

Tenure for the Common Good

3/30/2020

For Immediate Release:

Statement on Equity and Teaching During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic presents significant challenges to higher education. Tens of thousands of faculty are suddenly moving into teaching online, often with little preparation and inconsistent support. The austerity environments many predict, in which enrollments fall and hirings freeze across institutions, will affect contingent faculty first and most harshly. It is crucial to focus on the situations of these colleagues. Their positions, already more precarious than most, will likely worsen more quickly than those of the tenured and tenure-track faculty.

To their credit, universities have wisely assisted by revising tenure clocks and eliminating elements of evaluation regimens because those evaluations cannot be done reliably or fairly in such emergency circumstances; centers for teaching and learning have been working in overdrive to offer faculty their expertise in online learning. Libraries are finding ways to provide access to research resources while faculty are locked out of campuses.

Yet, as happens all too often, contingent faculty, including graduate students, who constitute approximately 70% of the American professoriate, are generally included in these efforts only in piecemeal ways. Despite active participation in the herculean effort of bringing our curricula online, many contingent faculty are receiving little support from their institutions. This is particularly worrisome. Online classrooms, for example, especially ones established hastily under the conditions of stress, are vulnerable to abuse. Some, who seek to identify and punish instructors they believe engage in inappropriate “indoctrination,” can

abuse this shaky new structure, creating a significant threat to academic freedom.

As stay-at-home and lockdown orders reduce the number of options for online-accessible workspaces, contingent and other non-tenure-stream faculty face challenges beyond those of their tenured and tenure-track colleagues. Access to the equipment necessary to teach well online can be spotty; some lack adequate access to the internet. Not even equipment and access solve all the problems that many poorly-compensated faculty face working at home: lack of space; sense of safety/security; and so on.

All faculty, whether on or off the tenure track, face real struggles at this moment, and all need support. Many of the issues and recommendations in this statement are true for faculty of all ranks and statuses; however, every one of our common struggles is significantly more difficult for our colleagues who are the most precarious and worst compensated. We hope that professional organizations will recognize these needs and provide whatever help they can.

If the pandemic does have the effects on education many of us fear, we may see serious reductions in student populations. Many contingently hired faculty may see their jobs disappear. Their hard work helping make the transition happen now will not help them.

Solidarity demands that we support and protect our contingent colleagues just as we are working to protect and support our tenure-track colleagues. We should always do so, but the current situation amplifies the need.

We therefore call on institutions to act on the following recommendations, which rest on the central principle that contingent faculty should have the same resources, assistance, and protections against financial and professional damage that tenure-track faculty have,

and due to poor compensation and working conditions, may have even more acute financial needs.

Support for teaching while social distancing

- Make sure contingent faculty are included on all contact lists concerning policies toward faculty and institutional support for remote/online teaching.
- Offer emergency technical support and equipment to contingent faculty as well as students and tenure-track faculty.
- Recognize that contingent faculty may need flexibility that tenure-track faculty do not. Do not promote synchronous over asynchronous scheduling. Do not require contingent faculty teaching at multiple institutions to use multiple video conferencing apps or technology platforms.
- Compensate contingent faculty for the unexpected additional labor of converting courses to remote/online platforms. While all faculty should be compensated for the additional labor, contingent faculty are generally not eligible for other forms of compensation (e.g., comp/reassigned time, service credit).

Changes to evaluation/renewal/hiring processes

- Suspend student evaluation of teaching for this semester.
- Suspend teaching observations for the current semester.
- Suspend annual evaluations, especially for non-tenure-track instructors, for 2019/2020. If your reappointment protocol demands evaluations, consider asking faculty to self-evaluate.
- Extend multi-year or rolling contracts for one year, especially for faculty whose appointments end in Spring 2020. For faculty on shorter contracts, grant renewals unless financial exigency makes doing so impossible.

- Assure, in writing, that renewal decisions will not be negatively affected by current disruptions.
- Resist using the current crisis as an opportunity to exploit contingency further by hiring more contingent faculty into precarious positions.

Protecting academic freedom, intellectual property, and professional autonomy

- Relax departmental supervision of individual instructors for the current semester except in extraordinary situations. Contingent faculty should not undergo supervision that tenure-track faculty do not.
- Defend the academic freedom of all faculty, including contingent faculty. This means supporting faculty who face online harassment for their views, and rejecting attempts to discipline faculty expressing allegedly controversial ideas.
- Protect contingent faculty ownership of course materials they create as they revise/remake courses to teach online. Contingent faculty frequently develop courses/curricula that programs take over without compensating them. As faculty redevelop courses en masse, this risk is heightened.
- Compensate non-renewed contingent faculty for curriculum they have developed that remains in use after their non-renewal.

Mutual care and support for precarious faculty

- Establish sick-day banks, or similar support mechanisms, for faculty who cannot meet their teaching responsibilities due to personal or family illness.
- Establish systems of support for contingent faculty that can help provide food, housing, and money for other costs.

- Give contingent faculty who want more credits priority when assigning teaching that would be overload for tenure-track/tenured faculty.
- Include contingent faculty when assigning other compensated work (e.g., assessment), and strongly consider giving them priority.
- Prioritize the redirection of funds saved from cancelled/postponed events and travel disbursements in spring 2020 towards the needs of contingent faculty.
- Agree not to contest unemployment insurance claims by contingent faculty for Summer and Fall 2020 terms.