



Online Education and Contingent Faculty: An Exploratory Analysis of Issues and Challenges for Higher Education Administrators

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Introduction

With the growth of the popularity and accessibility of online courses, higher education administrators are under tremendous pressure to keep pace with rapidly evolving conditions related to online learning. This exploratory analysis addresses the growth of online education and the use of contingent faculty in relationship to tenured and tenure-track faculty. It then describes inhibitors to online teaching for tenured and tenure-track faculty and offers potential administrative strategies to increase their participation.

Background

Between fall 2002 and fall 2010, student enrollment in online courses nearly quadrupled from approximately 1.6 million to 6.1 million in degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the U.S.¹ (See Table 1.) Over the same time period, the percentage of college and university students who took at least one online course more than tripled, from 9.6% to 31.3%. By 2011, nearly three-quarters (74.5%) of all four-year institutions reported an increase in the demand for online courses and programs.² Online education is growing faster than higher education as a whole. For example, Allen and Seaman's 2011 survey reported a 10% growth rate for online enrollments compared to less than one percent growth for the higher education student population between 2009 and 2010.³ Student demand for online courses and programs is substantial. Allen and Seaman also found 66% of higher education institutions reported increased demand for new online courses and programs while 73% saw an increased demand for existing online courses and programs.⁴

To meet this demand, higher education administrators may be tempted to turn to contingent faculty, particularly when insufficient numbers of tenured or tenure-track faculty express interest in teaching online courses.⁵ However, even before the popularity of online education, concern has existed about higher educational institutions' increasing reliance

Table | **Total and Online Enrollment in Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions, 2002-2010**

Year (Fall)	Total Enrollment	Annual Growth Rate of Total Enrollment (%)	Students Taking at Least One Online Course	Annual Growth Rate of Online Enrollment (%)	Online Enrollment as a Percent of Total Enrollment (%)
2002	16,611,710	n.a.	1,602,970	n.a.	9.6
2003	16,911,481	1.8	1,971,397	23.0	11.7
2004	17,272,043	2.1	2,329,783	18.2	13.5
2005	17,487,481	1.2	3,180,050	36.5	18.2
2006	17,758,872	1.6	3,488,381	9.7	19.6
2007	17,975,830	1.2	3,938,111	12.9	21.9
2008	18,199,920	1.2	4,606,353	16.9	25.3
2009	19,524,750	2.2	5,579,002	21.1	28.6
2010	19,641,140	0.6	6,142,280	10.1	31.3

Source: I. Elaine Allen and Jeff Seaman, "Going the Distance: Online Education in the United States, 2011" (Babson Park, MA: Babson Survey Research Group, November 2011), 30, <http://www.onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/goingthedistance.pdf>.

on contingent faculty. In 2005, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) identified the increasing number of contingent faculty members as "...the single most significant development in higher education in the last two decades."⁶ In 2009, more than 1.3 million (75.5%) of 1.8 million of faculty members and instructors were classified as non-tenure track.⁷ Undoubtedly, the use of contingent faculty may be particularly attractive to university administrators in recent lean fiscal years because they offer greater flexibility in staffing and lower personnel costs.⁸

Faculty inhibitors related to online teaching cannot be overlooked. A fundamental barrier is faculty workload. In research-oriented colleges and universities, faculty may fear that time spent on online course development and maintenance detracts from time available for research.⁹ The next section explores this tension more fully.

The Academic Ratchet

The propensity of tenured and tenure-track faculty to give precedence to research and research-related activities in their academic discipline can be explained through the concept of the "academic ratchet."¹⁰ Particularly, but not exclusively, in research-oriented colleges and universities, the autonomy afforded faculty to pursue their scholarly interests allows their work to be loosely coupled with the institution and its mission, even when such institutions profess teaching to be central to their mission.¹¹ Professional incentives connected to achievements within their respective academic disciplines may serve to draw faculty attention away from institutional goals related to teaching productivity.¹² Faculty autonomy in this sense may even serve to circumvent institutional teaching goals.

Even before the advent of online education, contingent faculty served as a cog in the academic ratchet. For example, increased use of contingent faculty is associated with a higher level of total external research expenditures, a portion of

which is likely used to provide faculty who have secured research grants reduced teaching loads.¹³ In a second example, the institution may prefer a tenured or tenure-track faculty member teach a general undergraduate course, which as a required course often has a substantial enrollment and hence generates significant tuition revenues, but the faculty member may prefer to teach an upper level or graduate seminar in his or her area of research expertise, usually with a much smaller enrollment. Although the workings of the academic ratchet may appear to conflict with institutional goals related to the primacy of teaching and encourage the increased use of contingent faculty, it is important to note that faculty are usually responding to the institution's existing reward structures, i.e., tenure, promotion, and salary increases.

Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Online education has proven itself to be an integral medium for postsecondary instruction, and, as a result, higher education administrators will continue to incorporate it into their immediate and long-term growth strategies.¹⁴ In addition to its popularity with students, online education represents a cost-cutting tool for higher education administrators responding to state budget cuts.¹⁵ In particular, the lower personnel costs and greater scheduling flexibility associated with contingent faculty are attractive to administrators. At the same time, tenured and tenure-track faculty in research-oriented universities may be reluctant to teach online courses because they view the investment of time required for online course development maintenance competing with time for pursuing research. However, tenured and tenure-track faculty might be more willing to teach online courses if they were provided with greater administrative support and compensation. Not surprisingly, Rockwell and colleagues found that the most commonly referenced faculty support issue related to online instruction in their case study was administrative recognition in the form of tenure or promotion.¹⁶ A second

issue was monetary in nature. According to Maguire's 2005 review of the research literature, stipends or increased salaries might motivate faculty to teach online courses at four-year colleges and universities.¹⁷

With the rapid growth of online enrollments in higher education have come concerns about student retention rates. Online learners have higher attrition rates than traditional, face-to-face students.¹⁸ According to Yukseltruk and Inan, multiple factors can influence online student retention in the higher education environment.¹⁹ For example, online learners may misinterpret or misunderstand expectations regarding the time and effort involved in online coursework; in addition, students may have limited technological or academic experience.²⁰ However, we do not know if some of the same factors that affect student retention in face-to-face courses also play a role in online education, such as exposure to part-time or contingent faculty,²¹ or lack of academic and social interaction.²² Further research is needed in these areas.

The academic ratchet reveals the institutional inconsistencies between stated university goals and the structure of the faculty reward system. In order to offer students a full range of coursework online, participation of tenured and tenure-track faculty is critical. Given the current incentives associated with faculty's academic disciplines and research pursuits, higher education administrators might want to consider online learning as pedagogical and professional development activities that count toward tenure, promotion, and salary increases. In addition, instructional design and development support, including release time, might incentivize faculty who feel they do not have the time to develop and maintain online courses without taking time away from scholarship.²³ 

Endnotes

¹ I. Elaine Allen and Jeff Seaman, "Going the Distance: Online Education in the United States, 2011" (Babson Park, MA: Babson Survey Research Group, November 2011), 30, <http://www.onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/goingthedistance.pdf>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 4.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Contingent faculty members are defined here as non-tenure track and adjunct instructors. See, Tamara Holub, "Contract Faculty in Higher Education," *ERIC Digest* (2003), <http://www.ericdigests.org/2005-1/contract.htm>.

⁶ American Association of University Professors, "Inequities Persist for Women and Non-Tenured Faculty. The Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession 2004-2005" (Washington, DC: American Association of University Professors (AAUP), March/April 2005), <http://www.aaup.org/NR/rdonlyres/0A98969B-FA6C-40F5-8880-5E5DC3B7C36D/0/05z.pdf>.

⁷ Laura G. Knapp, Janice E. Kelly-Reid, and Scott A. Ginder, *Employees in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2009, and Salaries of Full-Time Instructional Staff, 2009-10* (Washington, DC:

U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2010), <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2011/2011150.pdf>.

⁸ According to Holub, in "Contract Faculty in Higher Education," the benefits associated with using contingent faculty include more flexible staffing models, higher integration of practitioner expertise, less cost to educate students (36% less), and flexibility to address insecure funding allocations.

⁹ S. Kay Rockwell, Jolene Schauer, Susan M. Fritz, and David B. Marx, "Incentives and Obstacles Influencing Higher Education Faculty and Administrators to Teach via Distance," *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration* 3, no. 4 (Spring 1999), <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/rockwell24.html>.

¹⁰ Robert Zemsky, Gregory Wegner, and William Massy, *Remaking the American University: Market-Smart and Mission-Centered* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

¹¹ Karl Weick, "Educational Organizations as Loosely Coupled Systems," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 21 1 (March 1976): 1-19.

¹² W. Richard Scott and Gerald F. Davis, *Organizations and Organizing: Rational, Natural and Open Systems Perspectives* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007), 61.

¹³ Liang Zhang and Ronald G. Ehrenberg, "Faculty Employment and R&D Expenditures at Research Universities," *Economics of Education Review* 29 3 (June 2010): 329-337.

¹⁴ Allen and Seaman, "Going the Distance." Specifically, they found that 65.5% of chief academic officers agreed that online education was critical to the long-term growth strategies of colleges and universities.

¹⁵ David Neumark and Kenneth Troske, "Addressing the Employment Situation in the Aftermath of the Great Recession," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 31 1 (Winter 2012): 160-168.

¹⁶ Rockwell et al., "Incentives and Obstacles."

¹⁷ Loréal L. Maguire, "Literature Review—Faculty Participation in Online Distance Education: Barriers and Motivators," *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2005), <http://www.westga.edu/%7Edistance/ojdl/spring81/maguire81.htm>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Retention here refers to the number of online students who progress through the online program, assuming the successful completion of the course to allow for progression to the next course in the corresponding sequence. See, Margaret Martinez, "High Attrition Rates in E-learning: Challenges, Predictors, and Solutions," *The eLearning Developers' Journal*, July 14, 2003, <http://www.elearningguild.com/pdf/2/071403MGT-L.pdf>.

²⁰ Erman Yukseltruk and Fethi Ahmet Inan, "Examining the Factors Affecting Student Dropout in an Online Learning Environment," *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education* 7 3 (July 2006), <http://tojde.anadolu.edu.tr/tojde23/articles/article6.htm>.

²¹ Audrey J. Jaeger, and Derik Hinz, "The Effects of Part-Time Faculty on First Semester Freshmen Retention: A Predictive Model Using Logistic Regression," *Journal of College Student Retention* 10 3(2008-2009): 265-286. Specifically, they found that students were 37% less likely to be retained into the second year due to an increase in exposure to part-time or contingent faculty. In contrast, full-time, tenured, or tenure-track faculty had a positive effect on student retention.

²² Vincent Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 1.

²³ Kim E. Dooley and Theresa Pesl Murphrey, "How the Perspectives of Administrators, Faculty and Support Units Impact the Rate of Distance Education Adoption," *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration* 3 4(Winter 2000), <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdl/winter34/dooley34.html>; and Kristen Betts, "An Institutional Overview: Factors Influencing Faculty Participation in Distance Education in Post-secondary Education in the United States: An Institutional Study," *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration* 1, no. 3 (Fall 1998), <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/betts13.html>.