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Non-tenured Faculty Affects Student Learning ➡️

Is the University of Washington Tacoma Failing to Support Non Tenure Track Faculty?

📅 April 8, 2013 👤 Eva Reveal 📁 News, Spotlight 💬 No comments



This is the first installment in a series of articles outlining the situation of non tenure track faculty at The University of Washington, Tacoma. This article describes the experience of lecturers, and the challenges they face by being noncompetitively hired.

The University of Washington Tacoma boasts a faculty to student ratio of 18 to 1, and attracts students through a promise of individual attention from, and personal relationships with professors. However, as the university hires more of its faculty on a temporary, part-time basis, questions are beginning to arise of whether the university provides this group with enough support, and whether, under the circumstances, they are able to well support their students.

“It’s really problematic to be expected to be prepared for a year’s worth of courses, a year’s worth of service, a year’s worth of student support, and not have that guarantee, and frankly the respect that you’ve served here for five years, or 10 years, or however long it is, and that you could lose your job either because of budget constraints, or because administration deemed that your student evaluations were not high enough,” said Elizabeth Sundermann, a full-time lecturer and Chair of the Lecturer Affairs Committee.

According to their page on the university’s website, this committee was organized to take on the issues of UWT’s 41 full-time lecturers, and over 100 part time lecturers who teach 65 percent of lower division courses and 45 percent of upper division courses.

Lecturers fall into two categories: competitive hires and non-competitive hires. Those hired competitively are sought out in a nationwide search, interviewed, reviewed for the position, and hired from a pool of applicants. Lecturers hired using this type of search can be offered contracts of up to five years, due to a recent change in the UW Faculty Code.

Non-competitive hires are hired for positions that are not widely advertised, and often seek out positions themselves by contacting the university or sending in a resume. These non-competitive hires make up the majority of the university’s lecturers. According to the UW Faculty Code, they are not allowed promotions, rarely get salary raises, and are not offered contracts over one year. They are, in every sense, temporary.

According to the book “The Lost Soul of Higher Education” Ellen Schrecker explains that the

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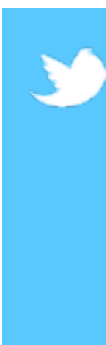
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phenomenon of part-time hiring rose out of an increasing number of PhDs looking to fill a decreasing number of tenure track professorships during economic downturns. The number of part-timers filling faculty positions in higher education across the country has risen from 33 percent in the 1970s, to almost 70 percent now, according to the American Association of University Professors.

According to Sundermann the temporary nature of this employment greatly affects an instructor’s ability to teach, despite his or her skill or qualification.

“It’s becoming an issue in terms of the support and service we are giving to students,” she said.

Last year Linda Dawson, a senior lecturer, and Katie Baird, an IAS professor and Chair of the Faculty Assembly, formed the Lecturer Experience at UWT Taskforce, and conducted a survey on how lecturers felt about their positions and issues of support.

The responses included 34 full time lecturers, 64 percent of whom were from Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences. The survey covered issues of ability for promotion, better salary, multi-year contracts, and needs for more institutional support and inclusion.

30 percent of lecturers surveyed felt that there is no lack in resources however, 70 percent had suggestions for additional resources that would further success in the classroom.

The first issue was scheduling courses well in advance. The Faculty Code requires that full-time lecturers be notified of contract renewal within six months of their previous contract’s expiration; however, the Lecturer Experience at UWT survey found that 45 percent of lecturers were given less than two months to prepare for their courses.

Sundermann described one instance where a lecturer was not notified of their contract renewal until the night before fall quarter started.

While not included in the survey, evaluations for rehire are also an issue amongst non-competitively hired faculty, whose job security is far from stable. In evaluation for rehire, student and peer evaluations play a key role in the decision making.

Oftentimes part-time lecturers do not receive a peer evaluation, and their rehire is based solely on student opinions. According to Sundermann, low level courses, taught primarily by lecturers, produce low teacher evaluations, and this can have an effect on a lecturers teaching rigorously, as students often blame teachers for low scores.

The survey also found that lecturers need more time for research, and, according to Sundermann, not only time, the incentive. As stated in UW hiring classifications, “Lecturer” is an instructional title, not one that is expected to produce research. This means that, while they are not prohibited from producing scholarship, no published works will count towards their rehire. The fact that their research does not count, combined with a heavy workload which leaves little time for extras, means that lecturers oftentimes neglect the research so much a part of academia. This has a negative effect on research institutions such as UW, but also on the lecturers themselves.

“Once you have a lecturer position, and your research doesn’t count, you are somewhat discouraged from doing research. If you do lose your job, or decide to look for another, you won’t have the research components that would make you competitive,” said Sundermann.

James Harrington acknowledges the importance of scholarly work at a research university such as UW. However, he emphasizes instruction as equally important, and does not see a solely instructional role as less valuable.

“A key thing we do is instruction,” said Harrington.

Still, though, one of the most difficult aspects of being hired non-competitively is the lack of job security. Not knowing if they will be teaching the next quarter, or the next year makes it hard for instructors to form long term relationships with students, and put down roots.

“The hardest thing for me is to tell a student I work very closely with, that I don’t plan on being gone next year, I don’t think I’m going to be gone next year, but you need to know I might not be here to see this project through with you,” said Sundermann. “I’ve had students contact me about courses I’m teaching next year, and on some level I can’t guarantee them that I’m teaching those courses.”

In fact, should a detrimental budget cut to higher education occur, in order to maintain operations, the university could fire many of its lecturers with no warning.

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“If something happens, they are the first to go,” said Baird.

While discussion of these issues is fairly recent on our campus, the conversation on lecturers and academic hiring practices has been going on for years. Dan Jacoby, Professor at UW Bothell, has been studying these issues for over a decade, even testifying before the Workers Rights Board in 2002.

“Part-time and other contingent academic faculty complain that job insecurity stifles their academic freedom because asserting themselves on faculty issues, demanding too much of students, or otherwise inadvertently offending others may result in retaliation. Few, often no, procedural protections are available to assure job renewal,” Jacoby said in his testimony.

Since then, the budget has shrunk, while the number of non-competitive hires has grown, and their situation has remained fairly consistent. For part time faculty hired non-competitively the situation is the most difficult.

“Our practices as an institution are often at their worst when it comes to part time faculty,”

said Baird, “We have a tendency to exploit them.”

While not all part-time lecturers want to be full-time, as they already have full time jobs in their fields and simply want to teach on the side, many want a career at the university. This group has the least job security, with their contracts being renewed, or not renewed, quarter to quarter. They may teach three classes on quarter and one the next, and are minimally involved with the campus community.

Not only are part-time lecturers excluded from governance, but invitations to meetings and retreats are often either not extended, or not strong and welcoming. Some departments prohibit part-time lecturers from attending meetings wherein teaching techniques and curriculum are often discussed.

According to one part-time lecturer, who preferred to remain anonymous due to their position at UWT, the university lacks even a general orientation for part-time lecturers. In some departments they are given a sheet of paper with general guidelines, but that is often the extent of the information they receive. There is a staff mentoring program, wherein lecturers are offered tenure track faculty mentorship. However, this is not always effective.


Even when departments are inclusive, part-time lecturers often do not have the time to be involved, especially those who work at multiple campuses.

The term “freeway flyers” has been coined to describe lecturers who have pieced together a career by working at different universities. Sundermann described some who teach classes at Tacoma, Seattle, and Bothell.

“You can imagine how that would affect their teaching,” she said.

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