

Who is Professor “Staff,” and how can this person teach so many classes?

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Executive Summary

Most of the faculty on American college and university campuses are contingent employees, working in conditions very different from the image of academic professional life that informs contemporary discussions of higher education policy. This report describes the findings of a recent survey of contingent faculty in the United States, focusing on the working conditions imposed upon contingent faculty and the ways those conditions impact students and the quality of the education they receive.

This report is based on a survey produced, distributed, and analyzed by the New Faculty Majority Foundation. See the survey at www.nfmfoundation.org/NFMF-Back-to-School-Survey.html

Two particular aspects of the working conditions of contingent faculty emerged as particularly significant: “just-in-time” hiring practices and limited access to pedagogical resources.

Many faculty who are contingent employees (listed in class schedules simply as Professor “Staff”) receive their course assignments only two or three weeks before the start of the academic term. Hired “just-in-time” for the start of classes, these professors have little time to do the preparatory work necessary to teaching a high quality college-level course. As a result, they suffer the “double contingency” of either using their own unpaid time to prepare for classes they may not be assigned or accepting the reality of teaching a course for which they have been unable to adequately prepare.

The report speaks directly to three core principles of the Campaign for the Future of Higher Education dealing with investment in faculty, use of technology, and the avoidance of false economies.

In addition, most contingent faculty are not given full and effective access to the resources and technologies that define quality education in today’s colleges and universities. They are given, at best, inadequate access to sample course syllabi, curriculum guidelines, library resources, clerical support, and the like. They often have only limited, if any, access to personal offices, telephones, computers and associated software, and technological tools and training.

For a complete version of CFHE’s Principles for Quality Higher Education in the 21st Century, see www.futureofhighered.org/principles

Perhaps the most important result of these damaging working conditions is that the educational experience of students suffers, both inside and outside of the classroom. It is only the extraordinary effort, personal resources, and professional dedication of contingent faculty that allows them to overcome the obstacles to quality education that derive directly from their employment status.

Existing explanations for the working conditions of contingent faculty do not suffice. Managerial flexibility and budgetary savings cannot justify administrative practices toward contingent faculty. Indeed, current practices amount to administrative inattention; correcting these practices would not reduce managerial flexibility or increase institutional costs in any significant way.

The report concludes by recommending increased transparency regarding the working conditions of contingent faculty in American higher education. It recommends that institutions of higher education commit themselves to collecting the data necessary to a serious study of the situation of contingent faculty and its impact on student learning. The survey instrument used herein is one possible way for faculty groups and for institutions of higher education to begin their own processes of data collection and analysis.

The new understanding produced by this process of description and analysis should then be used by college and university administrators to reform their employment practices. There can be no doubt that improving the working conditions of contingent faculty will also improve the education experiences of many, many college and university students.