

Models for Online Faculty Staffing and Support

Introduction

This document provides suggestions for institutions looking for ways to meet the academic staffing needs of an online degree program. Many programs start out thinking they can run an online degree program with only the faculty currently on staff. That assumption may work for an online program that is (a) replacing an on-ground program and (b) not expected to grow beyond the size of the on-ground program. For any other expectations (for example, programs created in addition to on-ground programs or programs expected to scale beyond current on-ground enrollment), the hiring of additional faculty should be part of the online program's business plan. The authors of this report have spent the last decade building online degree programs and figuring out ways to staff those programs appropriately. Here we share the strategies that have helped effectively staff some of the largest, most successful online degree programs in the country.

Faculty hiring has traditionally been a relatively slow process that typically involves vetting candidates through numerous selection committees and following the traditional academic calendar. We encourage programs to think more creatively and broadly about both the structure of faculty positions and the hiring process when contemplating new hires for an online program. The first priority is to hire high-quality colleagues who will sustain the institution's brand and be effective facilitators of learning. We suggest that by thinking differently about the structure of the faculty member's role and about the hiring process, institutions will be able to find exceptional colleagues from around the world who can begin work quickly and contribute effectively to online programs.

In this discussion, we tackle key issues raised by introducing greater numbers of contract-based full- and part-time faculty into an instructional community:

- a) Suggestions for hiring contract-based faculty.
- b) How to onboard and support part-time faculty.
- c) How to integrate them into your department's or institution's culture.

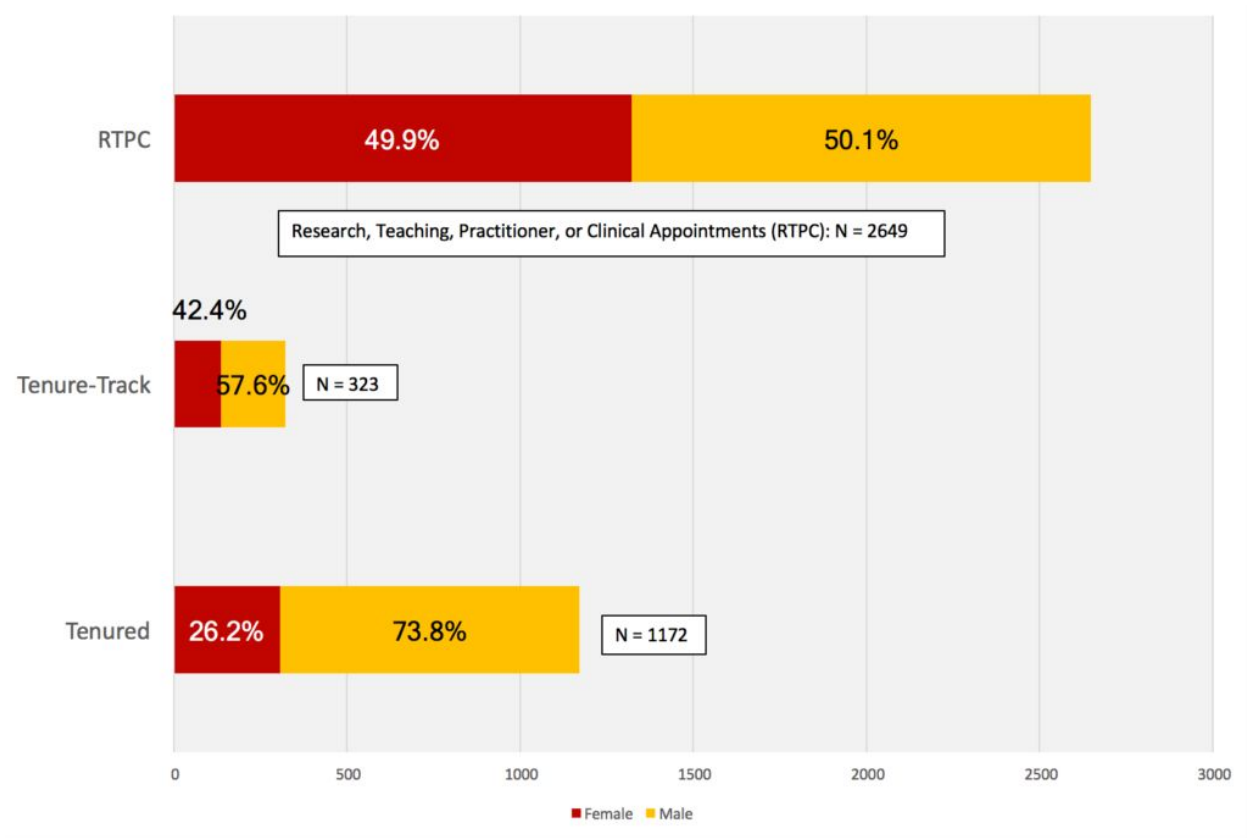
Our bias is that the more an institution can find ways to integrate these vital instructional team members into the organization, the better the experience will be for all faculty and, more importantly, for the students.



The Use of Non-Tenure Track Faculty

Full-time Faculty

Full-time, contract-based faculty are now the norm for faculty employment in higher education (AAUP Data: <https://www.aaup.org/report/status-non-tenure-track-faculty>). Tenure-line faculty continue to drive scholarship and original research at most institutions. However, for institutions to continue to grow, full- and part-time, contract-based faculty are being employed with increasing frequency. In fact, 70% of all faculty appointments, full or part time, are other than full-time tenure track (Ibid). For example, at the University of Southern California, contract-based faculty make up 64% of all faculty (Faculty Demographics from USC <http://oir.usc.edu/faculty-and-student-diversity/>):



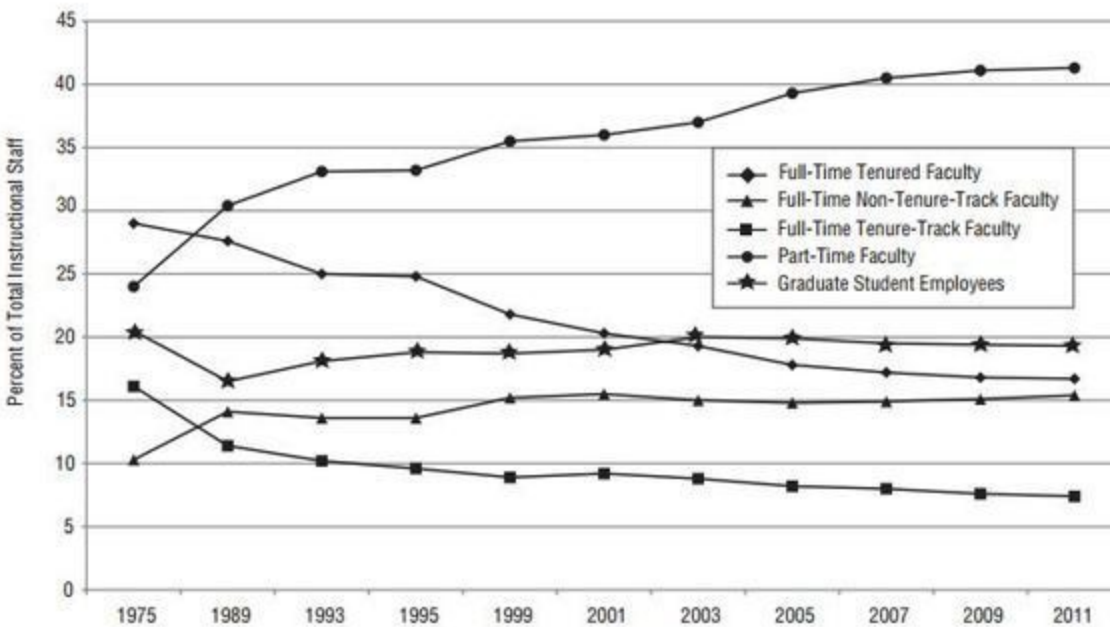
Nationally, approximately 50% of all faculty are non-tenure track. This includes full-time and part-time, contract-based faculty.

Part-Time or Adjunct Faculty



Today, more than 50% of teaching appointments in higher education are part time (AAUP, <https://www.aaup.org/issues/contingency/background-facts>). The graph below, from an article in The Atlantic (<https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/04/the-ever-shrinking-role-of-tenured-college-professors-in-1-chart/274849/>), shows the steady decline in the number of full-time, tenure-track positions and the growth in full- and part-time, contract-based faculty nationally, with the greatest growth occurring in the part-time, contract-based category.

Trends in Instructional Staff Employment Status, 1975–2011
All Institutions, National Totals



Notes: Figures for 2011 are estimated. Figures from 2005 have been corrected from those published in 2012. Figures are for degree-granting institutions only, but the precise category of institutions included has changed over time. Graduate student employee figure for 1975 is from 1976. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Source: US Department of Education, IPEDS Fall Staff Survey.

Hiring part-time, non-tenure-track instructors is a necessity for most university programs, given increasing enrollments and pressures to keep costs reasonable.

Difference between Part Time and Adjunct

Not all part-time positions are created equal. For the purpose of this discussion, we define an adjunct as a person with experience (even a concurrent, full-time position) in the field being taught (such as education or business) who teaches on occasion (perhaps once or twice a year) in a degree program. In contrast, a part-time faculty member is someone who may not have other full-time employment, may be teaching at more than one institution, and is teaching multiple courses over the year at any single institution.



The reason this distinction is important has to do with the goal of ensuring a quality work life regardless of one's appointment. We encourage institutions to structure all faculty positions equitably, with attention to creating a high-quality work environment. The research is clear: employees, including faculty, who feel valued will be more productive and will be less likely to leave. Faculty who are engaged and satisfied with their working conditions will create better learning experiences for students. Elements of a quality work environment for faculty include (a) feeling financially secure, including feeling fairly compensated and having access to benefits, and (b) feeling valued, which includes receiving timely and effective feedback, being informed about, if not included in, decisions that impact one's work, and feeling respected.

With respect to these elements, one difference to consider between the two types of instructors is whether or not the person has access to benefits from the university or from another employer. The adjunct, if fully employed elsewhere, may have benefits from that employer; the part-time faculty member, unless being provided benefits by their primary institution, probably does not have benefits.

We know that part-time faculty are often challenged to find enough teaching engagements to make a living wage. If they are teaching for multiple institutions, the research is clear that it is difficult for them to either create or feel a part of a learning community—although many of them try. If you intend to hire the same person for multiple courses across a year, we encourage you to (a) look for a reasonable wage, (b) use a multi-term contract so that the faculty member can commit to you for the year (and both of you can plan better), and (c) consider offering a part-time contract with sufficient work that the role becomes eligible for benefits. At USC, a goal in putting contracts together for part-time faculty was to package as many as possible with the equivalent of a 50% teaching load so as to make those positions eligible for benefits. These strategies may increase your instructional costs, but they also increase the opportunity for the faculty member to become a more integrated member of your learning community and reduce the likelihood of turnover. As the research indicates, replacing a great part-time faculty member is far more costly than retaining them year-to-year.

In terms of their teaching responsibilities, your institution may be able to help distinguish teaching-related service expectations and responsibilities between those teaching one to two courses per year (adjuncts) and those on part-time contracts with continuous employment across a year, or multiple years. Part-time faculty may be interested in: helping to redesign courses in collaboration with a full-time faculty member where desired, participating on program committees, or helping lead multi-section courses. The degree to which these faculty will be successful in these roles will be contingent upon the degree to which they are onboarded, supported, and respected by the full-time faculty. We have seen and facilitated the successful integration of contract-based faculty, full and part time, into the instructional teams of online programs. The programs we worked with would not have succeeded without their participation.

We turn our attention now to the strategies that can help ensure a successful partnership with contract-based faculty.



Hiring Contract-Based Faculty

Full time vs Part time—when to hire one vs the other

Hiring a full-time faculty member, regardless of faculty profile, is a large investment with long-term implications for both the faculty member and the institution. Programs are naturally cautious about making these commitments and often want evidence of a consistent, dependable need (for example, through enrollment trends) before launching such a process. The problem with waiting for this evidence is that by the time the evidence is gathered, the need is straining the rest of the faculty and could be adversely impacting the quality of the program.

One solution is to hire faculty on a part-time basis as the program develops, to allow time for enrollment trends to stabilize. It then may be possible to hire from within the pool of part-time faculty for a full-time position, if the timing and needs align. Alternatively, a full-time faculty member could be hired on a limited-term contract (one year, for example) as a visiting professor, while enrollments stabilize.

Alternative Profiles and Hiring Processes

Two areas to address when considering the use of full-time faculty are the models of faculty—or the faculty profiles—to use and the strategies for finding and hiring these colleagues.

Alternative profiles. Some contract-based faculty are hired to lead or support research efforts; however, for the purpose of this discussion, we focus on those hired to supplement instruction. If we consider the three primary functions of faculty—teaching, research, and service—the work profile of tenure-line faculty is typically thought of as being divided this way: 40% research, 40% teaching, and 20% service. To distinguish contract-based from tenure-line faculty, institutions typically structure the work profile for a contract-based faculty member as 80% teaching and 20% service, with no expectation for research.

Contract-based faculty typically have similar educational backgrounds as tenure-track faculty and may have greater field-based experience. Provided the institution compensates contract-based faculty fairly and provides equitable support and respect for this role (discussed below), it is possible to find many individuals to contribute to one's degree program.

Hiring process. Unless your institution has policies to the contrary, your program does not have to follow the typical tenure hiring process (use of a job talk, etc.). However, to increase credibility, some similarity to the process, particularly the involvement of tenure-line faculty, is recommended. We recommend consulting the online program's business plan, then posting



positions and vetting candidates in anticipation of need so that, as the program scales, you have access to candidates who have already been approved and can hire them as needed.

Posting the position. While some programs may be able to secure sufficient, qualified applications through word of mouth, most programs will eventually need to solicit applications. There are multiple strategies for getting the word out, including accessing the job boards of related professional associations, accessing the relevant channels of online networks (linkedin, for example), and asking faculty to distribute the position descriptions through their networks. As noted in the discussion of the hiring process, we recommend using a continuous posting process so that qualified applicants can apply anytime, even when you are not sure of or ready for a vacancy. It is much easier to stay connected with candidates you have already vetted, as you wait for an opportunity to arise, than it is to rush the process and risk not having the right person onboard prior to the start of class.

Vetting candidates. The vetting process can be more efficient and faster than the tenure-track experience, which can take an academic year. Programs should consult their academic governance processes to ensure compliance, but if that guidance is silent on this category of hiring, consider bringing candidates to campus for a half-day visit that includes interviews with key department faculty and students and a job talk. Alternatively, given that the role requires teaching online, you could conduct interviews and the job talk using the LMS the program uses (or will use). The programs with which we are involved use a balance between asynchronous and synchronous experiences, so interviews could occur using a tool like Zoom or Adobe Connect.

Support for Contract-Based Faculty

Once you've found the right faculty to meet your additional needs, you and they will have the optimal experience if you support them. Many institutions' governing policies and procedures have not yet addressed the effective integration and support—or the rights—of contract-based faculty. Compared to tenure-track faculty, non-tenure track faculty have had little access to:

- Faculty governance positions
- Evaluation and reappointment
- Professional development and promotion processes

Strategies for providing effective support and development opportunities for these instructional partners are discussed next.

Creating a teaching load/work-life balance

Full-time, contract-based faculty are typically employed year-round (12 months) to align with the academic calendar, including summer terms for teaching, whereas most tenure-track faculty are employed to work over nine-month contracts. Being employed year-round, especially in



academic programs that run year-round, can make taking vacation very difficult. In reality, contract-based faculty may have large teaching loads with heavy service expectations, including advising students, reviewing student applications, revising curriculum, and serving on committees. Striking a work/life balance, regardless of the profile, is central to the success for any faculty member. The institution can engage in multiple strategies and processes that will help full-time, contract faculty find that balance.

Provide clear and reasonable expectations. The research is clear that any employee will perform better if they understand what the goal is and what is expected of them (Locke & Latham, 2013). Providing clear expectations of contract-based faculty can contribute to a reasonable work climate. These expectations should delineate:

- How many courses or credits a faculty member is expected to teach and at what cadence.
- How much service is expected over what time period, and what activities constitute “service.”
- What constitutes “research” and “scholarship” and the extent to which either is permitted, expected, and supported.
- How much vacation the position accrues, and the process for scheduling vacation time.
- The process by which the faculty member’s performance will be formally assessed and the standards by which it will be measured (see below).
- When and how the faculty member will receive informal/formative feedback.
- How the faculty member should handle emergencies or illness that prevent him or her from teaching a class session.
- Who the faculty member’s primary point of contact will be regarding performance reviews, setting course assignments, etc.
- The criteria and cadence for promotion (see below).

We recommend sharing these expectations face-to-face and in writing with new faculty as part of the onboarding process.

A note about service for part-time and adjunct faculty. Once you find a great part-time instructor, it is tempting to off load as many of those time consuming but necessary tasks as you can to them. While service for full-time faculty is assumed as part of their workload, these responsibilities should not be assumed in the workload of part-time faculty. If you wish to have part-time faculty engage in service, you should articulate those expectations and the related remuneration as part of the contracting process. The generally accepted practice is to pay part-time and adjunct faculty for service beyond that which is typically involved in teaching a course. Being clear about what responsibilities come with the teaching contract and what service opportunities (and pay) could be added by mutual agreement will make the worklife clearer for your part-time faculty.

Address research and scholarship



As noted earlier, instructional faculty are usually neither required nor expected to conduct research. However, due to their specialization in their respective fields, research opportunities may arise through collaboration with tenure-track and research faculty. There are a number of issues that get created if the expectations of and options for contract-based faculty with respect to engaging in research and scholarship are not made clear. For example, what if an opportunity arises to create a text book? How will scholarly contributions be considered in the performance review and promotion processes? How will you work with the contract-based faculty member who is also proficient at securing external funding for research or implementing field-based programs? On the one hand, supporting these activities may result in more engaged faculty and better learning experiences for your students. On the other hand, some see a threat of “role creep” (i.e., the encroachment of contract-based profiles on the tenure profile) when contract-based faculty engage in these activities.

Onboard effectively

Cultural integration. Programs that integrate all faculty, regardless of category, into their community will produce a better working environment and probably better learning outcomes for students as a result. Simple strategies for inclusion are:

- Make faculty meetings accessible. If you hold an all-faculty meeting, include ALL faculty. Stream the meeting using video conferencing and build in ways to incorporate questions and contributions from those attending remotely. This change takes a little getting used to to execute effectively but is well worth the practical value the remote participants can contribute and sends a message that aligns with your goal of valuing all faculty.
- Committees: make a space for adjuncts. Curriculum development would be the most obvious type of work, given their solitary focus on teaching courses.
- Solicit feedback regularly. Treat the contract-based faculty as the (potentially) large stakeholder group they are, or will become (like alumni or employers).
- Hold remote opportunities to get together, like “lunch meetings,” to provide remote faculty with the opportunity to connect with each other and with full-time faculty.
- Appoint a senior person charged with “looking out for” part-time faculty—checking in on them, mentoring them with respect to professional development (see below), and ensuring they have what they need, etc.

Full-time, contract-based faculty may also, eventually, become excellent leaders for your program. Many institutions (USC, for example) open all university leadership positions (except participation on tenure review committees) to these faculty. For example, the president of the academic senate at USC was a full-time, contract-based faculty member in 2016. The institutions that engage all their faculty are finding unexpected advantages and opportunities.

A note about cultural integration for part-time and adjunct faculty. Part-time faculty are typically the least attended to. They may become the most utilized and most ignored. Ignoring this group of contributors is a cultural and tactical mistake. They are often willing to contribute, yet not often asked; if they are asked, they are rarely compensated for the additional work. If your



system is to be successful, you will need ways of including all of them—and not just the same few people. We recommend creating an open process to solicit participation, perhaps an annual call to serve that goes to all faculty.

We view unions as one alternative for increasing voice, but in our biased view, contract-based faculty interest in unions is a symptom of neglect on the part of the institution—if faculty felt included and respected, they might not feel the need to unionize. If unions are not a part of your institution’s culture, then work proactively to ensure their valuable advocacy is not needed, by including contract-based faculty from the start.

Provide sufficient resources to do the job

Another barrier to the effective integration of contract-based faculty is failing to provide them with the resources needed to do the job. Regardless of status (full time, adjunct, or part time), we require faculty to perform the same instructional job: preparing for class, communicating with students, providing feedback on student work, and, in many cases, advising and mentoring students; yet, very few campuses provide the necessary resources. Think of this problem as being like sending a child to school without the necessary supplies. In fact, we consider providing resources as the most important form of support. Being involved in your governance processes won’t matter if every faculty member doesn’t have the tools they need.

Office space. Every faculty member needs space to prepare for class and meet students. Part-time and adjunct faculty may not need their own, individual office, but they do need a space. If you aren’t sure about this, try getting work done in your building without using an office. Where would you sit? Depending on the number of part-time faculty you have, a “hotelling” office could be a solution. A hotelling office is a dedicated space for short-term use by anyone who signs up in advance. Create a common sign-up calendar for faculty to check availability and sign up for use.

Computer and tech support. Certainly full-time faculty need their own computer or laptop. You may decide that part-time and adjunct faculty need to provide their own computer, but we encourage you to think about having loaners available for checkout during class time. Some part-time faculty prefer to come to campus, use the hotelling office, and teach online from that space because the wifi or internet access is better than what they have at home. You could also consider term-based loans of equipment; if a part-time faculty member will be teaching several online courses for you in a term, you might loan them a better laptop than what they have access to at home. Similarly, ensure all faculty know how to access tech support, and be sure your tech support is broadly accessible. Part-time faculty may be picking up the online classes at non-traditional times and need to have access to effective tech support should anything go wrong during those times. Online instruction depends on having a decent tool and decent tech support—eliminate that worry for your faculty.



Opportunities for professional development. Professional development resources such as travel funding, professional association membership fees, access to university-offered professional development programs, and funds for purchasing publications are all ways to support the development of your faculty. Most institutions we work with offer a flat dollar amount per faculty member, to be used for any of these purposes. Others provide separate funding for conference presentations because these can raise the visibility of the institution.

Is it in the institution's interest to invest in the development of part-time faculty? We think yes. The risk you incur is that you invest in their development, and they leave prematurely. But the benefits—an attractive job opportunity that can increase the hiring pool, reduce attrition, and improve instruction/learning—outweigh the risk.

Provide effective performance appraisals

Some candor here: faculty performance appraisals and the provision of feedback generally fall short of what the research says is effective practice. The challenge for contract-based faculty (and part-time faculty in particular) is that the appraisal process needs to be more nimble and timely than a typical annual review process. The measures also need to be aligned with the expectations of contract-based faculty. In other words, don't penalize contract-based faculty for not engaging in research when that isn't part of their profile.

A solid performance review process benefits both the institution and the faculty. It allows the institution to retain the best instructional experts possible, and, for faculty, it provides valuable feedback to help them improve their craft. If done well, the process communicates that the institution cares and is invested in their progress. If done badly, it reinforces the low esteem placed on being non-tenure track or part time and may reinforce a belief that only "favorites" are retained.

Elements of an effective feedback and appraisal process include:

- Clear expectations and criteria for evaluation.
- Criteria that align with the role.
- Timely implementation: feedback is provided regularly and as performance warrants; concerns are not stockpiled until an annual meeting.
- Feedback is task specific, concrete, and constructive. Examples are provided and are specific. Work that meets expectations is identified and reinforced. If improvement is needed, feedback constructively addresses exactly how to improve, not just what must change. Faculty are asked to participate in their own process, with reflection being a central component of the process.
- Work that exceeds expectations is recognized and rewarded.
- The department's/institution's values are clearly aligned with the expectations for success (no mixed messages).

Provide opportunities for promotion



Provide promotion and merit increase reviews. Some institutions have recognized that full-time, contract-based faculty must be evaluated and, where appropriate, promoted. But few campuses have instituted the same process for part-time faculty. At a minimum, all faculty should participate in an annual performance review (see the above discussion) and, at regular intervals, be eligible for merit increase reviews. We say “at regular intervals” rather than “annual” because it may not be appropriate to offer an annual merit increase to the person who teaches one course a year.

Consider long term contracts. We suggest that you create and publicize a regular schedule for consideration of promotion. For full-time, contract-based faculty, it could be that they begin on a year-to-year contract and, after a certain time with a successful review, move to a three-year contract and later, a five-year contract. It is possible to award multi-year contracts, even in at-will environments, simply by making clear the understanding that the institution can terminate at any time. What the multi-year contract does is eliminate the need for annual contract renewal. Performance appraisals should still occur at shorter, regular intervals.

Similarly, for part-time faculty, we recommend instituting longer-term contracts, such as one year rather than term-by-term, and, after a standard amount of time, consider extending that to three and then five years. The benefit of longer-term contracts is the ability for both the faculty member and the institution to plan more effectively and for a better integration of the part-time faculty into the life of the institution.

Provide opportunities for mentorship. Due to the structure of tenure, pre-tenure faculty receive a lot of support and mentoring, including reduced teaching and service obligations to focus on their research agenda and mentoring from a senior faculty member. Contract-based faculty are sometimes overlooked but could still benefit from mentoring opportunities. At a minimum, we suggest creating the option of mentoring for any contract-based faculty. If you have a critical mass of contract-based faculty, they can create mentoring opportunities within the group. They can support one another around the experience of teaching online, on writing about their work, and, if you have remote faculty, on staying connected. Webinars, LMS-based meetings, newsletters, and 1-1 email contacts are simple ways to help contract-based faculty stay connected and supported.

Create a leadership position responsible for the welfare of part-time and adjunct faculty. It can be extremely useful for the institution and the faculty to appoint someone with some authority and budget to oversee the engagement of part-time faculty into the life of the institution. Having a single point of contact can give part-time faculty greater confidence in the institution’s ability to meet their needs and signal that it values the contributions of part-time faculty. This person can liaise with any related governance group and serve as a conduit of information between the institution and the part-time faculty. If representation of part-time faculty is desired on particular faculty governance groups, this person can help identify excellent candidates.



Conclusion

Institutions can continue to think of contract-based faculty—full time, part time, or adjunct—as interchangeable cogs in a wheel. But they’ll be having to change those cogs frequently. Or they can think of them as very important value contributors to the learning experience and treat them as such. While we know it takes significant institutional investment and commitment for all of the above recommendations to work, we believe the only long-term option is to truly engage this option. Programs that move online relying only upon tenure-line faculty will not be sustainable much longer. And, more importantly, those that successfully support and engage their contract-based faculty will develop a richer instructional community and a richer experience for students.

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