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Changes May be Coming to University Hiring Policies

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 Eva Revear

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This is the third installment in a series of articles outlining the situation of non tenure track faculty at the University of Washington, Tacoma. This article discusses what is being done to change their situation, and why it has proven to be a challenging process.

Currently, at the University of Washington Tacoma, the majority of lecturers are hired noncompetitively. This means that they cannot receive contracts longer than a year and are not eligible for promotion. However, as the faculty begins to speak out on these issues, changes are on the horizon.

“Discussion of these issues is fairly recent on this campus. I wouldn’t say a sustained or systematic discussion has taken place until this year,” said Elizabeth Sundermann, Chair of the Lecturer Affairs Committee and full-time lecturer on campus.

How lecturers function as part of the university system is beginning to have an effect on quality education, and conversations have begun to pick up across the university community about what can be done to change the policies that make the situation of lecturers difficult, with the goal of minimizing the number of lecturers on a noncompetitive track.

According to Katie Baird, the Chair of UWT’s Faculty Assembly, there are currently two changes being pushed forward for implementation by the university’s administration.

The first is more simple, and being widely accepted: hire the majority of faculty through an open search process that will put them on the career path of a competitive hire.

“That should be relatively easy. Everyone is on board with that,” said Baird.

What is predicted to be more difficult is changing the status of those who have already been hired. According to Baird, what seemed to be a simple matter of changing a lecturer’s job classification from noncompetitive to competitive, turned out to be a complicated, and slow process.

The university is a federal contractor; they receive federal funding, and are therefore required to abide by Affirmative Action and Equal Employment laws outlined in Federal regulations. These laws state that not only are employers not to discriminate against any potential employee based on race, color, religion, or nation of origin, but they are also required to develop hiring practices that draw on a large pool of potential employees.

“All of our hiring is supposed to be through a search. So, we’re not supposed to hire a friend,” said James W. Harrington, Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs.

According to Harrington, the government gives leeway to universities in order to allow the temporary hiring that is necessary for institutions to function. Up to one year contracts can be offered, and renewed yearly. Problems arise when noncompetitive hires have received contract renewals year after year, essentially making them a permanent part of the faculty, without any of the benefits.

Others have a different interpretation of the federal laws that the university is drawing upon to prevent noncompetitive hires from being placed on a competitive track.

“I believe the university believes what they are saying, but it’s a matter of interpretation,” said Dan

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Jacoby, a professor at the University of Washington Bothell who believes that the university’s interpretation is potentially causing the opposite of what the law is meant to do, and is potentially risking legal issues. In fact, the most likely candidates to end up stuck in dead end part time lecturer positions are women and minorities.

“The Imperative for Change: Fostering the Understanding of the Necessity of Changing Non-Tenure Track Faculty Policies and Practices,” written by Adrianna Kezar, Daniel Maxey, and Lara Badke outlines several other legal ramifications of keeping with such hiring practices.

Misclassification of workers, violation of academic freedom, and a lack of standardized policies regarding non-tenure track faculty, could all result in class action lawsuits against an academic institution.

However, these dangers do not outweigh the struggle that comes with changing longstanding policies in university hiring.

“When dealing with the university, you are dealing with a very large bureaucracy,” said Baird, “Doing something the bureaucracy is not designed to do is difficult. The real problem is not federal law. It’s just the standard bureaucratic resistance to doing things differently.”

Federal laws are a great way to end a conversation that will potentially change the way things have been operating, Baird explained. The proposals being discussed now, however, are reasonable, and many on campus believe that things will soon change.

“We are feeling positive that we will be able to make change,” said Sundermann.

Harrington recently drew up a draft document called “Making Decisions about Faculty Recruitment by Title.” It states that part time lecturers should be recruited typically through local networks when: there is an unexpected increase in enrollment, a long term faculty member is on some sort of leave, or a program needs an expert in a field to teach a few courses every year.

A full-time lecturer should be recruited for similar reasons, except the person will teach seven or more courses a year.

A search for a full-time lecturer is necessary when a program is seeing long term sustained growth, and new long term courses are being added.

According to Baird, however, the practice of hiring noncompetitively stems in large part from the current financial uncertainty being faced by the state university system, and this will be difficult to get past.

“Uncertainty leads to practices you can revoke,” said Baird.

Giving someone tenure is virtually akin to giving them lifelong employment, wherein fairly high wages are expected. Making this commitment in an insecure financial climate is risky.

“Institutionally we don’t do long term planning, and that’s tied to our finances,” said Baird.

While there have been instances of lecturer unionization on other campuses across the country, this is not the path that UWT’s lecturers want to take.

“We’d prefer not to unionize because then it becomes aggressive. It’d be better for students if we could work this out in an amicable and agreeable way,” said Sundermann.

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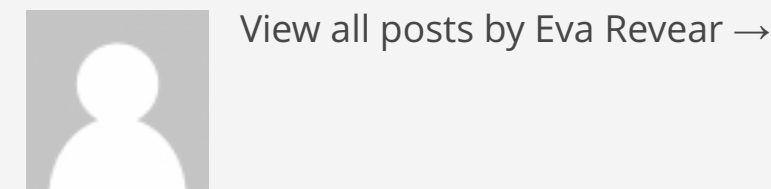
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