

*Organizational pressures influence the restructuring of the academic workforce. This chapter describes the key factors associated with increased hiring of contingent faculty.*

Organizational Pressures Driving the Growth of Contingent Faculty

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## Introduction

The dominant model of faculty employment in the United States since the early twentieth century has been the tenure system (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001; Park, Sine, & Tolbert, 2011). The concept of tenure was adopted to provide faculty with secure employment that promotes freedom of thought and expression in teaching and research, while also serving as an organizational tool to attract talented individuals to the academic profession (American Association of University Professors [AAUP], 1940, 2009). While tenure remains a cornerstone of academic employment at many institutions, the viability of the tenure system has been called into question by higher education leaders and stakeholders. It has become clear that irreversible changes have occurred across the higher education landscape, prompting the development of new faculty models to meet the needs of an ever-evolving higher education system (Kezar & Maxey, 2016). Increasing organizational pressures and demands are driving these changes across the academic workforce.

The observed changes in academic employment mirror larger trends in the U.S. (and global) workforce. Barker (1998) described a “restructuring of the American workplace” beginning in the 1980s characterized by reorganization, downsizing, and an expansion of contingent employment (p.

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197). Faced with increasing pressure from global competitors, U.S. firms sought to reorganize their labor forces to reduce costs and improve flexibility (Cappelli et al., 1997). Higher education has not been immune to these macroeconomic forces. Similar to other sectors of the U.S. economy, higher education institutions have confronted a turbulent economic environment characterized by increased market competition, technological advances, changing consumer demographics, and financial constraints (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001; Cappelli et al., 1997; Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). Colleges and universities have reacted to these rapid changes in a number of ways, but one of the most striking responses is the restructuring of academic employment. Higher education institutions are increasingly moving away from a traditional workforce model based on long-term employment and stability in favor of more flexible and variable approaches. See chapter 1 of this volume for an analysis of growth in contingent faculty by institutional type and sector.

In this chapter, I draw from literature across the fields of higher education and labor relations to summarize the general factors driving the increased hiring of contingent faculty in higher education. Viewed through an organizational theory lens, colleges and universities can be understood as organizations that are interdependent on their environments, continually adapting and responding to environmental demands (Davis & Powell, 1992; Scott & Davis, 2007). From this theoretical perspective, an organization's survival depends on its ability to respond effectively to external demands and expectations (Oliver, 1991; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). It is important to acknowledge that colleges and universities vary in their academic employment strategies and these decisions are highly influenced by institutional culture and context. Additionally, some of the influences described in this chapter have been more salient to specific institutional types than others (e.g., changes in state funding for higher education have had a greater impact on public institutions).

I identify and discuss two related but distinct environmental forces influencing higher education institutions' academic employment strategies: increasing financial pressure and a

corresponding demand for flexibility. I follow with a discussion of the implications of the changing faculty workforce for institutional researchers, higher education administrators, and other stakeholders.

### **Increasing Financial Pressures**

Colleges and universities have experienced numerous financial pressures over recent decades that have influenced their revenue sources, expenditure patterns, and institutional activities. There is a general consensus among researchers that economic factors have played a predominant role in the changing faculty composition (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001; Cross & Goldenberg, 2009; Gappa & Leslie, 1993). Three key financial factors have been particularly influential in the shift toward a predominately contingent academic workforce: changes in government funding for higher education; growing concern about college spending (particularly on faculty), and competition from non-traditional educational providers such as online programs and for-profit institutions.

#### **Changes in government funding for higher education**

Government funding for higher education has declined in recent years as most states have faced severe economic constraints. Per-student state appropriations to public higher education institutions have declined persistently over the last two decades, with the sharpest declines occurring during the Great Recession between 2009 and 2012 (SHEEO, 2017). From 1991 to 2016, average per-student state appropriations dropped by about 19 percent from \$8,599 to \$6,954 dollars. At the same time, public institutions have increased tuition revenue in response to losses in state funding. In 1991, the proportion of per-student revenue provided by tuition was just 26 percent on average; by 2016, tuition comprised 48 percent of per-student institutional revenue at public institutions.

Despite increases in tuition revenue, many public institutions have not been able to fully offset decreases in state funding per student over time, leading to decreases in overall revenue and

corresponding reductions in educational expenditures (Desrochers & Wellman, 2011). In one of the first studies to examine institutions' growing part-time faculty workforce, Gappa and Leslie (1993) interviewed faculty and administrators at 18 public and private campuses in the U.S. They determined fiscal pressures to be one of the most important external forces affecting the employment of part-time faculty at the institutions in their study. Increased hiring of contingent faculty, who often carry higher teaching loads and are compensated at rates significantly lower than their tenure-track peers, is viewed by many college and university administrators as a cost-saving strategy when faced with limited financial resources (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001; Cross & Goldenberg, 2009).

Declines in government support for higher education have also contributed to the growing use of contingent faculty indirectly through the rise of academic capitalism, a term scholars have used to describe market-like behaviors such as competition for research grants, university-industry partnerships, differentiated tuition, and other revenue-generating activities (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Increased emphasis on external research grants and contracts has led to a growing specialization of the faculty role, in which research and teaching are "unbundled" and increasingly divided between tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty (Finklestein et al., 2016). As tenure-track faculty have focused more of their attention on research and scholarship, institutions have turned to part-time and full-time non-tenure-track faculty to teach a significant share of undergraduate courses. Chapter 6 of this volume discusses the growth of contingent faculty at research institutions.

### **Growing concern about college spending on faculty**

Colleges and universities have faced increased criticism from policymakers and consumers who question the value of paying a rapidly increasing price for a college education (Boehner & McKeon, 2003; Lumina Foundation, 2013). Among their concerns is the perception that higher education institutions pursue and spend too much money (Winston, 2000) and focus too much on research and scholarly pursuits at the expense of undergraduate teaching (Boyer, 1987; Gillen, 2013;

Winston, 1994). Much of the blame for rising college tuition has been placed on faculty compensation (Rhoades & Frye, 2015). The tenure system in particular has faced increased financial scrutiny from those who believe tenure is too costly, too constraining for institutions, and no longer needed to protect academic freedom (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001; Blank, 2015).

Tenure-track faculty have become more expensive to employ, yet due to the labor intensive nature of academic work, institutions have not seen a corresponding increase in their productivity over time (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001; Cross & Goldenberg, 2009; Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). This phenomenon is described as “cost disease” and affects higher education and other industries that rely on a highly educated workforce to perform labor intensive work in such areas as medicine, law, and the performing arts (Archibald & Feldman, 2010; Johnstone, 2001). Cost disease helps explain why the price of services such as education and healthcare have risen faster than the price of goods over time. Scholars have argued that institutions’ increased hiring of non-tenure-track faculty has been in part a way to demonstrate their commitment to controlling costs and improving academic productivity while strengthening their focus on undergraduate teaching and learning (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001; Cross & Goldenberg, 2009; Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). Cost concerns have also contributed to pressure on institutions to compete with non-traditional education providers, as described in the section below.

### **Increased competition from non-traditional education providers**

The modern U.S. higher education system has always been comprised of a diverse set of publicly and privately controlled institutions, yet the past two decades have seen a dramatic increase in the number of non-traditional education providers including for-profit proprietary institutions such as the University of Phoenix and virtual non-profit institutions such as Western Governors University. Chapter 7 of this volume includes a description of the role of contingent faculty in for-profit education. Most recently, massive open online courses (MOOCs) have been developed by private

companies in partnership with traditional universities with the goal of improving access to educational content across the globe (Fain, 2012). Traditional campus-based institutions have been confronted with increasing competition from new providers that market themselves as more user-friendly, convenient, and flexible (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001).

Competition from these new higher education providers, and the accompanying technological advances, have challenged the faculty workforce model at traditional institutions and have been instrumental in reshaping faculty appointments (Finkelstein et al., 2016). New informational and instructional technologies have led to the emergence of new, contingent faculty roles such as instructional designers and online course facilitators at more traditional institutions. In their description of several new faculty models that have emerged in recent years, Kezar and Maxey (2016) described the “online or for-profit model” in which courses are designed by very few full-time faculty and delivered by a vast number of part-time instructors. The unbundling of teaching, research, and service into separate faculty roles has likely been accelerated by traditional institutions’ desire to maximize cost effectiveness and efficiency as they seek to compete with these new providers. In addition to the financial pressures driving institutional change, another major force in the restructuring of academic employment is the increased demand for institutional flexibility, as I describe in the following section.

### **Demands for Flexibility**

One of the primary criticisms of the traditional tenure system is that its emphasis on long-term employment and stability fails to provide institutions with the flexibility needed to adapt to sudden changes in their environments and the growing market-driven specialization of faculty roles (Cross & Goldenberg, 2009). Rigid caps on tenure lines and slow hiring and approval processes for tenure-track positions are additional barriers to institutional flexibility and adaptation. Technological advancements and increased competition have created pressure on traditional higher education

institutions to adapt more quickly to changing market demands for new programs and delivery modes (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001).

Higher education has also become increasingly influenced by corporate values and practices as greater numbers of trustee and leadership positions are filled with business leaders (Kezar & Maxey, 2016). Following broader trends in corporate employment relations, a “just-in-time professoriate” comprised of contingent faculty has proven to be an attractive alternative for institutions seeking a more flexible and adaptable employment structure (Barker, 1998, p. 197). Organizational flexibility has been cited as the primary reason U.S. firms increased their hiring of contingent workers beginning in the early 1980s (Davis-Blake & Uzzi, 1993; Kalleberg, Reynolds, & Marsden, 2003; Pfeffer & Baron, 1988). In this section I describe three sets of factors that have increased environmental uncertainty and have pressured colleges and universities to become more flexible in their faculty employment strategies: changing student enrollment and demographics, increasing financial volatility, and shifting policy and legal environments.

### **Changes in student enrollment and demographics**

Higher education institutions, particularly community colleges, have experienced substantial overall growth in student enrollment over the last two decades (Ma, Baum, Pender, & Welch, 2016). These increases in student enrollment have driven institutions’ desire for a more flexible academic workforce. For community colleges and other open-access institutions, limiting student enrollment in response to budget shortfalls is not politically or practically feasible. When enrollment increases are not met by corresponding increases in funding, economic realities may force institutions to hire more contingent faculty to help meet increased demand for courses (Gappa & Leslie, 1993). Additionally, because the number of tenure-track positions available is strictly limited at many institutions, it is often more feasible to hire additional contingent faculty to meet student demand than seek the authorization of new tenure-track faculty lines (Cross & Goldenberg, 2009).

Furthermore, student enrollment increases have not been distributed evenly across fields over time; disproportionate increases have occurred in applied fields such as business and health sciences (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016). Many institutions have developed new academic programs and curricular offerings in response to market changes; institutions may choose to staff these new programs and courses with contingent faculty until enrollment and finances are stable (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001; Cross & Goldenberg 2009; Gappa & Leslie, 1993). Different from tenure line faculty, institutions can hire or reassign contingent faculty in response to enrollment needs or program changes on a semester-to-semester basis without making long-term employment commitments.

Changes in student demographics have also influenced faculty hiring practices. As student enrollment has increased, the proportion of non-traditional students attending higher education has also grown (Cross & Goldenberg, 2009). Students who are older than the traditional 18- to 22-year age group or who attend college part-time are often constrained by work and other responsibilities and prefer to take classes in the evenings or on weekends. If tenure-track faculty are unable to take on flexibly scheduled courses, institutions may turn to contingent instructors to help meet the enrollment needs of these part-time students (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001).

### **Increasing financial volatility**

Related to the increasing financial pressures discussed earlier in this chapter, higher education institutions' funding streams have become less predictable over time. State and local funding in particular has become increasingly volatile from year to year, subjecting college and universities to growing uncertainty regarding their revenue streams and limiting their ability to make long-term planning decisions (Delaney & Doyle, 2011). Government appropriations are often finalized shortly before the start of the fall term, leaving institutions scrambling to respond to last-minute changes in state funding and student enrollment (Gappa & Leslie, 1993). Many institutions have hired more part-time and full-time non-tenure-track faculty in an effort to improve their flexibility to adjust their labor



forces in response to unpredictable changes in resources. Furthermore, most institutions now rely on tuition to cover an increasing share of operating costs, which is variable source of revenue that depends heavily on student enrollment. As colleges and universities derive more of their revenue from variable and volatile sources, they have sought greater flexibility in their academic employment structures. Chapter 5 of this volume analyzes the independent college sector and finds the use of contingent faculty as a tool for flexible growth to be especially prevalent.

It is important to note that an institution's ability to respond to financial volatility depends heavily on its mission and resource capacity. Revenues from alternative sources such as private gifts, endowments, and federal grants and contracts are disproportionately concentrated at research universities and selective four-year institutions and scarcely found at community colleges and non-selective four-year institutions (Cheslock & Gianneschi, 2008; Desrochers & Wellman, 2011; Rothschild, 1999). While virtually all postsecondary institutions have raised tuition over time, relatively few institutions experience excess student demand that allows them to raise their prices significantly without suffering enrollment declines (Winston, 1999). Tuition increases at non-selective two- and four-year institutions threaten to undermine these institutions' underlying mission to create access for underserved populations, who are the most sensitive to college pricing (Perna & Titus, 2004). Institutions that are unable to compensate for financial volatility through alternative revenue sources must find other ways to improve organizational flexibility. It is not surprising that community colleges, which have experienced the largest influx of student enrollments during the last decade, have also employed the largest proportions of part-time and full-time non-tenure-track faculty.

### **Changing policy and legal environments**

Evolving public policy and legal environments also contribute to institutional pursuit of a more flexible workforce. Institution- and system-level policies include those related to contracts, salaries, reappointment processes, and continuity of employment. Relevant state policies include those

governing the eligibility of non-tenure-track faculty to participate in state-sponsored retirement and health benefit plans, and to organize and participate in collective bargaining. These institution- and state-specific complexities are beyond the scope of this chapter; instead, I focus on describing key changes in the federal policy environment that have influenced the hiring behavior of U.S. higher education institutions.

A major federal policy change affecting academic employment occurred during amendments to the federal Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) in 1986. This legislation abolished mandatory retirement at age 70 and higher education institutions became required to comply with the law in 1994 (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001; Weinberg & Scott, 2013). Initial research determined the federal policy change in 1994 slowed down the retirement of faculty over 70 years of age (Ashenfelter & Card, 2002), and these effects have been further magnified by economic recessions over the last decade (Conley, 2009; Ehrenberg, 2006; Weinberg & Scott, 2013). The end of mandatory retirement has increased institutions' uncertainty regarding faculty turnover and new appointments, leading to the hiring of more contingent faculty to improve flexibility in responding to changing employment needs (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001; Ehrenberg, 2006).

More recently, the Affordable Care Act of 2010 (ACA) introduced new requirements for employers to provide health care coverage for all full-time employees, defined by the law as individuals who work 30 or more hours per week (NACUBO, 2014). According to the guidance provided by the ACA for determining adjunct faculty hours, part-time faculty teaching as few as 12 credit hours per week may be considered full-time depending on out-of-class requirements such as office hours and faculty meetings. In response to the ACA, some institutions have chosen to cap the amount of credit hours taught by individual part-time faculty. A 2013 survey of college and university human resource officers found that nearly half of respondents indicated their campuses have restricted the work of adjunct faculty to avoid meeting the ACA requirements (Flaherty & Lederman, 2013). An

unintended consequence of this new legislation may be larger numbers of part-time faculty teaching fewer courses as institutions seek to maintain or reduce faculty labor costs.

### **Implications and Future Considerations for Institutional Researchers**

What are the organizational implications of widespread changes in the academic workforce? Researchers who have studied the factors leading to increases in contingent faculty generally agree that these changes are not the result of an intentional plan to restructure the faculty (e.g., Kezar & Maxey, 2016). Rather, decisions to hire contingent faculty are often made in response to short-term budget and enrollment conditions. However, as evidenced in the description of faculty composition trends in Chapter 1 of this volume, these short-term hiring decisions have accumulated into a long-term restructuring of the academic workforce. Facing increasing organizational pressures, colleges and universities have prioritized institutional flexibility over traditional approaches to academic employment.

Recognizing that the decline of tenure-track faculty positions represents an irreversible trend, scholars have advocated for a systematic and intentional redefinition of faculty roles and academic positions (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001; Kezar & Maxey, 2016). A report from the Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success at the University of Southern California stated, “If we continue on our current path by haphazardly responding to our changing environment and demands, we will either sustain the gradual decline of our profession, or we will invite frustrated policymakers and outsiders...to recreate faculty careers and roles for us” (Kezar & Maxey, 2015, p. 10). From this perspective, the message is clear: to continue on the course of short-term, reactive decision making is to put the future of student learning and academic work at risk in many colleges and universities.

Institutions have experienced many benefits from employing contingent faculty, particularly increased institutional flexibility, expanded course and program offerings, and labor cost savings.

Despite these benefits, clear negative consequences have emerged from a small but growing body of literature examining non-tenure-track faculty employment. Scholars have questioned whether higher education leaders have overstated the cost savings provided by hiring contingent faculty. Simple comparisons of teaching loads between tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty inflate cost-saving estimates since they do not account for the many other responsibilities held by tenure-track faculty such as advising, research, and service (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001). The employment of part-time faculty may represent “false economies” in which increases in part-time faculty lead to hidden institutional costs such as heavier administrative burdens on remaining tenure-track faculty and high turnover expenses from hiring, orienting, and supervising new part-timers (Gappa and Leslie, 1993, p. 102). Chapter 2 of this volume provides a detailed discussion of the experiences of contingent faculty. As the proportion of tenure-track faculty decreases, tenure-track faculty have experienced higher workloads and declining influence over institutional affairs (Schuster & Finklestein, 2006). These arguments suggest that cost-benefit calculations based solely on salaries paid to contingent and tenure-track faculty may not fully account for the economics of academic employment. Institutional researchers may be able to illuminate some of the hidden costs by providing systematic data on the distribution of faculty appointments and turnover across campus and helping to identify departments in which workloads may be particularly unbalanced.

Institutions’ increased reliance on contingent faculty has also raised concerns about their treatment and working conditions. Contingent faculty differ substantially from tenure-track faculty in both the terms and conditions of their employment, leading to the creation of two tiers of faculty on campus (Kezar, 2012). Contingent faculty often face low pay, job insecurity, lack of opportunity for advancement, and little access to resources such as offices and computers, contributing to perceptions of their marginalization and exploitation (Gappa & Leslie, 1993; Thompson, 2003). Significant gender differences also persist in contingent faculty appointments, with women twice as likely as men

to be employed in non-tenure-track positions, on average (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). The decentralized nature of academic hiring has further exacerbated inequitable working conditions as non-tenure-track employment decisions are made at the department level, often without the need for any school or college approval. As a result, little attention is paid by presidents or provosts to the prevalence of contingent faculty or the policies governing their employment (Cross & Goldberg, 2009). Institutional researchers can help overcome the challenges of decentralized decision-making by collecting and providing comprehensive data on contingent faculty appointments, promotions, course loads, and compensation. Comparative analyses by race and gender, as well as department or program may help illuminate some of the inequities that persist within non-tenure-track appointments.

Poor institutional working conditions may harm student learning outcomes, and many have expressed concern regarding the educational consequences of institutions' increased use of contingent faculty (Ehrenberg & Zhang, 2005; Kezar, 2013). Due to job insecurity and high turnover, contingent faculty are less able to engage in mentoring and advising relationships that increase student success (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001; Thompson, 2003). Although only a few studies have attempted to examine the teaching practices of non-tenure-track faculty, the findings suggest the presence of key differences between contingent and tenure-track faculty. For example, part-time faculty have been found to interact with students outside of class less frequently than full-time faculty, and spend less time preparing for class (Umbach, 2007). The research examining the direct impact of non-tenure-track faculty on student outcomes is limited but suggests possible negative influences on graduation (Ehrenberg & Zhang, 2005; Jacoby, 2006; Jaeger & Eagan, 2009), persistence (Jaeger & Eagan, 2011; Jaeger & Hinz, 2008) and transfer to four-year institutions (Eagan & Jaeger, 2009). It is quite difficult to isolate instructor effects from other confounding factors that may affect student outcomes. However, advances in student data analytics and quasi-experimental research techniques may enable institutional researchers to systematically investigate differences in student performance and

satisfaction by instructor type, course delivery mode, and other important instructor and course characteristics. Such analyses would provide invaluable information to campus administrators who are interested in developing forward-thinking faculty models.

### **Conclusion**

Increased employment of contingent faculty will likely continue well into the future. Many of the organizational pressures that have driven the growth of part-time and full-time non-tenure-track faculty remain firmly in place. Yet, there is evidence to believe that continued increases in contingent faculty will not go unchecked as critics inside and outside of the academy express growing concern regarding the ethical and educational implications of contingent employment (e.g., Benjamin, 2002; U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and the Workforce, 2013). Furthermore, counterforces such as collective bargaining on the behalf of non-tenure-track faculty and accreditation standards that limit the employment of contingent faculty may serve to slow the creation of new off-track appointments. By understanding the internal and external pressures that have influenced academic employment, institutional researchers can play an important role in supporting campus efforts to design an effective and sustainable faculty workforce.

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