
Off-Track Profs

Nontenured Teachers in Higher Education

John G. Cross and Edie N. Goldenberg

The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

© 2009 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher.

For information about special quantity discounts, please email special_sales@mitpress.mit.edu.

This book was set in Sabon by SNP Best-set Typesetter Ltd., Hong Kong.
Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cross, John G.

Off-track profs: nontenured teachers in higher education / John G. Cross and Edie N. Goldenberg.

p. cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-262-01291-1 (hardcover : alk. paper). 1. College teachers—Tenure—United States. 2. College teachers—Employment—United States. I. Goldenberg, Edie N. II. Title.

LB2335.7.C76 2009

378.1'214—dc22

2008042149

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Do We Know Who Teaches Our Students?

Elite research universities in the United States are revered around the world. International students come to the United States to study; academics overseas send their students here; outstanding faculty from across the globe choose to spend their careers as professors in the United States; universities in Asia, Europe, South America, and Africa seek partnerships and exchanges with U.S. institutions; and leaders in higher education from other countries visit to learn how our universities function as they strive to emulate the successes of world-class institutions in this country. We have achieved a position of global leadership in higher education, an important national asset.

Over time, significant changes can be seen in the missions of our best universities as well as in their operations, staffing, and leadership, but the tenured faculty and many university leaders seem largely oblivious to them. Today, outstanding teacher-scholars spend much more of their time and energy on their individual scholarly work and their national and international networks than they spend on their local institutions. They enjoy tremendous independence and considerable control over their job duties and arrangements. If local conditions sour, professors in highly ranked departments can relocate, and they do (although not always to comparable institutions). Meanwhile, few attend to matters of institutional health, governance, or academic freedom. With increasing competition for excellence in higher education coming from universities in other lands, will ours retain their high status even as changes in the makeup of the faculty are ignored by faculty members, provosts, and presidents? In writing this book, we seek to highlight important trends in the nature of the faculty and issues that we believe need to be addressed

by those committed to maintaining the high quality of our best research institutions.

At the same time they are envied from abroad, U.S. research universities are attacked at home, and criticisms are nowhere more frequent and pointed than in the area of undergraduate education. Challenges come in many forms: research universities emphasize research to the neglect of undergraduate teaching;¹ research universities promote political correctness by hiring faculty who promote extreme or one-sided views in their instruction;² universities exploit “contingent faculty” and graduate students by engaging in bait-and-switch tactics that advertise high institutional standing based on distinguished faculty whom undergraduates rarely meet.³ Worse yet, low-cost faculty substitutes may not speak or understand English well enough to be effective in the classroom.⁴ The high and increasing cost of a college degree adds to public dissatisfaction with college experiences that seem inadequate.⁵

While we do not agree with most of these criticisms, we take them seriously and believe that they need to be addressed.⁶ To address them effectively, we need to understand both the forces at work on university campuses today that affect academic priorities and incentives as well as the levers of change. Those forces are complex. Our project in this book is to clarify them and to stimulate serious discussion about the implications of those forces for the future of our nation’s leading research universities.

Most critics of higher education tend to make two flawed assumptions. They assume that a conventional administrative hierarchy is in place on campus and that those at the top are intentionally producing undesirable outcomes. These critics blame the misplaced priorities of university leaders for the shortcomings in undergraduate education. University leaders are urged to change their priorities with the expectation that better undergraduate experiences will follow.

Yet anyone with experience leading a university understands that the reality is much more complicated than that. Presidents may be the most influential people on campus, but their influence is severely limited. Merely changing their priorities will not ensure organizational change. This is so for a number of reasons that we explore in this book. First, university information systems are inadequate for administrative

decision making. Presidents lack information about fundamental aspects of their institutions and lack the means to track instructional changes or evaluate education policies. Second, presidents come and go. They and their principal lieutenants rarely stay in place long enough to change fundamental aspects of their institutions. Third, universities operate in an intensely competitive world that severely limits what any one can do without suffering a loss in stature. Those universities with the greatest resources and reputations may appear to be well positioned to break from the pack, but even their resources and reputations are vulnerable to competition. Fourth, universities are strikingly decentralized institutions. As Cohen and March aptly observed more than thirty years ago in their study of forty-one colleges and universities, “Academic ‘policy’ is the accretion of hundreds of largely autonomous actions taken for different reasons, at different times, under different conditions, by different people.”⁷ In this environment, structural changes, introduced with the best of intentions, can sometimes encourage subordinates to take actions that accumulate into patterns of behavior that are diametrically opposed to presidential aims.

The second flawed assumption is that national averages can be applied to individual institutions. Take, for example, widespread criticism of the working conditions of non-tenure-track faculty on campus.⁸ Much of what is written relies on national studies of college faculty,⁹ and the conclusions do not always ring true for our nation’s elite universities. The itinerant lecturer who teaches individual courses on multiple campuses for paltry wages and no benefits does reflect reality in some places¹⁰ but is virtually unknown on elite research campuses. Their leaders can dismiss complaints about the growing numbers and poor treatment of non-tenure-track faculty as something happening elsewhere—only in public institutions as a consequence of state budget crises or mainly in the rapidly growing community college or for-profit sectors.

Who are the faculty who teach undergraduates on these select campuses, and what are their employment arrangements? One of the major surprises of our study is that nobody seems to know. A number of reports of national data collected by the U.S. Department of Education provide summaries that break down total faculty numbers into tenure-track and non-tenure-track categories by type of institution, by specific university,

and by discipline.¹¹ These studies provide a general picture of trends, although we make the case that they all likely understate the number of individuals who are off the tenure track who teach undergraduates in the university as a whole. They are unable to break out those categories by school or college within universities, however, and that limits their ability to characterize the faculties responsible for most of the undergraduate education on campus. Knowing who is teaching undergraduates and understanding how they engage with their students are important because the faculty bears primary responsibility for the quality of undergraduate education. The faculty offers classes, establishes the curriculum, sets graduation requirements, and shares in university governance.

We focus in this book on faculty members in distinguished research universities—public and private—in arts and sciences and engineering, the two schools with the largest undergraduate enrollments. We do not assume that the processes at work in large, elite, and relatively well-funded research universities are identical to those at work in other types of institutions of higher education. We know they are not. However, we do believe that these universities are especially important because they give U.S. higher education its high international standing, they are emulated by other institutions, and they are best positioned to strike out in new directions when warranted. They are also the least likely to pursue policies that diminish the role of tenure or tenured faculty—in part because they are busy trying to attract and retain the most distinguished people in each field and in part because their administrators recognize that their reputations for listening to the faculty are important in those efforts. As such, elite research universities provide a strong test case of resistance to pressures to increase numbers of instructors outside of the traditional boundaries of tenure. And they also happen to be the universities that we know best.

We became interested in this topic while serving as academic administrators at the University of Michigan. In our roles as dean and associate dean of the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts (LSA), we launched an initiative in 1990 to revitalize the educational experiences of undergraduates at Michigan, and we realized considerable success. Our senior faculty members were willing and even eager to reengage with first-year students in small seminars and with sophomore students in

undergraduate research experiences. Nonetheless, we quickly realized how little we knew about the makeup of own faculty. We routinely reviewed our own operations and collected data about LSA and similar arts and sciences colleges at universities that we regarded as peers. Generally, those data painted a familiar picture, but in one important instance we were surprised: we never anticipated the significant increase over time in employment of part-time and full-time non-tenure-track instructors in our own college. Our office was entrusted with academic appointment policy, and yet we observed substantial growth in a type of appointment that we never consciously decided to make. The expanding role of non-tenure-track instructors was taking place under our noses but without our being fully aware of it. We were also surprised to learn about some of the employment circumstances of lecturers in our college that were established in departments without our participation.¹²

Anecdotal evidence suggested that other leading universities were having the same experience, and although several colleges (including our own) had attempted to implement policies that would rationalize the use of non-tenure-track instructors, none had met with much success. We realized that leaders of elite universities with responsibility for undergraduate education generally lack adequate understanding of central features of the undergraduate experiences at their own institutions. They do not fully understand why universities engage in particular instructional hiring practices, and they do not comprehend the consequences of those practices for the quality of educational experiences, the functioning of the university, or the excellence of the academic environment.

As social scientists, we became intrigued by this conundrum. We decided to explore these matters at Michigan and elsewhere. We believed that understanding educational operations is an essential first step in designing successful, sustainable reforms for improvement in undergraduate education. We have also come to appreciate that instructional hiring decisions provide a fascinating window into how elite universities operate. These decisions, taken one by one, accumulate and determine the makeup of the faculty, and that makeup may be very different from what anyone intends.

Our purposes in this book are four—first, to describe the instructional workforce and the trends in hiring in arts and sciences and in engineering

at our nation's premier universities; second, to understand what drives these patterns and trends; third, to explain why we should care about this if we want to improve undergraduate education, support collegiality on campus, trust in faculty governance, protect tenure, and preserve our preeminence in higher education across the globe; and finally, to offer university leaders some suggestions for how they might address these issues.

With support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, we selected ten universities, all outstanding Research I institutions that are similar in terms of both their research status and their competitiveness for faculty and students. Five are public: the University of California–Berkeley, University of Illinois, University of Michigan, University of Virginia, and University of Washington. Four are private: Duke University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Northwestern University, and Washington University. One, Cornell University, is a mixed public-private institution. We sought institutions with contextual and structural characteristics that vary in ways that we expected would affect academic personnel policies. We included institutions in large labor markets and in areas with more limited workforce availability; we included institutions that have adopted highly decentralized budgeting systems (responsibility-centered management) and some that have not.

We began close to home. We were fortunate that Michigan had a relatively well-developed management information system. Even so, tracking the numbers of non-tenure-track instructors we employed was challenging, and our subsequent efforts to rationalize and limit the hiring of lecturers in our college met with only partial success.¹³ As we sought information about hiring practices in other universities, we learned that few collect data in a form that can be used to monitor non-tenure-track appointments. Some use staff titles for instructors, some use faculty titles for staff, and some limit the title of “faculty” to tenure-track faculty (meaning that instructors off the tenure track appear in none of their faculty data reports). Even when the data are available, the definitions across universities differ, making comparisons suspect. To get a comprehensive view of instructional employment practices that would permit comparison and genuine understanding, we decided it was necessary to

review the internal structure and procedures of each institution and find (or define) categories of comparable instructional types.

Discussions with our peers at other institutions convinced us that provosts and deans often lack adequate information to support appropriate hiring of faculty to provide undergraduate instruction. We have all heard departments argue for additional tenure-track or tenured hires because of the press of undergraduate enrollments. Yet we do not always know who is actually teaching our students, and we cannot compare the teaching effectiveness of different categories of instructor—that is, we cannot provide credible evidence that part-time or full-time non-tenure-eligible faculty members provide more or less adequate education to undergraduates than do tenured faculty.¹⁴ We hear extensive claims of teaching effectiveness from both tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty, but none of these is supported by convincing data. Without such information, how can we know whether hiring an additional person on the tenure track is the most appropriate way to address unmet undergraduate teaching needs?

Moreover, we train many of our PhD students, especially in the arts and sciences, for academic careers. Faculty advisers at elite universities measure their success as graduate teachers by the status of the placements that their graduate students achieve. Yet surveys count large numbers of PhDs who cannot find the kinds of jobs they want and who end up in lecturer or part-time academic roles. How can we justify the cost and time devoted to graduate education in certain fields without understanding the market for individuals with the training we provide?

University leaders talk endlessly about “teacher-scholars” who bring cutting-edge research to state-of-the-art teaching and who learn from teaching bright, challenging students who stimulate intellectual creativity and research productivity. As John Sexton, president of New York University warned, “To be attractive to students, the research university must ensure the connection between learning and research which is its justification.”¹⁵ Deans and provosts also stress the principles of academic freedom and “shared governance” and the essential role of faculty members in guiding our best institutions of higher learning, especially when it comes to curriculum, intellectual quality of students and faculty, and promising intellectual areas ripe for future development. At the same

time, we are remarkably uninformed about the consequences for faculty makeup, faculty priorities, academic freedom, and faculty governance of hiring large numbers of teaching and research specialists who are not eligible for tenure. Is the day of the teacher-scholar coming to an end? Is academic freedom at serious risk? Will faculty governance continue to be able to operate on behalf of high-quality education *and* scholarship? These are some of the questions that drive our interest in understanding the forces that lead research universities to hire non-tenure-track faculty and the consequences of such hiring decisions for university functioning.

A great deal has been written about the increasing use of non-tenure-track faculty in the academy, most of it highly critical.¹⁶ These writings assert that non-tenure-track faculty members are exploited and need to organize into unions: they teach too many courses, receive poor pay and poor (or no) benefits, are marginalized on campus, and often have to commute from campus to campus picking up piecemeal work from multiple universities to put together full-time jobs with (barely) livable wages. These writings also assert that non-tenure-track instructors are unable to deliver high-quality education to undergraduates because they cannot spend the necessary time with their students, they lack private offices and even computers, and they have no opportunities for professional development. The premise of these writings is that the increasing use of lecturers is driven almost entirely by economics, that non-tenure-track faculty are unable to offer the same high-quality educational experiences to undergraduates as do tenure-track faculty, and that the continued practice of hiring non-tenure-track instructors will threaten academic freedom and the existence of the tenure system.¹⁷

Some of these claims are true in our nation's most elite universities; others are not. The many reasons for hiring non-tenure-track faculty to teach undergraduates rarely receive any attention at all. Painting a more complete and accurate picture of practices on these select campuses is one of our goals. To identify realistic possibilities for change, we also go beyond practices to explain why they exist and what kinds of consequences they produce.

Statistical studies of faculty hiring trends abound, but they cannot explain how or why individual employment decisions are made.¹⁸ They

overlook the fact that definitions are inconsistent as different universities apply different titles to the same instructional categories, and they blur important economic and geographical differences among colleges and universities. Many institutions do not have data systems that are adequate for understanding the non-tenure-track issue. Accurate data-management systems are relatively new on many campuses. In some cases, they are the product of one budget officer's efforts rather than any broader institutional initiative. This means that different institutions vary in the lengths of their historical records and that different categories of instructor are often not effectively differentiated. For example, many institutions have data systems that do not distinguish graduate student teaching assistants from part-time instructors.¹⁹

This data deficiency is often compounded when busy academic administrators restrict their attention to high-profile tenured faculty. Although most administrators know how many tenure-track faculty are employed at their institution (and how many full-time equivalents, or FTEs, they represent), they are much less aware of the numbers of non-tenure-track instructors. The answer to the question "How many tenure-track faculty positions do you have?" is typically precise (for example, "324"), but the answer to the question "How many non-tenure-track faculty do you have?" is often vague ("I think it is about 20 percent"). Worse, different officers of the same institution often come up with very different percentage estimates. Unless the non-tenure-track faculty are organized by a union and have a negotiated contract, university leaders are also poorly informed about the conditions of employment of their teaching specialists. Salaries, fractions, and duties may be arranged department by department, with little central oversight.

Therefore, we needed a different approach. After developing summary profiles of our ten institutions, we visited each campus. Our goals for these visits were threefold. First, we sought disaggregated institutional data on the instructional mix (tenure-track, graduate teaching assistants, non-tenure-track faculty) in arts and sciences and in engineering, over time. To the greatest extent possible, we sought detailed data that would permit distinctions across disciplines and levels of instruction. These data generally came from the institutional support personnel who create and maintain university or college data systems. We supplemented these data

with extensive discussions with a wide range of academic administrators (including presidents, provosts, deans of schools and colleges, department chairs, and faculty members) to learn about their hiring and budget processes and about the reasons why their universities employ instructors off the tenure track. We explored actual and potential consequences, including unionization efforts, faculty morale, and governance problems. We explored how the systems of faculty appointments work, how various instructional needs are met (and why), what special problems are addressed by employing non-tenure-track faculty, and whether the numbers of non-tenure-track faculty create problems that are recognized by the university leaders themselves.²⁰

Our campus visits proved invaluable. We benefitted tremendously from the interpretations of knowledgeable insiders. They enabled us to go beyond simple descriptions to paint a more complete picture of the educational commitments of elite research universities. They helped us understand the forces at work today that drive their undergraduate teaching missions and the consequences of today's hiring practices for quality education and healthy academic environments.

We start in the next chapter with a description of trends in the use of non-tenure-track faculty in arts and sciences and in engineering in our ten elite universities. Despite primitive management information systems, we see a general picture of growth in numbers over time that mirrors the reports in other studies. In subsequent chapters, we turn to each of four realities that complicate the lives of university leaders who might try to stem this growth—frequent presidential turnover, competition among universities, decentralized decision making, and budgetary reforms based on business models.

Then we turn to five implications of growing specialization in faculty roles:

- First, non-tenure-track faculty members are forming unions, to the dismay of tenured faculty and administrators who view the academic enterprise as a mutually supportive intellectual and collegial community. Higher education is among the few growth sectors for organized labor today for both teaching assistants and instructors off the tenure track.

- Second, over time, non-tenure-track faculty members are teaching an increasing percentage of credit hours that are offered to undergraduates, but we know remarkably little about what that means for the quality of the educational experiences that our students have. We describe some of the existing data and explain their limitations in answering this fundamental question.
- Third, tenure-track faculty members are deeply involved in graduate education. Their own reputations depend in part on how successfully they place their PhD students, and non-tenure-track positions are not regarded as successes. Yet these same faculty members sometimes avoid undergraduate teaching, thereby encouraging more non-tenure-track hiring to cover undergraduate courses.
- Fourth, insufficient attention to governance issues in an environment with large numbers of teaching and research specialists may compromise the effectiveness of academic decision making and lead to unanticipated and negative consequences for the health of the academic enterprise.
- Fifth, the growth of non-tenure-track faculty numbers constitutes an erosion of the tenure system. There is remarkably little attention to this—and to possible erosion in academic freedom—by the tenured faculty on our nation's elite campuses today.

Finally, we describe several critical dilemmas facing university leaders that have an impact on the makeup of their campus workforce, and we offer some advice for dealing with them effectively.