

Contingent Faculty: Helping or Harming Students?

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***Abstract:** Contingent faculty are as diverse as both their institutions and the disciplines they represent. As such, context matters in contingency faculty research. This paper will assess the current utilization of contingent faculty in postsecondary institutions. A particular eye will go toward synthesizing research on the benefits and potential disadvantages that contingency faculty have on students. A brief history of contingent faculty will be provided followed by a review the literature with regards to the empirical research conducted documenting the impact on non-tenure-track faculty on students. Particular attention will be paid to different types of contingent faculty (full and part-time) and different classifications of institution. Finally, suggested directions for future research on contingent faculty and student impact will be discussed.*

Studying the potential impact evolving from the overabundance of contingency faculty in U.S. post-secondary institutions is not new. As the composition of the student body has changed, so has the composition of the faculty entrusted with teaching them. The roles of contingent faculty are both institutionally and disciplinary dependent, so context is essential. As states are increasingly holding institutions accountable for various student outcome measures such as retention and graduation rates (McLendon, Hearn & Deaton, 2006), it is important to know any potential consequences of employing contingent faculty members on students. This focus is important because undergraduates are increasingly being taught by contingent faculty members with little known about the overall effect. This manuscript will proceed in three parts: First, a brief history of the usage of contingent faculty in postsecondary institutions. Second, a review of published manuscripts documenting contingent

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faculty effects on student outcomes, and finally, a discussion of possible directions for future research.

Before introducing research, we first must define what we mean when referring to contingent faculty. Contingent faculty can be full- or part-time teachers at any level of postsecondary institution. Their common thread is that the institution makes no long-term commitment to them (AAUP, 2008). These faculty are referred to as adjuncts, lecturers, and at the most impersonal, staff (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001). The research differs on whether or not graduate students are lumped into the category of contingent faculty (Benjamin, 2003a). For these purposes, graduate students will not be included unless specifically mentioned and a focus will be upon full-time tenure stream faculty as compared to everyone else, the contingent faculty.

The lack of a long-term commitment to contingent faculty is troublesome for a few reasons. First, the lack of job security limits the contingent faculty's ability to have a career comprised of all three of the dimensions of university appointment: teaching, research, and service (Townsend, 2003). Security, or lack thereof, can also threaten the contingent faculty's academic freedom. One who is beholden to a term or yearly contract is not as free to speak their mind in the classroom (Thompson, 2003). Further, contingent faculty are rarely afforded the benefits, both monetary and otherwise of their tenured peers. Contingent faculty can also be excluded from the university governance structure and decisions on curricular matters (Thompson, 2003).

A Brief History

Non-tenure track appointments have a storied history in colleges and universities. Benjamin (2003b) explains the use of non-tenure track faculty was actually very common at the beginning of the twentieth century because institutions were focused primarily on teaching. When institutions began to differentiate between research and teaching was when the designation of tenure track versus non-tenure-track began to take hold. The G.I. Bill and the introduction of higher education to the masses necessitated more teachers. The tenure system applied to the scholar-teachers and others not performing research became contingent faculty. The chasm between researchers and teachers grew as the number of colleges grew, and now the gap exists within institutions between

those who are tenured and have the full responsibilities of research, teaching and service, and those who are untenured and have a more limited role.

With mention of a chasm and non-tenured faculty appearing to be cast as second-class faculty of sorts, one might be led to believe that they are small in number. This is not the case. Between 1975 and 2005, the number of full-time tenured faculty declined by fifteen percent. Also, full-time tenure-track faculty also declined from about 20 percent to about 10 percent in 2005. The decline in tenured and tenure-track faculty is matched and surpassed by the increase in both full-time and part-time non-tenure-track professors. Full-time non-tenure-track faculty now comprise 20 percent of the faculty in U.S. institutions and part-time non-tenure-track faculty comprise 48 percent of the faculty (American Association of University Professors, 2009).

The rise in contingent faculty has been most dramatic and impactful. What has contributed to this meteoric rise in contingent faculty in four-year colleges and universities especially? Baldwin and Chronister (2001) attribute this growth to factors both internal and external to the institution. Internally, they cite the rising costs of universities. Increasing costs of faculty salaries, benefits, and other institutional needs are not offset by increases in tuition revenues. Contingent faculty are of lower cost than their tenured peers which makes them an attractive cost saving measure. Further complicating this, once a position is off the tenure track, the money saved is then reallocated with little hope that position will shift to one with tenure. Tough economic times have also contributed to the increase in contingent faculty. In difficult times trustees and governments can be reluctant to fund tenured faculty time that might be devoted to research. Hiring contingent faculty guarantees money will be spent in the classroom.

Another internal factor that has contributed to the rise in non-tenure-track faculty is the changing nature of the college student (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001). Higher education has become more accessible to all members of the population. There are more students in general and also more non-traditional students wanting to acquire post-secondary education. This coupled with the rise in students with special needs and the decline of quality secondary education in some areas means that more is being demanded of professors. In some cases contingent faculty

seek out positions to serve or are hired to meet the needs of these new types of students (Gappa & Leslie, 1993)

It is not just the population of students that is changing; the demographics of the faculty are changing as well (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001). The suspension of mandatory retirement has aged the faculty. Administrators are no longer able to plan for faculty retirement like they could in the past. This uncertainty leads to more contingent faculty. Conditions of the academic labor market have also contributed to this rise. Universities are churning out more Ph.D. degrees and these graduates are grasping for a place in the academe. A contingent position is as, if not more, attractive than no position at all, so the newest doctorates clamor for these and send the signal that institutions do not need to offer tenure to attract credentialed candidates.

Internally, employment of contingent faculty allows institutions to adapt to changing revenues, and student enrollments. However, there are factors external to institutions which have contributed to the rise in contingent faculty. The first external factor cited by Baldwin and Chronister (2001) is a loss of public confidence and trust. There is an overwhelming public perception that undergraduate education is being sacrificed for research. The public is also inundated with frequent news of tuition hikes and the high cost of a college education and meanwhile parents hear their children are being taught by graduate students. Under these conditions, one can see public perception either tilting toward having only full-time teaching faculty or retaining contingent faculty who focus on teaching and undergraduates.

Other factors influencing the rise of contingent faculty are the decline in government funding and the rise of new technology (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001). Government funding in the areas of capital projects, research and financial aid can diminish in times of economic distress. When institutions have less funding they have to make choices and contingent faculty can be a money saver (Gappa & Leslie, 1993). In addition, the constant progress in technology requires institutions to invest money in staying up-to-date, potentially diverting funds away from faculty. Also included in technology upgrading is distance learning. Contingent faculty are often retained initially teach these courses while student interest is gauged.

Institutions are also faced with a new competitor. For-profit institutions are attracting potential college students through marketing and innovative course offerings. These institutions do not traditionally offer tenure and are more agile in offering courses that students request through the use of contingent faculty (Shuster & Finkelstein, 2006). This new institutional model resonates with the business people that serve on college and university boards. Traditional postsecondary institutions provide employment options where one can obtain tenure. This is out of sync with the corporate workplace which is one of contingency and those engrossed in business see this model as the most profitable (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001). For profit institutions have had success embracing a non-tenure employment structure and traditional university governance may be under pressures to adopt some of the for-profit practices with uncertain impact on students.

Contingency and the Undergraduate Education

It appears as if factors both internal and external to the institution are pointing to the elimination of the tenure system in favor of a more flexible and cost effective contingent faculty system. If this is the case, is this a terrible thing? From the administration's perspective at an institution, probably not, but the real threat of an overabundance of contingent faculty is the threat it can potentially provide to the quality of the undergraduate education. In 1984, the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in Higher Education issued their final report detailing three qualities that facilitate excellent undergraduate education -- student involvement, high expectations, and assessment and feedback. Faculty are vital in all three of these components. However, as the commission states, "strong faculty identification with the institution and intense faculty involvement with students requires a primary commitment" (p. 36) from a faculty member. By nature, contingent faculty do not have a primary commitment from the institution, nor is their commitment to the institution a primary one. Consequently, the use of contingent faculty may be eroding at the quality of undergraduate education.

Empirical Research

This section will review empirical research conducted regarding contingency faculty and their effect on students across institutional types. In general, three different student outcome variables are addressed in the literature: persistence, graduation rates, and student learning. As

persistence and graduation rates are readily available, many studies are able to focus on these student outcomes. Bolge (1995) and Umbach (2007) however, add to the literature by attempting to assess contingent faculty effects on student learning. Studies differ in their focus on part-versus full-time contingency faculty and institutional type, but all serve to expand our understanding of the consequences related to the expansion of non-tenured faculty on students.

Student learning. One of the first studies to empirically address the issue of the effect of faculty status on student learning was done by Bolge (1995). He randomly sampled 100 students at a community college in New Jersey into two groups. 50 of the students were enrolled in basic mathematics courses taught by full-time faculty members and the other 50 by part-time faculty members. The students were all given both a pre and post test where no significant difference in the amount of learning between the two groups was found. The study has quite a few limitations. First, there was no differentiation between tenured and non-tenure track professors. Second, the study encompasses only one developmental math course at one community college meaning it is difficult to generalize these findings. Despite this, the conclusion that part-time (contingent) faculty and those who teach full-time may have the same student outcomes is insightful and invites further research.

In 2007, Paul Umbach set out to investigate the impact of the use of contingent faculty on the undergraduate education. Specifically, he set out to answer three research questions. First, he investigates the degree that contingent faculty members engaged students in good practices as compared to their tenured and tenure-track counterparts? Second, he asked: to what extent the proportion of contingent faculty on a campus influence the frequency that faculty engage in good practices? Finally, he investigated the effect having a contingent appointment varied between institutions and if these differences could be explained by institutional characteristics. He analyzed the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement of 2004 and after narrowing the responses to both full- and part-time faculty members who taught at least one class he had responses from 17,914 faculty members covering 130 institutions.

Umbach (2007) created six composites to embody practices influencing increases in student learning to use as dependent variables. These composites were: interactions with students, course-related interactions,

non-course-related interactions, active and collaborative learning techniques, academic challenge, and time spent preparing for class. Umbach used a series of hierarchical linear models to do his analysis. He found that undergraduates were impacted in the area of faculty interaction most severely. Non-tenure-track faculty interacted with students less outside of class than their tenured or tenure-track peers. This interaction lacked in regards to both academic and non academic matters. This is an important conclusion to note because the undergraduate experience is often made richer through interaction with faculty outside of the classroom setting. Students need faculty to advise on career matters, write letters of recommendation, and further clarify concepts discussed in class. It seems as if students whose professors are off the tenure track are at a disadvantage in cultivating rich faculty interaction.

Student persistence. The studies of student persistence vary widely on what it means to persist. Persistence can mean taking another course in a subject, continuing on to the next semester or year, or dropping a class. Harrington and Schibik (2001) examined the relationship between student retention into the spring semester and their having had courses taught by part-time contingent faculty in the fall. The data came from a Midwestern comprehensive university and was available for 7,174 first-time freshmen from 1997 through 2001. One of the first factors the authors found surprising was that in the first semester at least 85 percent of the students had 75% or more of their course load taught by part-time faculty. Furthermore, they found a negative and significant relationship between the exposure of students to part-time faculty in their first semester of college and their retention to the second semester. Again, these results encompass only one university in the Midwest. However, this analysis points to the potential importance of departmental administration in assigning courses. Further investigation is needed on the effect of part-time faculty on students not in their first semester of college.

In 2004, Bettinger and Long used both value-added and course fixed effect models to quantify how a student's having a course taught by an adjunct professor or a graduate student affected their subsequent enrollment in other courses of that subject and their success in those courses. The authors used a dataset of public four-year colleges in Ohio to conduct the analysis. The dataset includes 12 colleges and almost

25,000 first-time freshmen with student level records of each course they took from fall of 1998 through spring of 2002 and the instructors who taught those courses. In addition, students were able to be tracked across multiple campuses within the state of Ohio.

Interestingly, Bettinger and Long (2004) find that students are less inclined to take another course in a discipline or major in that discipline after having an adjunct or graduate student as a professor as opposed to having a full-time tenure-track faculty member instructing the course. Their findings also indicate a difference by discipline. In the sciences and humanities graduate assistants and adjuncts had a negative effect on subsequent course enrollment, while in the professional fields (business, computer science, and architecture) graduate students and adjunct professors seem to improve outcomes for students as measured by pass rates of subsequent courses. Furthermore, when the researchers differentiated the adjunct professors and graduate students based on age, they found that much of the negative results were being driven by contingent faculty under the age of forty. Overall, their conclusion was that adjuncts and graduate students have a negative effect on enrollment in a subsequent course in the discipline, but not on student success in those courses. Bettinger and Long caution that before these results are used to understand the tradeoffs between the different types of faculty, the effects of research and service must also be studied.

Eagan and Jaeger (2008) further examined part-time faculty instruction in gatekeeper courses and the effect that having a part-time instructor had on student persistence. Using data from four cohorts of first-year students in four universities (a doctoral-extensive, two doctoral-intensive, and a master's comprehensive) Eagan and Jaeger devised a model with the assumption that students enrolled in gatekeeper courses with part-time faculty will have less opportunity to interact with these faculty and thereby be less immersed in the academic culture at the institution. After controlling for student characteristics, the authors found exposure to part-time faculty had a negative effect across institutions on student persistence into the second year. But, the more gatekeeper classes a student completed the more likely they were to persist. This suggests that institutions should staff introductory courses with non part-time faculty.

To lend an international perspective, Hoffman and Oreopoulos (2007) use administrative data from a large Canadian university from 1996 through 2005. The dataset included 41,402 students that enrolled in a full-time undergraduate Arts and Science program; however this number was reduced to 36,144 students with reported high school grades. These students were all of traditional age, 17-20, during the year of entry. The authors investigate a student's probability of taking another course in the same subject or dropping a course based on instructor characteristics. They found that a professor's rank, tenure status and salary had no effect on student course taking patterns. When they evaluated students' perceived effectiveness of the professor, this also was found to have no effect on course dropping or future course enrollment. However, the researchers did note that, "subjective teacher evaluations perform much better in reflecting an instructor's influence on students compared to objective characteristics such as rank and salary. This influence, however, is smaller than that implied of elementary and secondary school teachers in earlier research" (p. 4).

Hoffman and Oreopoulos (2007a) also found that if a student enrolled in a course taught by a lecturer hired full-time to teach, they were .8 percentage points less likely to drop a course compared to a course taught by tenure-track faculty. The researchers also found a link between a student's subject interest in college, his prior high school grades and the rank of the professor. The researchers note, "Lecturers have a significant negative impact on subject interest for students among the lowest quartile, but a positive impact among students from the highest quartile. Compared with full professors, students from the lowest high school grade quartile are less likely to be interested in a subject after taking an introductory course with an assistant or associate professor, or an adjunct or emeritus professor" (p. 17). This could indicate that full-professors, who have presumably taught the longest, would have the greatest influence over the academically weakest students.

Graduation rates. Jacoby (2006) recognized that part-time faculty provide nearly all instruction in community colleges and he went about investigating the effect of part-time faculty employment on community college graduation rates. Deciding to investigate this at an institutional rather than student level, Jacoby employed IPEDS data from all 1,209 public two-year colleges in the United States; Washington, DC; and Puerto Rico for 2001. His models included three different measures

of graduation rate as the dependent variable, IPEDS graduation rate, the net graduation rate, and the overall degree ratio. The IPEDS graduation rate is the graduation rate of the full-time first-year (FTFY) students who enter an institution with a degree seeking intent. The net graduation rate is “the ratio of FTFY students who graduate within 150% of normal time relative to the cohort of FTFY students minus those who have transferred to other institutions” (p. 1088). The overall degree ratio is the number of graduating students in any given year to the college full-time equivalent enrollment. He found that increasing the proportion of part-time professors employed at two-year colleges had a negative and highly significant impact on all three graduation rate measures. The author presents an informative table where he has separated 935 community colleges from the study (those with adequate data) into quadrants representing low and high part-time faculty ratios and faculty-student ratios. Schools with low part-time faculty ratios have higher graduation rates than then their comparison schools with comparable faculty-student ratios and different part-time faculty ratios. Schools with the highest faculty-student ratios and low part-time faculty ratios have the highest graduation rates at 34.6 percent. To compare, schools in the highest third of part-time faculty ratios and the lowest third of faculty-student ratios have a graduation rate of 21.1 percent.

Adding to the literature base, Ehrenberg and Zhang (2004) investigate the effect that non-tenure-track faculty (both full- and part-time) have on the graduation rates of undergraduate students. This study uses data from the College Board from both two-year and four-year colleges and universities across the United States in the years from 1986 through 2001. They also incorporated IPEDS data to quantify the faculty characteristics. The researchers found that neither increasing the percentage of faculty that are part-time or increasing the percentage of full-time faculty not on the tenure track is associated with a decline in graduation rates, all else being held constant. The association is larger at public institutions than in private ones and greatest at master’s level institutions. They found, “other factors held constant, a 10 percentage point increase in the percentage of faculty that is part-time at a public academic institution is associated with a 2.65 percentage point reduction in the institution’s graduation rate. Similarly, a 10 percentage point increase in the percentage of full-time faculty that are not on the tenure-track lines at a public college or university is associated with a 2.22 percentage point reduction in the institution’s graduation rate” (pp. 654).

When they differentiated by both type of faculty and type of institution they found that for every 10 percentage point increase in full-time faculty not on the tenure track at master's level public institutions, a 4.4 percentage point decline in graduation rates was found.

Ehrenberg and Zhang (2004) extended their study to account for the differing SAT scores of college students, hypothesizing that those scoring lowest might be impacted most in relying on non-tenured faculty. They found no evidence that this was the case. Further, like previous studies, Ehrenberg and Zhang used their dataset to test the first-year completion rate and return-for-second-year rate of students. They found effects that were not to the magnitude of the graduation rate effects and fewer were statistically significant. The authors note that one of the reasons given for the increase in non-tenure-track faculty is that tenured and tenure-track faculty members are spending more time on research and less time in the classroom focusing on students. They examined research expenditures and found employing more full-time non-tenure-track faculty is associated with greater research productivity among the tenured and tenure-track (especially in doctoral institutions), but the employment of more part-time faculty had no effect on research productivity. This indicates that institutions hiring part-time faculty for classroom teaching so that the tenure stream faculty can be more productive in research may be misguided, especially since the authors' earlier finding indicated that an institution increasing its part-time faculty lowered graduation rates.

Discussion

The amount of empirical research investigating the impact of contingent faculty on undergraduates has increased markedly over the past decade. This may correspond to the increase in accountability at the primary and secondary levels trickling up to affect higher education, or it could be just an interest in making sure that students are being properly supported at post-secondary institutions. The research performed thus far has found mixed results, and not all studies are comparable as some fail to differentiate between all combinations of full- and part-time, tenured and not, and type of institution. However, there do seem to be some initial conclusions that can be tentatively drawn. First, the importance of the first-year experience for students cannot be underestimated which is consistent with literature on the first year college experience (Upcraft,

Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). It is in the initial introductory courses that students are exposed to subject matter for the first time and an engaging, pedagogically proficient professor has a significant impact. Departments wishing to increase subsequent course taking in their subject matter would be wise to assign introductory courses to full-time, tenured professors, whom initially seem to have the most impact on freshmen. Second, it appears graduation rates are impacted by the increase in contingent faculty in institutions. This effect is evident in both the study of all types of institutions by Ehrenberg and Zhang (2004) and Jacoby's (2006) study of community colleges.

Recommendations for Future Research

The area of contingent faculty is ripe for further research. Institutions have already adopted a structure that is dependent on faculty who are off the tenure track. This applies to both those in full-time and in part-time positions. Institutions are also taking note of the research that is being conducted about the impact of this contingent faculty on students. In an attempt to improve instructional quality, student satisfaction, and overall graduation rates, some institutions are incorporating professional development for contingent faculty. Studies need to be conducted analyzing the impact of these programs on contingent faculty performance.

Further, the antidotal evidence would indicate that at some institutions contingent faculty are not incorporated into departments fully and as such their commitment and trust in the institution may not have the motivation to develop. Research on whether different levels of institutional commitment among contingent faculty have an impact on their effectiveness as teachers would add to the literature. Important to this would be to differentiate between part- and full-time contingent faculty members. If there is an impact, then doing more to ensure contingent faculty are a cohesive part of their departments could be beneficial.

Both internal and external factors are driving the institutional switch from tenure-track to non-tenure-track faculty. Institutions face uncertain budgets and enrollments and need to be nimble enough to adjust to changes. However, it would appear that institutions are acquiring more contingent faculty with little thought to the impact on students and on the

tenure-track faculty. This analysis has ignored the impact of contingent faculty on tenured faculty for the most part to this point. It seems that the decline in the number of tenure stream faculty increases their time commitment to institutional committees and other university service since there are fewer people to perform the same amount of work. This shift in responsibilities can result in a larger workload overall for the tenure stream faculty or a shift toward institutional service and away from research and teaching. If teaching levels decline for tenured track faculty then it would seem that more contingent faculty would be required to fill the gap, exacerbating the problem. That is not to say that employment of contingent faculty is entirely negative, but research seems to indicate that the large number of non-tenure track faculty is eroding the postsecondary experience for students. Institutional administrators need to take note of students when deciding the balance among tenure track and non-tenure track faculty, particularly with regards to part-time professors and their commitment to students and the institution.

It could just be the case that only small changes are necessary to increase effectiveness of contingent faculty. Things like office space and pay for conducting office hours will afford more contact between contingent faculty, students, and other faculty. Regardless, contingent faculty are now structurally a part of American institutions. Our postsecondary institutions are changing with regards to the composition of both faculty and students. Research is necessary to make sure that these changes serve to strengthen our tertiary education system and not weaken it. More students than ever are taking advantage of the high quality higher education that America has to offer and it is the responsibility of institutions to make sure that the quality of and access to the undergraduate experience does not erode with the changing composition of the faculty.

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