

Data Snapshot: Contingent Faculty in US Higher Ed

Over the past few decades, the tenure system in US higher education has eroded. At its best, the tenure system is a big tent, designed to unite a diverse faculty within a system of common professional values, standards, rights, and responsibilities. Tenure protects academic freedom by insulating faculty from the whims and biases of administrators, legislators, and donors, and provides the security that enables faculty to speak truth to power and contribute to the common good through teaching, research, and service activities.

Today, the tenure system has shrunk, and the majority of faculty members are contingent workers who work without the protections of tenure. While many students and parents may assume that the majority of faculty are tenured or tenure-track, our data demonstrate a truth long known to those inside higher education: students at US colleges and universities are more likely to be taught by non-tenure track faculty members working in full-or part-time contingent positions than by tenure-stream faculty.

The casualization of faculty labor is reflected in the *unbundling* of the traditional faculty role. This data snapshot concerns those who teach in higher education, in positions that may or may not also include research, professional development, and service.

Overall Trends

As shown in Figure 1, at all US institutions combined, the percentage of instructional positions that is off the tenure track amounted to 73 percent in 2016, the latest year for which data are available. For the most part, these are insecure, unsupported positions with little job security and few protections for academic freedom. Depending on the institution, contingent faculty can be known as adjuncts, postdocs, TAs, non-tenure-track faculty, clinical faculty, part-timers, lecturers, instructors, or non-senate faculty.

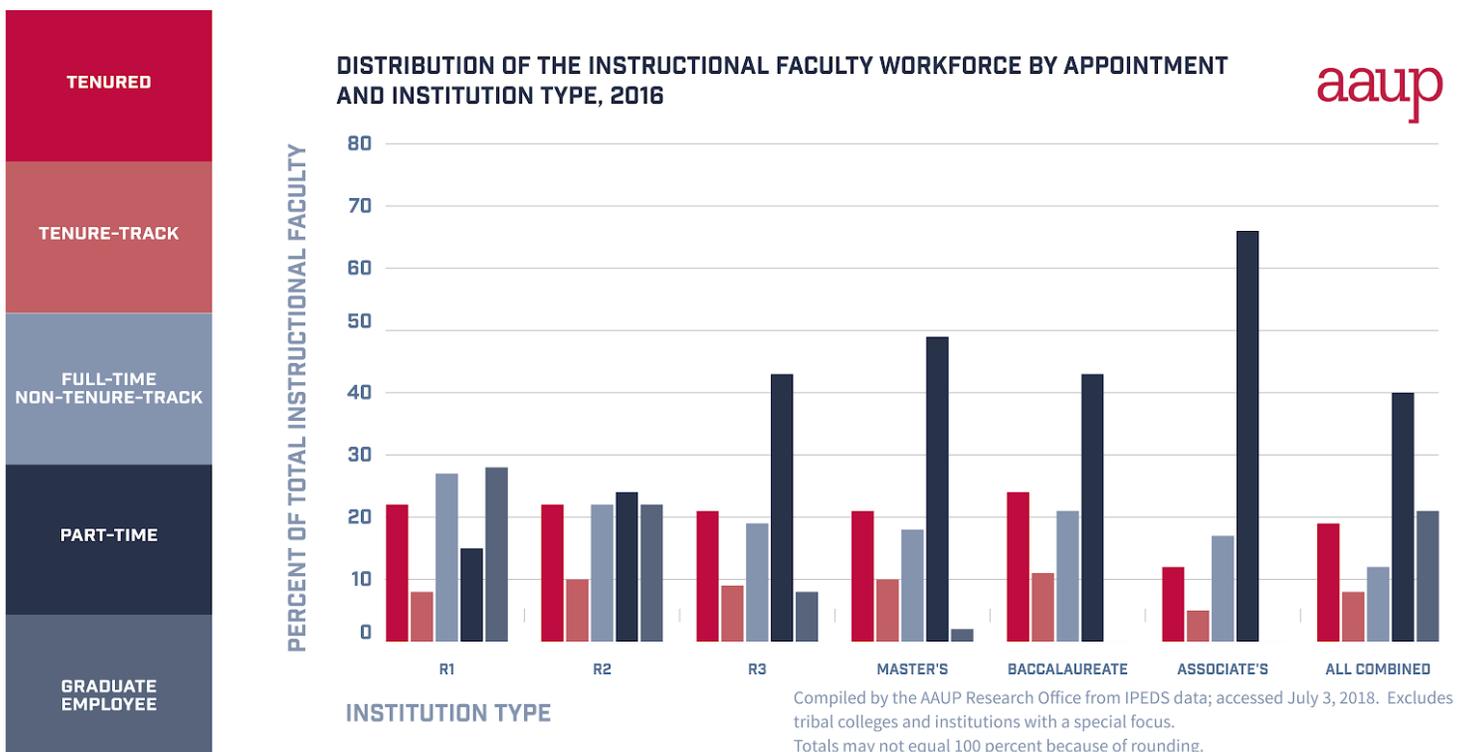


Figure 1

Part-Time and Graduate Teachers

When we drill into the data, differences by type of institution become visible. The higher education workforce looks very different depending on what kind of institution you are in. The cohort of tenured and tenure-track faculty is stronger at research-intensive and other four-year institutions, where they comprise about a third of the faculty. At two-year institutions, tenure-stream positions make up less than 20 percent of faculty positions.

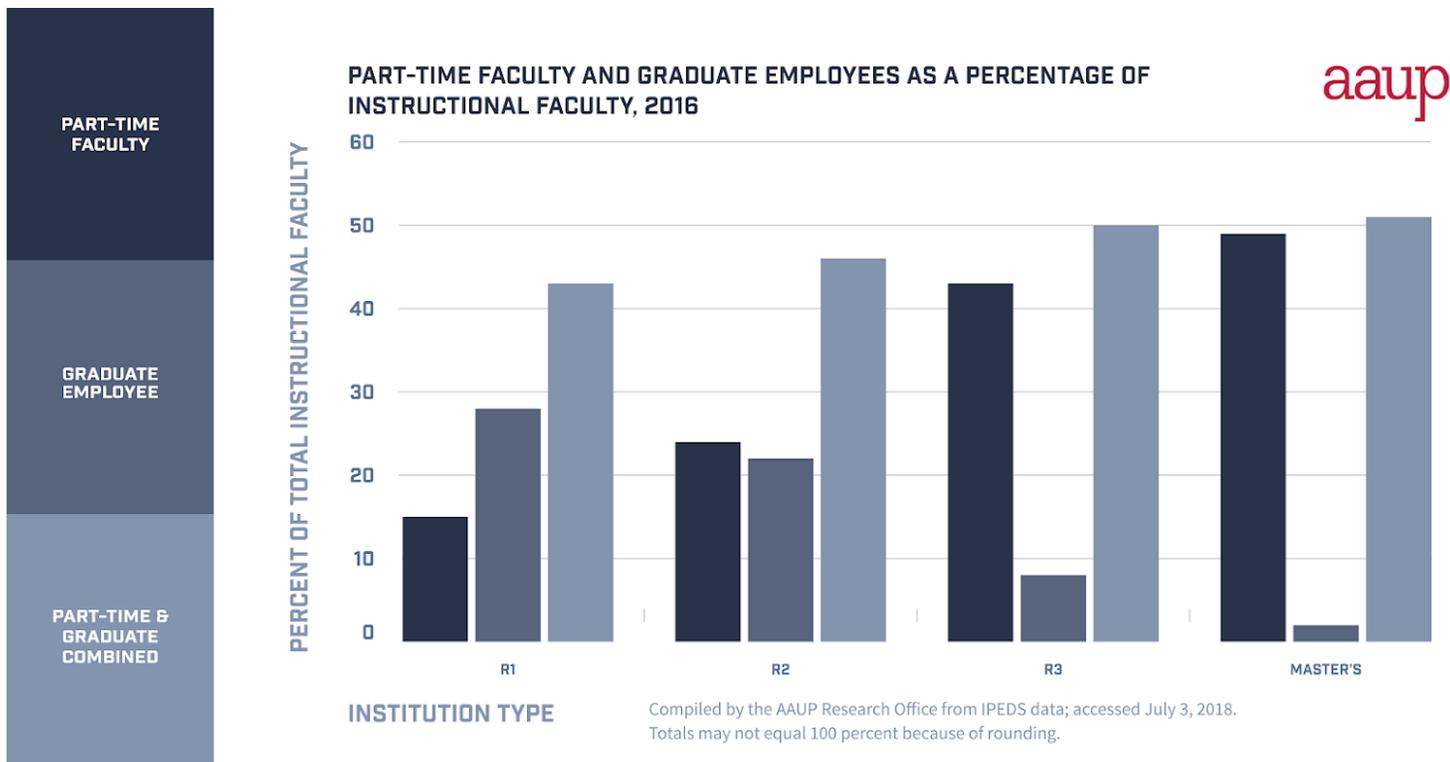


Figure 2

As you can see in figure 2, at research-intensive institutions, graduate-student employees perform labor that is performed at other institutions by part-time faculty. This is often billed as “professional apprenticeship” for graduate students. Many teaching assistantships, however, come with little or no training for the teaching profession. Further, most teaching assistantships do not advance progress toward a degree; in fact, they often hinder it when graduate students’ work duties take so much time that they detract from studies. While teaching a few courses can be a valuable learning experience, many teaching assistants instead operate as a source of cheap labor for the academy, teaching section after section of introductory or developmental courses.

At two-year institutions, this cheap labor is provided by faculty working in part-time positions (though it is worth noting that such faculty often actually work full time, since many cobble together a living from multiple part-time appointments). While a little less than 50 percent of faculty positions at master’s and baccalaureate institutions are part-time, more than 65 percent of positions at two-year institutions are. Part-time teaching positions tend to be the least secure and worst remunerated teaching positions in higher education, with low per-course pay and few benefits. Faculty in these positions are typically hired by the term and paid only for the hours they spend in the classroom, not for time spent meeting with students, evaluating student work, and class planning and preparation. They often lack access to basic tools like offices, computers, and photocopying services, and can be hired on the spur of the moment with little time to prepare--sometimes after a semester has already started. And they often receive little or no evaluation and mentoring, making them especially vulnerable to being dismissed over one or two student complaints. The high turnover among

such faculty members mean that students in a department may never have the same teacher twice, or may be unable to find an instructor who knows them well enough to write a letter of recommendation.

Full-time Contingent Faculty Contract Length

Working conditions and job security are somewhat better for full-time, non-tenure track faculty. As shown in Figure 3, few work on contracts of less than a year. In general, longer contracts offer more security for individuals and stability for institutions and students.

At four-year institutions (including research universities), an average of 38 percent of full-time non-tenure track faculty are on annual contracts, with 58 percent on either multi-year (20 percent) or indefinite/at-will contracts (38 percent); only 4 percent work on contracts of less than a year in duration.

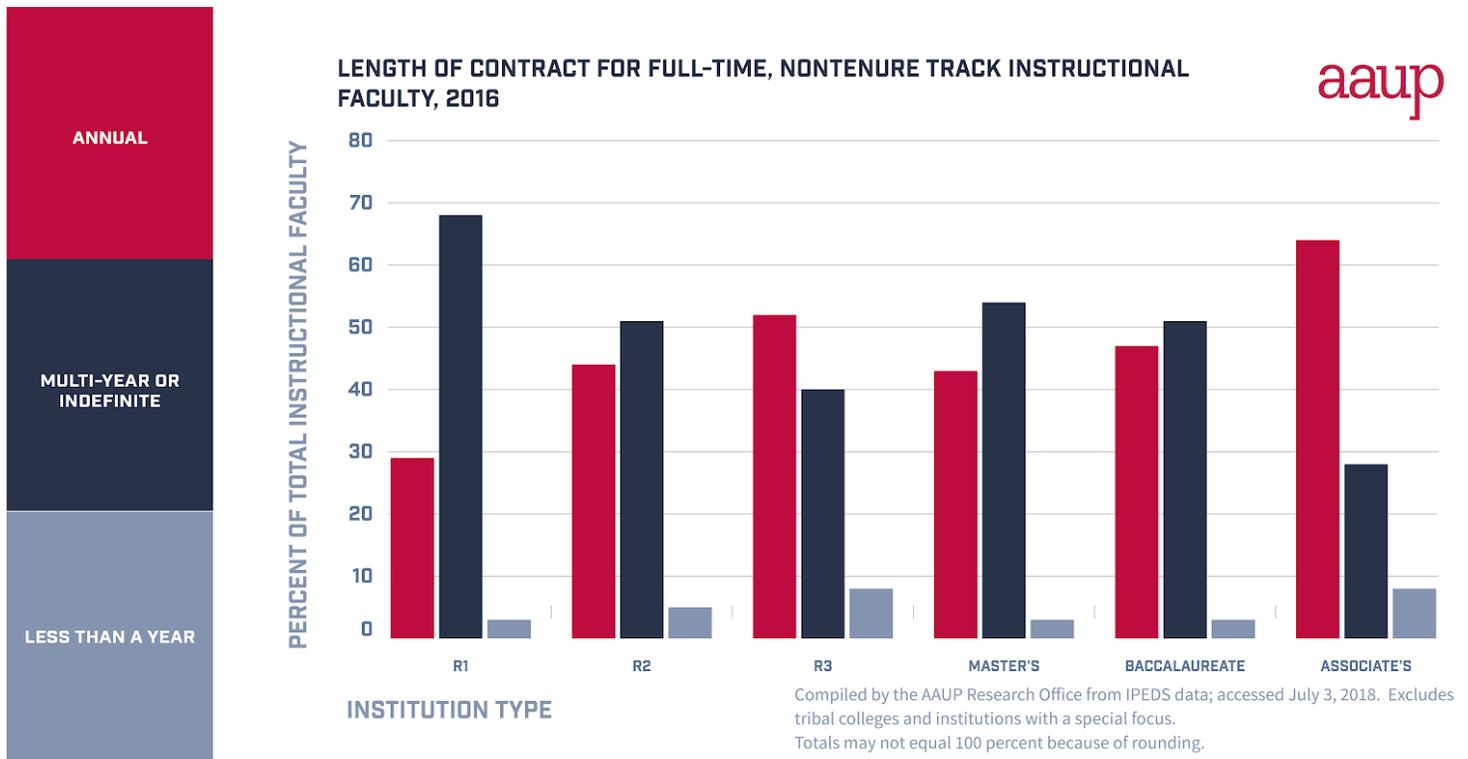


Figure 3

At community colleges, the majority of full time, non-tenure track faculty are on annual contracts (63 percent) with 28 percent having multi-year or indefinite contracts and 8 percent having less than an annual contract (for example, by the semester).

Annual and multi-year contracts are self-explanatory; indefinite contracts are those without a specific end date and this category contains a variety of arrangements. Some faculty with indefinite appointments have a fairly good expectation of continued employment. But although they have the word “indefinite” in common, indefinite contracts differ greatly from tenured appointments. Whereas tenure is an indefinite appointment that can be terminated only for cause or under extraordinary circumstances such as financial exigency and program discontinuation, indefinite contracts are effectively at-will in many states; that is, the institution can end the contract with no notice at any time for any reason. Thus, often they do not offer much security or protection for academic freedom.

Contingent Faculty Working Conditions Are Student Learning Conditions

While contingent faculty members are often highly qualified and dedicated teachers, their tenuous working conditions affect students. By definition, contingent faculty lack protections for academic freedom. This means

that they are vulnerable to dismissal if readings assigned or ideas expressed in the classroom offend a student, administrator, donor, or legislator, or if students don't receive the grades that they want. Thus, the free exchange of ideas may be hampered and students may be deprived of the debate essential to citizenship and of rigorous evaluations of their work.

Faculty in contingent positions are often cut out of department and institution-wide planning, though they may teach the majority of some types of courses, especially in community colleges and at the introductory and developmental levels in four-year institutions. When this happens, the knowledge that they have about their students and the strengths and weaknesses of the courses they teach is not taken into consideration.

In short, while many contingent faculty members may be excellent teachers, they are not given adequate institutional support to perform their jobs.

Increasing Contingency

As the AAUP and others have documented over the past decades, the percentage of faculty that are off the tenure track has been steadily increasing. According to an October 2017 report by the United States Government Accountability Office, over the 2008–2012 Great Recession the number of tenure-track faculty increased by 1 percent while the number of full time contingent faculty increased by 11 percent and part-time faculty increased by 18 percent. In 2016 (the most recent year for which there is data), higher education institutions hired 30,865 full-time, non-tenure-track instructional faculty, but only 21,511 full-time, tenure-track faculty.

Since the principal purpose of tenure is to safeguard academic freedom, this trend is deeply worrisome. Free inquiry, free expression, and open dissent are critical for student learning and the advancement of knowledge. When faculty members can lose their positions because of their speech or research findings, they cannot properly fulfill their core responsibilities to advance and transmit knowledge.

Definitions

This data snapshot uses the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Learning, as follows for all institutions in the US eligible to receive Title IV funding in the IPEDS database. We exclude Special Focus Institutions, Tribal Colleges, and institutions with no Carnegie Classification.

R1: Doctoral Universities – Highest research activity. Includes universities such as Harvard University, Kansas State University, and West Virginia University.

R2: Doctoral Universities – Higher research activity. Includes universities such as American University, Kent State University, and San Diego State University.

R3: Doctoral Universities – Moderate research activity. Includes universities such as DePaul University, Idaho State University, and Liberty University.

Master's: Generally includes institutions that award at least 50 master's degrees and fewer than 20 doctoral degrees per year. We have included Carnegie's classifications of M1, M2, M3 collectively. These would include universities such as Appalachian State University, Eastern Kentucky University, Gonzaga University.

Baccalaureate: Includes institutions where baccalaureate or higher degrees represent at least 50 percent of all degrees but where fewer than 50 master's degrees or 20 doctoral degrees are awarded per year. Includes colleges such as Castleton State College, Hampshire College, and Oberlin College.

Associate's: Includes community colleges and colleges that have one or more baccalaureate degree programs but that confer more than 50 percent of degrees at the associate's level. Includes colleges such as Central Virginia Community College, Mississippi Delta Community College and South Puget Sound Community College.