Non-Tenure Track STEM Faculty in Higher Education

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Summary

The proportion of postsecondary faculty working off the tenure-track has grown rapidly over the past four decades. While we have generally built a better understanding of these faculty in recent times, there is still much to learn. For one, faculty have a range of motivations for working off the tenure track and their work experiences are quite diverse as well. Too often, scholars fail to recognize this heterogeneity and they formulate generalizations that do not apply to wide swaths of adjuncts. My work aims to elucidate and clarify the diverse types of contingent faculty working in higher education.

Our understanding is also limited with regard to the job satisfaction of tenure-ineligible faculty. In fact, the popular media and the professional outlets of higher education in many cases have already concluded that these faculty are hopelessly marginalized and unsatisfied with their work.

My research presents evidence that these faculty experience great satisfaction, but that there are important, particular grievances that need to be addressed. If you want to learn more about this work, check out my website: www.chadevans.org

Common beliefs about non-tenure track (NTT) labor:

• Part-time employment: There is an impression that NTT faculty only teach one or two classes, but never a full course load (Schmidt and Oh 2014, Saha 2015).
• No future: It is claimed that there is little or no opportunity for career advancement for NTT faculty (Frisconie 2014).
• Disgruntled labor: Some have argued that NTT experience little job satisfaction in their work (Schmidt 2015).
• Transient employees: Some have portrayed these faculty as itinerants, bouncing from one institution to the next in order to sustain employment (Kangkade 2013, Raah 2015).
• Low pay: Many believe NTT are paid inadequate salaries (Kersel 2013, Takahashi 2014).
• Few job benefits: It is believed that NTT faculty rarely receive contributions towards their retirement, vacation time or health insurance (Brecher 2014, Dunn 2014).
• Poor working conditions: NTT faculty rarely possess office space and ways to engage and communicate with their students (Moser 2014, Pathe 2014).

Research Questions

R1: What kinds of NTT typologies emerge from recent data and how do these compare to earlier classification schemas by Gappa and Leslie (1993) and Schnur and Finkelftein (2006)?
R2: Which variables influence or relate to the probability of tenure?
R3: How satisfied are NTT faculty with their jobs and in what areas are they more or less satisfied?

Data

The Survey of Doctorate Recipients (SDR): The SDR is a longitudinal biennial survey (panel data) conducted since 1973. It contains demographic and career history information on individuals with a research doctoral degree in a science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM) field from a U.S. academic institution. The survey follows a sample of individuals with STEM doctorates throughout their careers from the year of their degree award until age 76.

Unlike many survey instruments with information on non-tenure track faculty, this instrument is extremely well-designed and rigorously applied to a probability sample of faculty. The trade-off is that this sample only includes faculty who earned a research doctoral degree in a science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM) field and working in research institutions.

Partial dependence plots give graphical depictions of the marginal effect of a variable of interest on the probability of classification. Here I examine how the probability of “Tenure/Track” classification changes as salary (left) and age (right) increase.

Principal Factors of Adjunct Job Satisfaction

Contrary to the beliefs of many, non-tenure track faculty are fairly satisfied with their jobs. More than 3/4 report that they are either “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their jobs on the whole. But aggregated data sometimes obscures. Following an exploratory factor analysis, important factors emerge in the job satisfaction of contingent faculty. These data came from the HERI 2010.

Table 1: Factor Loadings of NTT Faculty Satisfaction Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor 1</th>
<th>Factor 2</th>
<th>Factor 3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality of students</td>
<td>Salary</td>
<td>Health benefits</td>
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<tr>
<td>Office/Job space</td>
<td>Opportunity for scholarly pursuits</td>
<td>Retirement benefits</td>
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<td>Autonomy and independence</td>
<td>Teaching load</td>
<td>Tuition remission for children</td>
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<td>Prof. relationships with faculty</td>
<td>Job security</td>
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<td>Social relationships with faculty</td>
<td>Availability of child care at this inst.</td>
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<td>Competency of colleges</td>
<td>Prospects for career advancement</td>
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<td>Departmental leadership</td>
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<td>Course assignments</td>
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<td>Freedom to determine course content</td>
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<td>Clerical/administrative support</td>
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Conclusions

• There is considerable heterogeneity among STEM faculty adjuncts. Generalizations failing to take into account these diverse characteristics may misrepresent the lived experiences of many non-tenure track faculty.
• Earlier classification schemas were extremely important in elucidating the roles and experiences of non-tenure track faculty. However, recent data suggests that a professional class of adjunct is emerging: faculty who are far more diverse than the non-tenure track faculty that have been traditionally distinguished as “recognition.”
• Some have argued that post-tenure track faculty are quite unsatisfied with their work. My research demonstrates that this is not the case. The vast majority (75%) of non-tenure track faculty are either “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their work on the whole.

Want to learn more? Go to my site: www.chadevans.org