, including "What can we do to optimize the NTT career path for everyone: institutions, administrators, tenure-track colleagues, students, and the NTT faculty themselves?"

In order to answer this question, we must understand what NTT faculty members seek in their positions and work environments. What do NTT instructional faculty want? In our conversations with NTT faculty, five themes emerged: focus on teaching, flexibility, job security, professional growth opportunities, and respect and belongingness. This article focuses on the responses of those whose primary career focus is classroom instruction (as opposed to another group of NTT faculty whose primary career focus is outside of the university classroom).

Teaching

Although some NTT faculty hope to move onto the tenure track, a majority of our focus group participants were generally satisfied to remain in their current positions. Those who were pleased with their positions named several reasons. One was their ability to focus on teaching. Many NTT faculty greatly value the opportunity to work closely with students and view it as the highlight of their work. One woman explained, "I want to spend my time with the students." Another person commented that "being able to concentrate on teaching totally, and interact with the students, has been...an extreme joy." A third instructor explained that she appreciated "being able to really concentrate on the teaching and investing in the students."

Flexibility

While many men and women in the NTT ranks enjoy administration and research, others told us that they value not feeling pressured to meet the research and service requirements faced by their tenure-track colleagues. One person noted, "I don't have all of these meetings scheduled and the pressure of getting the money, and publishing. I like not having that." The absence of these pressures often translates into increased flexibility. As another instructor explained, the more open schedule allows for increased creativity and risk-taking: "I feel like, in my position, because I don't have so many strings and I'm not tied up in meetings and all those other obligations, I do have the time, believe it or not, to think more creatively, and to step back and take some risks, and do some things I don't believe that I would feel like I could do in a tenure-track position."

This greater sense of flexibility is important to both men and women struggling to balance their careers with their family lives. Describing her current position, one woman told us, "It seems easier to achieve work-life balance on the lecturer-track faculty position than I perceive I could in a tenure-track position, especially in the sciences. If I need to go home at 5 o'clock to spend time with my kids, it's not a big deal." Another NTT faculty member shared that "the autonomy that I'm afforded, and the flexibility to take care of my kids if I need

to, to be able to run them to a dentist appointment, or whatever, is just outstanding.” This flexibility is often an important reason why NTT faculty seek out and remain in their positions.

It is possible, of course, that some women decide early in their careers to opt out of the tenure track, practicing what Drago and Colbeck call “bias avoidance,” or “behaviors designed to escape potential career penalties associated with caregiving commitments” (Drago et al. 2006). In other words, some women may choose not to seek tenure-track positions in order to avoid prejudice or disapproval for spending time caring for their families instead of concentrating exclusively on their professional lives. (Drago and his colleagues found little difference among disciplines in women’s practice of bias avoidance, and they also found lower levels of bias avoidance when women had supportive supervisors.)

Job Security

Many NTT faculty with whom we spoke indicated that job security is a key issue of concern. Although some institutions offer five-year contracts or the expectation of continued employment, most teaching contracts for lecturers and instructors are for shorter periods, ranging from one semester or one year (typical for part-time employees) to three years. One faculty member commented, “I don’t want to have to deal with [the possibility that] next year I’m going to get fired....It just would be nice if the position involved more job security.” The department chair’s high level of influence on NTT faculty job status creates another layer of job insecurity. One instructor described her situation: “I’m on an annual contract, and I guess—what’s that phrase they used to use on *West Wing*?—‘I serve at the pleasure of the president.’ I serve at the pleasure of the chair of the department, I guess. So, obviously, at the moment we have a wonderful chair who said, ‘Yes, you’re fine.’ [But] circumstances could change.”

NTT faculty want more job security not only so they can plan for their financial and professional futures, but also so they can feel comfortable investing their time and talents in departmental projects or committees. Without knowing whether they will have jobs next year, or even next semester, many non-tenure-track faculty members feel dispensable and disconnected. While they often enjoy their work and would like to be more involved in their departments, they hesitate to make deeper time commitments without knowing whether their employment will continue. Instead of investing their efforts in departmental projects, they spend time scouting out alternative employment in case they are not offered new contracts. One person explained, “If I felt that I could be gainfully employed for a period of time, I wouldn’t be searching in other areas.”

Institutions committed to improving job security for their NTT faculty have developed policies that set up tiers of lecturer appointments. These arrangements allow for upward mobility within the non-tenure track while extending contract length from one to three to five or more years as faculty move up the ranks. At institutions with clearly defined and longer contract terms, our focus group participants have responded positively, saying that “it gives you some security.”

Opportunities for Professional Growth

NTT faculty often expressed the desire for more opportunities for professional growth. One person described feeling professionally stifled: “I came here last year and I was so excited. I love my job....And I was getting involved with all these committees. And then, when I started to see [that] opportunities were being locked out in terms of career development, more professional development, I [reexamined] my contract. ...I saw, ‘Oh, this is actually all I’m hired to do.’” Another person explained that, even though he is evaluated on committee participation, not enough opportunities exist for all NTT faculty to serve: “In our Activities Report, we are expected to do committee work but if we don’t get the opportunity, then it’s not on [the report], so it’s kind of a catch-22.”

Even NTT faculty who work for many years at one institution have limited professional development opportunities. “I don’t get a sabbatical,” said one lecturer. “I don’t get release time for publications.” Sometimes professional development opportunities are available, but not departmentally supported. According to another NTT faculty member, “I feel that, although the administration in my department doesn’t really appreciate what I do, other colleagues in the university do. And I have had an opportunity to work on so many interesting projects. Unfortunately, since that’s not really valued in my own department, that’s on top of what I’m already doing.” Other NTT faculty told us they would like professional guidance and formal opportunities to grow in their careers. In the words of one woman, “I wish that we had some type of development [support person] who says ‘Hey, you know, this is where we’d like to see you go’ or ‘Have you thought about this?’...I don’t know who to [approach] to ask these questions....”

Departmental and university support for NTT faculty’s professional growth could take many forms: funding to present at conferences, release time from teaching to write and research, eligibility for university awards and grants, inclusion in faculty and university-wide committee meetings, or the chance to advise students and serve on thesis and dissertation committees. Without these opportunities, many NTT faculty sense a lack of support stemming from administrators’ attitudes that NTT faculty are not full, contributing professionals and therefore are not worthy of institutional commitment and resources. As one person stated, “I don’t think we’ve reached the point where the administration is looking at the non-tenured faculty as long term investments. They’re still seeing them as stop-gap measures.”

Belongingness and Respect

Clearly, more job security and more opportunities for professional growth would go a long way toward making NTT faculty feel valued. But belongingness also consists of being treated with respect by colleagues. Although some NTT faculty feel valued and respected,

many others report working in climates where “there’s still tremendous elitism and prejudice.”

“It is,” one person told us, “more the sort of subtle, unspoken things with other colleagues, about the prestige of the position. You are still sort of seen as second tier. You couldn’t do it. You couldn’t make the tenure track, so you are at this kind of second tier level.... ‘We value you as a teacher but you’re still not top bar.’” NTT faculty shared many incidents in which they were treated with little respect, including being ignored in the hallway by tenure-track colleagues. One NTT woman who had been in her department for several years described being asked by a senior tenured colleague to leave the faculty lounge because he mistook her for a student. The disrespect is often less subtle. As one lecturer said, “Sometimes when you’re in a meeting, they say ‘OK, all the non-tenure-track people leave now; we have to vote on something....’ Or when we have our department faculty meetings, they would say ‘Well it’s now the graduate meeting so the lecturers all will leave.’”

One lecturer explained, “There are certain people in my department who see me as qualitatively different from themselves.” In the words of another, “There’s definitely this perception [in my unit] that you are not really a real professor unless you are a tenure track.” When it comes to belongingness and respect, there is a common sense of invisibility among NTT faculty. According to one NTT faculty member, “I feel like we’re just this invisible group.... I mean, we’re out there everywhere but... we don’t really have an identity. I have no idea how many of us there are out there—or in what capacities.”

Recommendations

Our focus group members showed dedication and a strong sense of pride in their contributions to their institutions and to students’ educations. Inspired by their example, we have responded to their comments by identifying a number of best-practice policies and procedures with the potential to greatly improve departmental and institutional climate for NTT faculty. Many of these recommendations would be relatively easy and inexpensive to enact, and they would enable dedicated NTT professionals to thrive.

Hiring and Continuing Employment

- Offer multiyear appointments, especially for full-time NTT faculty
- Create an adequate time frame for notifying NTT faculty of contract renewal or nonrenewal
- Create fair, equitable policies covering employment terms, benefits, titles, and promotion criteria
- Make policies clear and easily accessible, perhaps through a designated Web site

Career Development and Advancement

- Offer career development opportunities: workshops, mentoring relationships, conference attendance, and an increasing breadth of teaching assignments
- Offer opportunities to take on administrative responsibilities and to be members of departmental and university committees
- Offer opportunities for release time and career development leaves
- Offer opportunities to apply for teaching awards and grants

Integration into Departmental and Institutional Life

- Encourage collaborations between NTT faculty and their tenure-track colleagues—to develop curricula, for example, or to plan and teach courses
- Include NTT faculty in departmental and institutional-level governance
- Provide social networking opportunities for NTT faculty
- Include NTT faculty in faculty retreats and other departmental events
- Provide opportunities for NTT faculty across campus to come together to meet and learn from one another
- Create an environment where everyone—tenure-track and NTT faculty, administrators, and staff—feels engaged and connected to each other and to the department’s work

These recommendations would not only improve the lives of NTT faculty but would also create a more inclusive and equitable work environment for the larger community, including tenure-track faculty, administrators, and staff. In addition, students would benefit from greater consistency of instruction across semesters and from lecturers who feel supported and engaged in their teaching. The recommendations also aim to create work environments that are family-friendly and supportive of women who choose to work and have children—a particularly important goal given the higher percentage of women than men in NTT positions.

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