new educational innovations.” The resulting white paper, which was sponsored by a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, concluded: “We invite institutions to consider redesigning faculty roles to ensure that institutional missions—and particularly students—are being served. For example, campuses such as The Evergreen State College (WA), Hampshire College (MA), and The University of Texas of the Permian Basin have redesigned their faculty roles with new contracts, responsibilities, and appointments; these institutions have never had a form of tenure in place.”

Fact 3: Disruptive innovations do not necessitate reductions in the proportion of full-time or tenured faculty.

In response to disruptive innovations, organizations often try to compete with entrants at the bottom of the market by cutting costs in the sector where entry competition is the greatest and adopting some of the technological innovations that offer disruptors leverage. Some colleges and universities have pursued this strategy by reducing the proportion of full-time and tenured faculty (and relying increasingly on part-time instructional faculty), thereby reducing instructional costs. What effect is this having?

Figure 4 presents the distribution of instructional staff by rank in 2013, the most recent year for which data are available through IPEDS, at all Title IV–eligible, degree-granting institutions that enroll first-time, full-time undergraduates. Historically, faculty have been classified as “primarily instructional” when at least 50 percent of their activity is associated with teaching. Primarily instructional activity is represented in the bar on the left-hand side of the figure. Data on institutions unable to disaggregate faculty, or institutions where at least 50 percent of faculty activity is a combination of “instruction, research, and public service,” have been presented in the center bar. The bar on the right-hand side of the figure presents the combined, unduplicated total of faculty reported in the first two bars for those institutions reporting data.

To provide some perspective, in 1975, full-time tenured and tenure-track faculty composed 45.10 percent of the total instructional faculty. Today, only 20.35 percent of instructional faculty are full time and tenure track. The combined proportion of full-time tenured (19.51 percent) and full-time tenure-track (7.37 percent) faculty together does not match that of the full-time tenured instructional faculty (29 percent) of four decades ago. In their place is an army of part-time instructional staff and graduate teaching assistants. While there are many fine graduate teaching assistants and part-time instructional faculty, the reliance on these positions—because they generally lack the economic security of tenured appointments, institutional commitment to professional development, and adequate working conditions—does not align with the vision of most institutional missions, particularly as they pertain to students.

As the AAUP's 2010 report Tenure and Teaching-Intensive Appointments noted, “a broad and growing front of research shows that the system of permanently temporary faculty appointments has negative consequences for student learning.” Some of this research has found that temporary...