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Nurturing the Contingent Colleague

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With operational costs generally rising faster than tuition, public appropriations, and contributions, campuses are turning more and more to the use of non-tenure-track appointments to cut costs and preserve what is euphemistically known as "institutional flexibility."

The National Center for Education Statistics reported that there were 617,868 full-time faculty employed at Title IV (federal student aid-receiving) institutions in fall, 2001. Over a third of these, 213,232, occupied non-tenure-track slots.¹

Current hiring practices are doing nothing to decrease this percentage. In fact, "the U.S. Department of Education has found that more than half of all new full-time faculty members at four-year institutions are not on the tenure track".²

Meanwhile, non-tenure *part-time* positions comprise a substantial additional segment of the college teaching corps. As early as 1998, 40% of all professors were serving in these partial and temporary positions.³ While there was an overall increase of 60,000 faculty members between 2001 and 2003, the number of full-time faculty increased by only 2% while the number of part-timers grew by 10%.⁴

These full and part-time instructors laboring outside the tenure system are what the American Association of University Professors labels *contingent faculty*. According to the AAUP, "Whether these faculty members teach one class or five, the common characteristic among them is that their institutions make little or no long-term commitment to them or to their academic work."⁵ Consequently, "I did not feel like a teacher," said Ph.D. holder and former adjunct Jim Stockinger. "I did not

feel like a member of an ancient and honorable society. I did not feel like someone who was making important contributions to his society. I did not feel like someone whose educational attainments got the respect and dignity they deserve. I felt like a Kleenex tissue, disposable.”⁶

The heavy reliance on adjuncts and their potential feelings of exploitation can be exacerbated in mass communications programs by three key factors: (1) the shortage of terminal degree holders in the field due to the relatively small output of doctoral graduates; (2) the skimming off of terminal degree holders by the industry — particularly in such fields as public relations and media research; and (3) the temptation to cede lower-level, lower-prestige “practical and production” courses to local media practitioners.

In the case of broadcast education, for example, Guterman discovered that, while the mean number of applicants for broadcast education faculty positions was 20, many searches yielded pools only in the single digits. And this number reflected all applicants — including those who did not possess the needed degree qualifications for a tenure-track hire.⁷ Commercial marketability certainly contributes to this shortage. As the communications industry moves more and more to consumer-centric measurement and message packaging, doctoral degree holders comfortable with mass communications research methodologies are finding employment options in business that offer compensation packages far outstripping even senior level faculty appointments.

Finally, the ready availability of contingent faculty in the work forces of local media outlets presents a temptingly easy way to fill teaching slots for basic classes. Local reporters, air personalities, and photojournalists can be hired “on the cheap” to teach basic writing, performance, and production courses, thereby leaving more advanced theory and seminar courses to the terminal degree holders on tenure lines.

While these dynamics do not inevitably lead to defective instruction and exploited instructors, they all too often can result in both if administrators and departments do not create and maintain an environment that treats adjuncts as colleagues rather than serfs.

As on the campus as a whole, contingent appointments are a fact of life in mass communications programs — and likely to remain so for the foreseeable fiscal future. So the challenge becomes how to integrate fully these full and part-time term appointees into an academic program’s work and culture.

Adjuncts need to feel fulfilled in their labors. And departments need to feel pride in the totality of their instructional product — not just that portion of the product delivered by

those occupying tenure-track slots. To consistently meet these twin desires, the unit should make a long-term commitment to the following four-step process, a process that can be dubbed the DRMC:

1. Define roles specifically
2. Recruit people proactively
3. Monitor and mentor continuously
4. Compensate equitably

Define Roles Specifically

There is a natural tendency to use contingent faculty as stop gaps. An instructor must suddenly be found for a course vacancy that has developed, or a backlogged class requires an extra section. The word is put out on the street, and the first applicant possessing some familiarity with the subject matter is thrown into the breach. Chances are reasonably good that the person will know something about this subject. Chances are not necessarily good that s/he knows how to teach (in general — or that subject in particular.) Certainly, unexpected vacancies do occur. And the timeframe for filling them may be short. However, without due diligence, such emergency situations can set the pattern for every adjunct hire. All adjunct-staffed vacancies are routinely filled as per-course assignments with little forethought or position design. Even courses regularly slated to be handled by contingents are casually filled on a last-minute basis. People are hired because they have been available in the past — not because of their specific background or teaching expertise.

A much more effective alternative to this cavalier approach is the studied identification of courses that can effectively be handled by adjuncts on a regular basis. Few deans or provosts will allow a unit to be staffed completely with tenure lines. By administrative mandate, specific or “understood,” a certain percentage of the load must always be adjunct-served.

So, why not systematically identify those assignments that best lend themselves to staffing by part- and full-time contingent faculty and design these non-tenure lines to conform to this reality? Offerings in such areas as writing/reporting, editing, design, production, and performance can be assigned to non-terminal degree practitioners — not because these classes are less worthy — but because they involve skills these current or former practitioners have honed throughout their careers.

In profiling contingent positions, it should not be assumed that they will involve only lower level courses. Gaps in the tenured staff’s expertise should be factored into contingent position construction. If an upper level class in media management or programming can more suitably be staffed by an

appropriate adjunct hire, an adjunct position should be configured accordingly. This not only places faculty in the slots for which they are best prepared, but it also signals to adjuncts that their role in (and importance to) the program has been considered as carefully as that of their tenure-track associates.

By conceptualizing the role-defining goal as one of strengthening those portions of the curriculum that contingents can deliver best — rather than sacrificing those portions in which they will do the least harm — a mass communications administrator capitalizes on the strengths that adjunct colleagues can bring to the enterprise. Such conscientious planning usually will result in the sculpting of well conceived full-time slots rather than randomly chipping off part-time assignments. This thereby creates positions for contingent colleagues whose full-time status makes them much more available than part-timers to involve themselves in the department's workings and lifestyle.

“Being ‘one of the gang’ has a psychological component,” veteran adjunct Jill Carroll observed. “If you believe you don't belong, or are bitter about your adjunct status and wear that bitterness on your sleeve, you won't belong.”⁸ Full-time appointments go a long way toward initiating a contingent faculty member's feeling of comfort in the clubhouse.

Recruit People Proactively

Once adjunct positions have been definitively identified, and amalgamated into full-time slots whenever possible, recruitment can be initiated. Clustering of cohesive course assignments will create salaried positions more attractive to candidates than per-course scraps. This in turn will result in hires who are better qualified to perform the instructional work to be done. Such pre-planning liberates the department from the strictures of per-class local picks. Recruitment can be done on a regional or even a national basis because the position being advertised evidences a well-focused long-term need rather than a short-term grab bag of course leftovers. Candidates will know what they are being asked to teach and be in a much better position to appraise how this definitive teaching profile meshes with their professional background and interests.

Pride of ownership is a central component of high employee morale. The adjunct who knows up front that s/he will be given responsibility for a specific segment of the curriculum is likely to be more attracted to the assignment and, subsequently, committed to improving the courses which it comprises.

Even though the institution's hiring process for adjuncts may be much more streamlined than for filling tenure-track appointments, the department should not take it any less

seriously or cast the recruitment net any less expansively. Once on campus, adjunct faculty are indistinguishable from tenure-track instructors in the eyes of most students. Therefore, it makes little sense to devote seven months to a national tenure-track hire and fill adjunct slots via same-week exchange of a few local phone calls.

“Inequities begin in the appointment process,” asserted the AAUP's 2003 *Policy Statement on Contingent Appointments and the Academic Profession*. “Appointments of full-time tenure-track faculty typically follow rigorous national searches, which include a review of the candidate's scholarly record, an assessment of teaching potential, and consideration of other attributes by faculty in the department offering the appointment. Contingent faculty, by contrast, are often hired in hurried circumstances. Department chairs select likely candidates from a local list.”⁹

Little wonder that the department consequently invests less faith in its adjuncts and the adjuncts feel less appreciated by the department. An off-the-cuff initial hiring procedure tends to generate mutual feelings of dissatisfaction and even disrespect. Conversely, a hiring process that takes contingent selection seriously is the first indication to candidates that their teaching contributions will be taken seriously as well.

Monitor and Mentor Continuously

Creating well-conceived adjunct positions and comprehensively recruiting for them are vital first steps in the effective utilization of non-tenure-track instructors. However, such efforts will be wasted if the contingent colleague is not properly oriented and assisted to achieve classroom success. Adjuncts require no less support than tenure-track hires in this regard. In fact, if they are coming from the industry rather than the academy, they may well need even more guidance in how to carry out the instructional task.

This guidance should begin at the very start of the year. Enlightened campuses offer orientation sessions for all new faculty regardless of their employment classification. These sessions optimally include components in which adjunct and tenure-track faculty all meet together as well as separate (and shorter) breakout meetings to cover the unavoidable differences in employment paperwork completion.

Longtime San Francisco adjunct Melissa Maley argued that “a regularly scheduled meeting designed especially for new hires at the beginning of each semester could make a world of difference. That meeting should include the basics about student demographics and retention rates, as well as the all-important copy-machine codes and restroom locations.... A group meeting has the benefit of introducing new faculty and staff members to one another so that they feel less like a

voice in the wilderness and more like a part of the pack.” 10.

Grouping new tenure-track and contingent hires together in these initial sessions helps to build a climate of collegiality among the two newcomer cadres. Following this procedure over time will lessen if not eliminate what previously might have been an entrenched academic caste system. Each year's new hires now develop shared and common experiences instead of fixating on differentiating employment classifications. Whether or not the institution as a whole provides such common orientations, the mass communications unit should include all hires in all department meetings beginning with the very first conclave of the year. This is essential in evidencing an unmistakable commitment to inclusiveness.

Once the term is under way, oversight and assistance for both tenure-track and contingent appointees should be similarly uniform if for no other reason than that they are all expected to provide the same quality of instructional experiences to students. Peer classroom visitations, one-on-one faculty mentoring, and scheduled feedback sessions with the chair or other designated senior faculty member are all important vehicles for instructor orientation and development. Such mechanisms should be made available to — and required of — tenure-track and contingent faculty alike. The time investment involved in extending monitoring and mentoring services to adjuncts pays significant dividends in two fundamental ways: (1) classroom performance and management weaknesses can be improved and strengths complimented; and (2) the adjuncts' sense of their role in the instructional mission is bolstered by the serious attention paid to them and the concrete encouragement of their efforts.

Even in the worst case scenario, mentoring and monitoring are advantageous. The process identifies those who, despite their past professional successes, are simply not predisposed to be viable teachers. The “war story Jerrys” can be detected and their contracts not renewed, making room for more effective teachers before the image of all adjuncts in the unit is tarnished by association.

Committee assignments also should be made available to non-tenure-track faculty as these experiences constitute valuable vehicles through which newcomers come to know colleagues inside and outside the department as well as becoming players in campus decision-making. Of course, adjuncts should not be required to accept such assignments because committee work is usually outside their contractual responsibilities. But those who wish to avail themselves of this opportunity should be encouraged to do so. While committee labors are something more feasible for full-time rather than part-time adjuncts to pursue, this constitutes yet another benefit to consolidating contingent appointments into

full-time slots. Though committee meetings can be tedious, they are also empowering by making the adjunct professor a stakeholder rather than an outsider in the overall educational enterprise.

Additionally, contingent faculty should be eligible for the same training and conference attendance opportunities as tenure-track personnel because such experiences pay off for everyone. Students benefit from the insights their instructors thereby gain, and adjuncts in particular are gratified by the investment the department is making in their continued professional development. If travel and training opportunities are extended only to tenure-track professors, however, contingent faculty can get the distinct feeling that for them, instructional improvement is neither required nor expected.

Compensate Equitably

Of course, travel support is also an aspect of employee compensation. Nurturing contingent colleagues means providing as close to equal pay for equal work as the department is able. Institutional policies do not always make this easy to achieve. But adjuncts appreciate departmental efforts to come as close to this goal as possible.

On many campuses, full-time adjuncts are expected to teach one more course per term than are tenure-track hires. One way for a unit to mitigate this inequity is through the assignment of non-course load. If, for example, tenure-track personnel teach nine hours per semester, contingent staff must teach twelve. However, each tenure-track person can be given a three-hour mandatory academic or co-curricular advising assignment, activities that adjuncts are not expected to perform. The result? Equated twelve-hour loads for everyone. A variation of this pattern would involve release time for research. This works too — provided that both tenure-track and adjunct members are uniformly eligible for such research release if they have developed worthwhile proposals that are germane to their teaching profiles.

Base salary and benefit discrepancies between contingent and tenure-track postings are usually a function of college or university-wide policies that the mass communications unit cannot directly impact. Even in this area, however, some accommodations can be made that demonstrate departmental commitment to adjunct well-being. The unit head can continue to push for salary scales that treat relevant academic and industry experience equally in years-of-service calculations. The annual salary surveys published by ASJMC and BEA can be used with upper administration to benchmark the faculty as a whole, since a “rising tide lifts all boats.” Such efforts may be only partially successful. But contingent faculty are much more likely to feel like colleagues when their unit is aggressively presenting such argumentation on their behalf.

Even small gestures can significantly aid in building collegiality. At the writer's own institution, for instance, the employee parking fee was raised from \$100 to \$185 per year. However, tenure-track faculty were in the third year of their collective bargaining agreement that froze their parking fees at \$100. Suddenly, adjuncts were forced to pay almost double to park their cars as compared to "regular" faculty. The department was powerless to change these external assessments — so it adjusted internally. The departmental travel allocation for each adjunct and non-faculty staff member was raised \$85 over that of tenure-track faculty, thereby bringing all full-time members of the unit back to parity. The dollar amount involved in this decision was minor. But the message of equal treatment it signaled to adjuncts and other staff was major. (With these and other departmentally-determined perks, proportional calculations can be utilized in the case of part-time adjuncts to benchmark equitably the benefit to the instructor's employment percentage.)

The Collegial Unit

More than many departments on the campus, mass commu-

nications units tend inherently to rely on teaching expertise that derives from both academic and industry experience. Sometimes such experience is blended in the same terminal-degree person. Often, however, it resides in different individuals possessing different career backgrounds. Our discipline benefits by bringing faculty from both perspectives together in a common educational mission regardless of their tenure-track or adjunct status. Today's economics simultaneously decree that this mission be accomplished in as cost effective a manner as possible. The solution lies in finding and employing practitioner faculty to compliment the contributions of those on tenure track. If these contingent colleagues are truly recruited and treated as *colleagues*, the department has everything to gain in providing its students with a rich and variegated perspective on our field. Ideally, distinctions between tenure-track and adjunct faculty are discernible only in the personnel office's data base.

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Endnotes

¹ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. [E.D. Tabs] *Staff in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2001, and Salaries of Full-Time Instructional Faculty, 2001-2002*, NCES 2004-159, by Laura G. Knapp et al. Washington, DC: 2003, 38-40.

² Piper Fogg, "For These Professors, 'Practice Is Profit'," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 16, 2004, A-12.

³ Valerie Martin Conley, supplemental table updates to *Part-Time Instructional Faculty and Staff: Who They Are, What They Do, and What They Think* (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2002), Tables 1 and 12.

⁴ See U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. *Staff in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall, 2003, and Salaries of Full-Time Instructional Faculty, 2003-2004*.

⁵ *Contingent Appointment and the Academic Profession*, policy statement of the American Association of University Professors Committee on Part-Time and Non-Tenure-Track Appointments, and Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure (adopted by the national Council, November 9, 2003), 2.

⁶ "Teachers without Tenure," *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* transcript, January 8, 2003.

⁷ Jeff Guterman, "Telephone Survey of Mass Communications Programs Advertising on the BEA Web Site in the Fall of 1999," presentation to the Broadcast Education Association 2000 Convention, Las Vegas.

⁸ Jill Carroll, "How to Be One of the Gang When You're Not," *Chronicle Careers*, January 18, 2002, 3.

⁹ AAUP, *Contingent Appointments*, 7.

¹⁰ Melissa Maley, "Integrated and Informed," *Chronicle Careers*, May 12, 2005, 2.