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

UWT, City of Tacoma Unite for Future Downtown Developments 

Non-tenured Faculty Affects Student Learning

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 Eva Revear

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This is the second installment in a series of articles outlining the situation of non-tenure track faculty at The University of Washington, Tacoma. This article demonstrates the impact a large number of non-tenure track faculty could have on student learning outcomes.

Being hired noncompetitively has a harsh effect on a lecturer’s career. However, having a large number of non-tenured track faculty may also have an effect on student learning outcome.

“A teacher’s working conditions are a student’s learning conditions,” said Dan Jacoby, a professor at the University of Washington Bothell, who has researched extensively the effect of part time faculty on student learning outcomes.

In his 2006 study “Effects of Part-time Faculty Employment on Community College Graduation Rates” published in the Journal of Higher Education, Jacoby found that higher numbers of non-tenure track faculty decreases the likelihood that students will complete their programs.

While Jacoby’s study focuses on community college, it discusses the effect uninvolved faculty have on student integration into their learning environment, which also applies to a commuter campus such as UWT.

Although Jacoby’s study was specific to Washington colleges, the phenomenon he found is national. In her book “The Lost Soul of Higher Education” Ellen Schrecker describes lecturers who admitted to lowering the difficulty of coursework to keep from annoying students, or avoiding the discussion of controversial topics for the same reason.

Even those who maintain high standards and don’t allow their positions to prevent them from discussing difficult issues may not have the time to develop challenging courses.

In the first study of this nature ever conducted, Ronald G. Ehrenberg and Liang Zhang of Cornell Higher Education Research Institute asked the question “Do tenured and tenure track faculty Matter?” The goal of their study, conducted in 2004, was to create an argument for more funding, by demonstrating that the price of tenure track faculty was worth it.

They found that the excessive use of non-tenure track faculty, both part time and full time, has a negative effect on undergrad graduation rates, and that this phenomenon is worse at public institutions than at private.


According to their findings, a 10 percentage point increase of non-tenured full time faculty resulted in a 4.4 percentage reduction in the graduation rates at the institution.

They also found that, while one argument for an increase in non-tenure track faculty is that it will increase the amount of research tenure track faculty are able to do, an increase in research does not occur when more non tenure track faculty are hired to take on the greater teaching loads.

The reasons for these findings vary, however, according to Libi Sundermann, a full time lecturer at the University of Washington Tacoma, it is not a lack of qualification.

“Having many of our courses taught by part time lecturers is a problem,” said JW Harrington, Vice

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Chancellor for Academic Affairs. “Students don’t get to know them as well.”

As Jacoby points out in his study, this lack of continuity of instructors plays a large role in how students are integrated into the university community, especially at a commuter campus such as UWT, or, as the study focuses on, community colleges.

The university saves thousands per instructor, when they hire noncompetitively; however, they also lower retention rates, a key indicator of success in public higher education.

Yet, while student populations are increasingly in need of extra help, instructors are becoming less and less equipped to give it. Ernst Benjamin, of the American Association of University Professors, published a study in 2002 about how part time faculty lack the time to be involved with their students.


“Because of the increase in student populations, and the idea that everyone should go to college, student populations are less prepared for college, and teaching loads have gotten harder,” said Sundermann.

Benjamin’s study found that full-time faculty generally report two to four times as many out-of-class student-related hours per class hour as part-time faculty. In public two-year colleges, where full-time faculty spend eight-tenths of an hour outside class for every hour in class, part-time faculty spend only two-tenths outside to each hour inside and that part time faculty spend half the out of class time with students than full time.

Of course, these studies do not account for many lecturers who remain rigorous, and well involved with their students’ despite the circumstances.

“I teach and grade the way I should teach and grade without worrying about evaluations,” said Sundermann.

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