

# Who is Professor “Staff”

And how can this person  
teach so many classes?

Course Number	Instructor	SEATS	OPEN	WAITLIST
50423	JONES	27	0	2
50424	STAFF	27	0	3
(50425)	STAFF	27	0	2
(50426)	STAFF	27	1	0
(50427)	STAFF	27	0	2

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\*\*The Center for the Future of Higher Education is the virtual  
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(CFHE), directed by Gary Rhoades. It seeks to influence  
public policy and practice in higher education, in furtherance  
of the seven principles of the Campaign  
(<http://futureofhighered.org>)

Steve Street, a fiction writer and essayist who taught composition, creative writing and literature for colleges and universities continuously since 1980, never on the tenure track, died of cancer on August 17, 2012. He was a member of the Board of Directors of New Faculty Majority, a member of United University Professions, an important voice in the national movement for faculty equity, and a cherished colleague and friend. This report is dedicated to him.

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## **Executive Summary**

Most of the faculty on American college and university campuses are contingent employees, working in conditions very different from the image of academic professional life that informs contemporary discussions of higher education policy. This report describes the findings of a recent survey of contingent faculty in the United States, focusing on the working conditions imposed upon contingent faculty and the ways those conditions impact students and the quality of the education they receive.

Two particular aspects of the working conditions of contingent faculty emerged as particularly significant: “just-in-time” hiring practices and limited access to pedagogical resources.

Many faculty who are contingent employees (listed in class schedules simply as Professor “Staff”) receive their course assignments only two or three weeks before the start of the academic term. Hired “just-in-time” for the start of classes, these professors have little time to do the preparatory work necessary to teaching a high quality college-level course. As a result, they suffer the “double contingency” of either using their own unpaid time to prepare for classes they may not be assigned or accepting the reality of teaching a course for which they have been unable to adequately prepare.

In addition, most contingent faculty are not given full and effective access to the resources and technologies that define quality education in today’s colleges and universities. They are given, at best, inadequate access to sample course syllabi, curriculum guidelines, library resources, clerical support, and the like. They often have only limited, if any, access to personal offices, telephones, computers and associated software, and technological tools and training.

Perhaps the most important result of these damaging working conditions is that the educational experience of students suffers, both inside and outside of the classroom. It is only the extraordinary effort, personal resources, and professional dedication of contingent faculty that allows them to overcome the obstacles to quality education that derive directly from their employment status.

This report is based on a survey produced, distributed, and analyzed by the New Faculty Majority Foundation. See the survey at [www.nfmfoundation.org/NFMF-Back-to-School-Survey.html](http://www.nfmfoundation.org/NFMF-Back-to-School-Survey.html)

The report speaks directly to three core principles of the Campaign for the Future of Higher Education dealing with investment in faculty, use of technology, and the avoidance of false economies.

For a complete version of CFHE’s Principles for Quality Higher Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, see [www.futureofhighered.org/principles](http://www.futureofhighered.org/principles)

Existing explanations for the working conditions of contingent faculty do not suffice. Managerial flexibility and budgetary savings cannot justify administrative practices toward contingent faculty. Indeed, current practices amount to administrative inattention; correcting these practices would not reduce managerial flexibility or increase institutional costs in any significant way.

The report concludes by recommending increased transparency regarding the working conditions of contingent faculty in American higher education. It recommends that institutions of higher education commit themselves to collecting the data necessary to a serious study of the situation of contingent faculty and its impact on student learning. The survey instrument used herein is one possible way for faculty groups and for institutions of higher education to begin their own processes of data collection and analysis.

The new understanding produced by this process of description and analysis should then be used by college and university administrators to reform their employment practices. There can be no doubt that improving the working conditions of contingent faculty will also improve the education experiences of many, many college and university students.

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## **I. Introduction**

The reality of most college professors’ working lives diverges sharply from the dominant view articulated by policymakers and accepted by the general public. The new faculty majority, comprising over two-thirds of the faculty workforce nationally, are contingent employees (AAUP, 2010; AFT, 2009; Schuster and Finkelstein, 2006). Contingent faculty can be hired at a moment’s notice, with no review process, and their appointments can be “non-renewed” with little or no justification, regardless of their performance. Nearly half of all contingent faculty work part-time jobs, many working in multiple such positions at a time. Large numbers are invisible, even to students, generically designated in class schedules as Professor “Staff.”

The deficiency and invisibility of contingent faculty members’ working conditions compromise students’ learning conditions, undermining students’ ability to engage with these professors out of class and over time in important ways that contribute to student success (Bettinger and Long, 2010; Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2009; Eagan and Jaeger, 2008; Ehrenberg and Zhang, 2004; Jacoby, 2006; Jaeger and Eagan, 2009, 2010; Umbach, 2007, 2008; Umbach and Wawrzynski, 2005, Public Agenda and WestEd, 2012). The cumulative effect of these conditions devalues the work of students and faculty, and detracts from the promise of higher education

In this report, we share findings from our research about the realities of the contingent faculty experience. These results are based on data from an exploratory survey of 500 faculty members with contingent appointments, conducted by the New Faculty Majority Foundation in September 2011. The survey focused on “back-to-school” hiring procedures and working conditions because these are key aspects of the contingent faculty experience that can profoundly affect a faculty member’s teaching and a student’s learning.

The on-line survey was designed to be an effective, cost-efficient tool for institutions and groups to assess some key aspects of their own hiring practices and learning conditions. See Appendix A for more information and download the survey instrument at [www.nfmfoundation.org/NFMF-Back-to-School-Survey.html](http://www.nfmfoundation.org/NFMF-Back-to-School-Survey.html)

**The current reality.** The hiring experience of many contingent faculty members is captured in the opening of the 2003 documentary, “[Teachers on Wheels](#),” by Linda Janakos.<sup>1</sup> The film begins with a voicemail playback expressing a community college’s urgent need for English instructors “beginning immediately.” The message, left by an administrative staff person on behalf of the department head, informs the listener that “we have classes available day and evening and Saturday morning.” In a voiceover, Janakos relates that she has received many such calls, often the day before a class is due to begin, often from someone who is prepared to hire her “over the phone.” Her documentary continues with interviews of several contingent faculty members, and with depictions of the conditions that have led many to be dubbed “freeway flyers” and “Road Scholars.” These contingent professors commute among multiple campuses, working without access to office space, computer equipment, and other professional necessities. They battle constant anxiety over economic survival, and each semester over the possibility of losing a class or having their contract “non-renewed.” They struggle over summers and in between academic terms to remain available to the institution (though unseen by and unavailable to students) even though they are often “let go” at the end of one term and “rehired” at the beginning of the next.

Whether a faculty member has been teaching for many years at the same university or is a new faculty member and, whether or not there is adequate time to prepare a new course, the insecurity of the work is the same.

Too few outside of academe are aware of the distinct faculty tiers in American higher education today. Too few think of “teachers on wheels” when they think of college faculty. Too many policymakers and academic managers continue to advance a caricatured image of faculty when critiquing the professoriate, misrepresenting the actual working conditions of most faculty and the effects those conditions have on professors and their students.

Across the nation, college administrations have institutionalized employment practices that threaten the quality of the education students receive, mismanaging valuable human resources. Large numbers of college teachers learn only at the last minute if they will have courses to teach and what those courses will be. Contingent faculty assignments are the last to be confirmed and the first to be changed at the last moment. Whether a faculty member has been teaching for many years at the same university or is a new instructor, the insecurity of the work and the adverse educational effect is the same.

As a result, college students everywhere are confused or dismayed when they open their class schedules to find the apparently indefatigable Professor “Staff” listed as the instructor for hundreds of courses. Many faculty members perceive the exponential growth of this designation as a particularly wry commentary<sup>2</sup> on the anonymity and interchangeability of contingent faculty in the academic community and on the overall casualization of the entire academic profession.

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<sup>1</sup> View “Teachers on Wheels” at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fpZ3nixDHus&feature=related>

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AIEqcXL0fyE> and <http://www.theadjunct.net/buy-professor-staff-a-box-of-chalk/>

The hidden cost of this managerial system for staffing classes is the uncertainty captured in the question posed by students and chosen as the title of this report. Students might rightly wonder how Professor “Staff” can teach so many classes. They might also rightly be frustrated that an anonymous Professor “Staff” is unavailable to assist them in significant ways.<sup>3</sup> Thus, a central focus of our survey of contingent faculty is the implications of these hiring practices and related working conditions for the learning conditions of students.

## II. Survey and Core Findings

As a project of the Campaign for the Future of Higher Education (CFHE) and the New Faculty Majority Foundation (NFMF), this report addresses three of the Campaign’s core principles about quality higher education. (A more detailed version of this report, as well as briefs addressing some additional principles and themes in the data, are available and forthcoming at the NFMF web site at [www.nfmfoundation.org](http://www.nfmfoundation.org)). Drawing on the rich qualitative and supporting quantitative data from our survey, we examine the implications of widespread employment uncertainty, insecurity, and lack of institutional support on the ability of college faculty to provide quality higher education.

Beyond making manifest the symbolic anonymity of the generic Professor “Staff” designation, the survey responses reveal consistent patterns in the objective working conditions and subjective experiences of contingent faculty.<sup>4</sup> The survey included open- as well as closed- ended questions to access the narratives of respondents’ work lives and their reflections about how employment practices affect their ability to carry out their professional responsibilities as educators. Resonating throughout the responses were the faculty’s awareness of and concern about how the structures of contingency affect students’ learning experiences.

Of course, not every contingent appointment is alike. (See Appendix B for a description of the methods and a fuller description of the respondents). This diversity was highlighted in the comments of respondents who taught at multiple institutions. For example, as one respondent reported, “At College X I am treated with respect. At College Y, I was demoted last term to a fee-for-service class, i.e.: non-credit, not even listed in the class schedule. Neither the Dean nor the Chair have communicated with me this term. I have registration slips and checks from the students that have not been turned in because of this lack of

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<sup>3</sup> For example, among the themes uncovered by the Public Agenda/WestEd report Student Voices on the Higher Education Pathway was that most community college students “believe that the student success and developmental education courses intended to bring them up to speed were not offered in a way that helped them succeed”; that “... faculty members who offer support and guidance that is accurate, accessible, and tailored to students’ educational and career goals are in high demand and can be hard to come by”; and that “finding the specific information or services they need often requires going on a “wild goose chase.”

<sup>4</sup> In designing the survey and in presenting the findings, the New Faculty Majority Foundation (NFMF) has sought to avoid two common pitfalls of research on contingent faculty: 1) overlooking the heterogeneity of these faculty members’ motivations and access to non-institutional support; and 2) drawing conclusions about the faculty experience based on characteristics of working conditions rather than on the subjective experiences of faculty themselves (Kezar and Sam, 2010).

### Campaign for the Future of Higher Education: Core Principles

- Quality higher education in the 21st Century will require a sufficient investment in excellent faculty who have the academic freedom, terms of employment, and institutional support needed to do state-of-the-art professional work;
- Quality higher education in the 21st century should incorporate technology in ways that expand opportunity and maintain quality;
- Quality education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will require the pursuit of real efficiencies and the avoidance of false economies.
- See all 7 core principles of the Campaign: [www.futureofhighered.org](http://www.futureofhighered.org)

communication.” And faculty respondents varied according to length of service and other aspects of their personal life situations. Also, there was evident a variety of institutional locations, including type of institution (community college, public or private school), academic department, and the presence/absence of collective bargaining.

Yet, amidst these variations, we found significant patterns that reflect general working conditions in academe. In the US today, there are growing numbers of full-time, non-tenure track faculty employed in colleges and universities, but by far the most common form of employment is part-time. Many teach in multiple institutions, especially in community colleges where, as referenced in the Center for the Future of Higher Education’s first report, “Closing the door, Increasing the gap: Who’s not going to (community) college,”<sup>5</sup> 70% of the faculty are part-time. Contingent employment is also increasingly common in four-year institutions. Although as a whole, faculty nationally are often unionized (Rhoades, 1998), that is not true of contingent faculty, and especially not of part-time faculty.

Survey findings indicate that managerial practices of just-in-time employment and structured limited access to instructional tools represent negligible false economies and a level of “flexibility” that is unnecessary and counter-productive.

Our 500 survey respondents generally reflect the composition and patterns of higher education faculty employment nationally. However, there is some over-representation of respondents teaching in four-year institutions and at institutions where contingent faculty are unionized, making our results, if anything, an underestimation of problems in employment practices for contingent faculty. Our respondents had these characteristics:

- 77% of respondents teach in part-time, contingent positions
- 54% teach in more than one institution
- 29% teach in two institutions
- 11% teach in three institutions
- 6% teach in four institutions
- 52% teach in four year institutions
- 14% teach in both two and four year institutions
- 59% teach in at least one position governed by a collective bargaining agreement<sup>6</sup>

The remainder of this report explores two of the most prominent experiences of contingent faculty employment in the United States: “Just-in-Time” management of classroom instruction and inadequate resources to provide the students with the education they deserve.

The first pattern concerns timing, specifically the managerial practice of “just-in-time” employment of contingent faculty immediately before classes start. This hiring practice is related to a sub-theme of unpaid preparation time for contingent faculty, some of whom

<sup>5</sup> Read this report at [http://futureofhighered.org/uploads/ClosingTheDoorFINAL\\_ALL32812.pdf](http://futureofhighered.org/uploads/ClosingTheDoorFINAL_ALL32812.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Given that access to collective bargaining likely raises workers’ consciousness about the terms and conditions of their employment and their access to surveys such as this one, it is not surprising that so many respondents are represented by unions. And given that collective bargaining agreements are more likely than non-unionized settings to provide some sort of due process and structure to the employment of contingent faculty, the NFMF survey offers, if anything, a best case test of the hiring and employment conditions of contingent faculty.



Collectively, these terms of employment and the lack of institutional support surrounding them do not facilitate quality education and instead constitute real structural barriers many contingent faculty confront in trying to provide their students with a quality educational experience.

prepare for classes “just in case” they get the last minute contracts to teach them. This practice is also related to an erroneous administrative notion that instruction takes place solely in the classroom, a mistaken view that overlooks important instructional activities and interactions that take place before classes start and outside the classroom.

The second prominent pattern in the survey responses involves access to instructional tools, specifically late and/or limited access to important materials and resources necessary for quality instruction. Contingent faculty report having limited access to basic and advanced technology, including inadequate access to even essential resources such as orientation to campus cultures and resources, syllabi, curriculum guides, libraries, and office spaces. Collectively, these terms of employment and the lack of institutional support surrounding them do not facilitate quality education and instead constitute real structural barriers many contingent faculty confront in trying to provide their students with a quality educational experience.

For all the managerial claims about the necessity of maintaining current hiring practices and conditions of employment because of fiscal constraint and the need for flexibility, there is little to no tracking of the practices and conditions in question. The report proposes increased transparency through use of the NFMF survey instrument to clarify the educational costs of contingency. The survey instrument, which can be used on-line, provides a low cost means by which to benchmark and improve the timing of hiring as well as faculty members’ access to the resources and tools that are fundamental to quality education. Such reforms are important first steps toward more comprehensive reforms that are necessary to restore the integrity of the teaching and learning process. The survey suggests that managerial practices of just-in-time employment and structured limited access to instructional tools represent negligible, false economies and a level of “flexibility” that is unnecessary and counterproductive.

### **III. “Just-in-time” employment: Not good for the students or the faculty**

An overriding theme that emerged from the survey data is that a “just-in-time” managerial approach is alive and well in higher education to the detriment of students and faculty. The closed-ended responses in the survey captured the best and worst case situations of contingent faculty who have multiple appointments. For these faculty members, “just-in-time” frequently means they may not know if they have a course to teach until a week or two before the start of the term. Remarkably, in the best-case situations more than one-third of respondents reported receiving three weeks or less notice (17% reported having received “less than two weeks” notice before the start of the class for which they receive the *most* lead time; another 18% received “between two and three weeks” notice). In the worst experiences, almost two-thirds reported receiving three weeks or less notice to

prepare for their class (responding to a question about the appointment for which the faculty member had the *least* lead time, 38% had “less than two weeks” and 25% had “between two and three weeks”).

Such numbers alone tell a sorry story about the lack of opportunity for contingent faculty to prepare for the classes they are teaching. But the narrative is even more striking when the faculty themselves describe the actual preparation time available to them and the implications for their students. Numerous respondents highlighted the reality that “less than two weeks” can, in fact, be a matter of days:

*“I was told the week classes start.”*

*“I teach several classes online as well, and those classes typically give me about a three day notice.”*

*“I got the . . . assignment just five days prior to the start of Fall.”*

*“I wasn’t sure what my course load would be until the Thursday of the week before classes started. I signed my contract that day.”*

*“I had less than two weeks to order texts and prepare syllabus and lectures.”*

The “just-in-time” staffing model is unjust for both the students and the faculty. It creates an institutional infrastructure of uncertainty and insufficiency of time that compromises educational quality.

In the normal contingent faculty experience, faculty may get their classes “bumped” by tenure line faculty. Some of the comments from contingent faculty speak to that point: “My class schedules were changed a week before the start of the semester when a full-time tenured faculty member’s classes did not fill and so I was ‘bumped’ to accommodate this person’s needs.” The unnecessary scale and scope of practices such as “bumping” clearly undermine the ability of faculty to prepare for their courses, with some obvious and some not-so-obvious negative educational costs:

*“Because I don’t know what classes I may be assigned, it is impossible for me to be as prepared as I would like to be. The schools won’t give me the textbook until they know that the class is going, usually only a day or two before the first day of class.”*

Late assignment of classes translates into contingent faculty unable to be as prepared for the early part of the semester as they otherwise would be. It also compromises the chance for contingent faculty to put together the sorts of materials they would like to present to their students. As one faculty member explained,

*“I have very little time to choose textbooks or write up my syllabi, which can limit the nature of courses in terms of contemporary information or issues, and can lead to mistakes on syllabi. Additional time is needed for both.”*

Others highlighted the confusion and the increased costs students face when faculty members often don’t have sufficient time to order course textbooks and other materials:

*“I have been doing this for some time. However, ordering course materials, text and self-published workbooks, is always at the last minute, because I never know my*

*appointment very far in advance. This inevitably causes confusion and inconvenience to my students.”*

*“Because I only found out that I’d be teaching a section less than a week before the start of classes, I decided to use the latest edition of a book that I’d used before. Only some of my students have been able to buy the book (we’re into the second week of the semester). Also, had I had more time to prepare, I probably would have chosen something less expensive—this paperback book costs more than \$100.00.”*

Some respondents spoke specifically about the effect of last-minute assignments on their effectiveness and about the unfortunate implications for faculty and students alike:

*“Being asked to teach a brand new class at the last minute, and then not being allowed to teach with a textbook I’ve used before cuts way back on my classroom effectiveness.”*

*“With very little lead time before classes began, I could not get my textbook order placed in time for the books to be available for the start of classes. Students are less likely to buy the text when it isn’t available in the campus bookstore. If I tell them the text is important it makes me look sloppy and unprepared when the text isn’t available. It also hinders student preparation. ... By not giving me the time and materials I need to be prepared, my department is, in effect, limiting my ability to be successful in the classroom.”*

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Clearly, there are serious educational costs to students in a system where large numbers of classes are being assigned on very short notice. Such “just-in-time” employment practices shortchange students and violate long- recognized professional standards of employment. At the most basic level, students are unable to know ahead of time who is teaching the class. As one survey respondent noted,

*“A secondary effect involves the overall uncertainty of what classes I will be teaching in any given semester: students who want to take additional classes with me in a subsequent semester never know for sure what classes I’ll be assigned, which makes their own scheduling of classes more problematic.”*

As is evident in the above survey responses, insufficient notice of assignment translates into insufficient preparation time, insufficient time to incorporate and update meaningful materials for students, and insufficient time to explore pedagogical methods and materials. The “just-in-time” staffing model is unjust for faculty and for students and clearly compromises educational quality.

**“Just in case,” unpaid preparation.** Indeed, there is a double contingency to the employment of contingent faculty. Just because they are told they will have classes in a subsequent semester, as survey respondents pointed out, does not mean the classes will be offered or that the contingent faculty member will not be “bumped” or reassigned at the last minute. Faculty who were not informed of any assignments in subsequent semesters, as respondents also pointed out, are left in the position of deciding whether to

be ready – with courses prepared – for a possible last minute assignment. In both cases, faculty are left in the position of being forced to prepare for course assignments “just in case” – and such preparation time is uncompensated.

The structured uncertainty of the situation fosters two different responses. Some contingent faculty devote considerable time, unpaid, to prepare for possible classes:

*“Every semester, including this one, when I teach a new course, I spend weeks of unpaid time doing course planning.”*

*“My contract starts the first day of classes. If you go by that, I had no time to prepare. However, since I knew I would be hired, and what courses I would be teaching, I had all kinds of time to prepare, though, of course, I was not paid for that time.”*

Yet as the following professor’s experience indicates, even when contingent faculty do prepare, unpaid, the structure of the working conditions compromises educational quality for students:

*“I have text documents on file for courses which I have taught, so these can be fairly readily modified. One course I am teaching is an honors section, for which I chose to add readings to the textbook. I did not know until the last minute whether the course would be offered due to attendance, so did not select or order these. I am doing this ‘on the fly,’ as I teach....”*

Quite understandably, a number of other contingent faculty indicated that they hesitate to participate fully in the self-exploitation of undertaking instructional work for free. Instead, many find ways to cope. For instance,

*“If I think a class may be cancelled before the first meeting or during the first week I put together a very brief, barebones syllabus of one page or less. If the class is not cancelled I put together a complete syllabus.”*

All the same, the faculty understand the implications for students and for the quality of the education they receive.<sup>7</sup>

Through many specific details, the qualitative narratives expose the educational drawbacks of the current just-in-time system. Institutional reliance on contingent faculty, without compensating them for preparing materials “just in case” classes are assigned to them, amounts to an underinvestment in and lack of commitment to the quality of students’ education. Further, given that there is a difference between notice of appointment and the actual start of employment, *all* preparation time of contingent faculty is undervalued, unpaid labor. In fact, real instructional work entails more than just being in class: it also

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<sup>7</sup> In fact, we know from experience that some faculty members explain to students the structural barriers they face in trying to provide them with the highest quality education possible. But as we did not ask directly about such disclosure, this is a topic that merits exploration in subsequent surveys.

involves preparation, interacting with students outside of class, grading, interacting with other faculty members in the department about curricular and quality issues, and other out of classroom work that is fundamental to educational and instructional performance and educational quality.

**Shortcomings of “just in the classroom” employment.** The “just in the classroom” aspect of contingent employment so narrowly constructs the faculty role that it overlooks what we know is important for faculty and for students to ensure a quality education. Current hiring practices treat contingent faculty members as individual contractors who are being hired simply to go to a classroom and deliver a prepackaged course. In fact, 94% of the survey respondents received no departmental or institutional campus orientation. Those numbers are all the more remarkable given that 54% of respondents were new to the departments where they are teaching and 49% were new to the campuses. The survey respondents spoke to the educational shortcomings of their isolation:

The “just in the classroom” aspect of contingent employment so narrowly constructs the faculty role that it overlooks what we know is important for faculty and for students to ensure a quality education.

*“Well, it seems really hard to be teaching new classes and yet really know very little about the institution’s culture. ... Having little time to prepare for classes for which I’ve been provided little support material seems pretty much like a lose-lose situation. I would like to do well and be asked to teach again, but how can you conform when you don’t know the expectations? As far as the students go, I will teach as I believe is best and work with each closely and supportively, as I always do. But I feel like it is unlikely I will succeed.”*

*“It certainly does not benefit my students that I have no information on the department’s curriculum guidelines.”*

The failure of colleges and universities to integrate contingent faculty into the academic communities in which they teach does not serve students well, as the student voices in the Public Agenda report also confirm. It compromises the quality and consistency of the curriculum. Indeed, the comment of one faculty respondent, who did go through a minimal orientation, points to the problem in terms of serving students:

*“I’m on a new campus and know very little about it in spite of the two-hour orientation, so I can’t answer students’ questions. I’ve also never met any of the other instructors teaching this course. This means it will be impossible for me to do collaborative activities with colleagues.”*

Another respondent agreed:

*“What I can’t provide, which I am always asked about, is academic advising, because I simply don’t know the answers to questions about requirements and the like.”*

Given the ever larger numbers of part-time students who rely on their professors as the principal point of contact with and as a major source of information about the larger

If universities and colleges fail to engage professors as professionals whose work extends beyond an isolated class to include interaction and relationships with other faculty as well as with students, they are also failing to engage the students in ways that clearly have a significant impact on their learning.

institution, the disintegrated situation of contingent faculty is very problematic. If universities and colleges fail to engage professors as professionals whose work extends beyond an isolated class to include interaction and relationships with other faculty as well as with students, they are also failing to engage the students in ways that clearly have a significant impact on their learning.

#### **IV. Late and limited access to resources in a high tech world: Unfair burdens on students and faculty alike**

Structural limitations are also evident in the working conditions of many contingent faculty when it comes to access to various pedagogical resources. Limited access to basic instructional resources in a high tech world clearly undermines quality. Indeed, it appears, ironically, that the expansion of high technology resources in instruction makes for yet another divide between contingent faculty and students on one side and higher education institutions on the other, as students and contingent faculty end up paying for their institutions' unwillingness to provide faculty with timely access to resources.

Consider the frequency data from respondents about access to some of the most basic materials and resources necessary for preparing and providing instruction. In the *best* cases, where respondents described appointments that gave them the most access to resources, respondents reported the following conditions:

- 47% received copying services less than two weeks before classes started
- 45% gained library privileges less than two weeks before classes started
- 38% received access to office space less than two weeks before classes started
- 34% did not receive sample syllabi until less than two weeks before classes started
- 32% received curriculum guidelines less than two weeks before classes started
- 21% never received curriculum guidelines
- 21% never obtained access to office space

In the case of office space, the data are striking, but the stories of the contingent faculty are even more telling. When faculty do not receive even the most basic resources expected for the profession, such as a desk in an office, the students experience the negative consequences in numerous ways:

*“As a part-time instructor, I do not have access to office space to meet with students.”*

*“Not providing adjuncts with an office for meetings makes it harder to communicate effectively with students. It’s harder to have private conversation, which are necessary when a student is failing.”*

*“Lack of office space means no opportunity to meet with students privately outside of class time.”*

When contingent faculty do get office space, it is generally insufficiently private to the sensitive tasks at hand in talking with students. Many respondents referred to overcrowded, public, shared office space as very problematic:

*“Because of the office situation, a general use room shared by twenty instructors where there is no personal space, I am hesitant to hold any kind of meeting with students due to privacy issues.”*

*“The lack of adequate office space (my office has three desks, two computers, and eleven people assigned to it) means that it is difficult to meet with students in my office, even though we are required to have some conversations with students (e.g., academic integrity issues) ‘in private.’ In general, the lack of institutional support means that the instructor that is most likely to know a first-year student by name is also the one the institution treats most contemptuously, which hurts retention, etc.”*

The last quotation speaks to the underinvestment in the students who most need support. That is indeed a national pattern. As referenced in “Closing the door, Increasing the gap,” spending per student is considerably less in those colleges (e.g., particularly community colleges) that serve the largest proportions of lower income and students of color.

That underinvestment is driven by the large numbers of part-time faculty (with low pay and benefits) and by colleges’ limited investment in sufficient educational support resources for those faculty.

**Limited access to technology.** The pattern of structural underinvestment in instructional support for contingent faculty is evident in technological resources as well, from phones to computers to access to the software and information systems that have become a central part of undergraduate instruction. In the case of phones and computers, colleges have simply offloaded the burden of providing these resources to individual faculty who most often own a cell phone and a laptop (just as contingent faculty often bear the burden of copying costs, due to insufficient access to departmental/college copying services). In the **worst** case settings, 41% of survey respondents were not provided with access to a campus phone. A little over half either had no access to a computer (27%) or gained such access less than two weeks before classes started (26%).

Constrained access does not serve students well:

*“I believe instructors should have plenty of early access to the resources and materials because students will surely need help the first week of class.”*

*“At both the community colleges I teach at, lack of assistance has hampered the ability to aid students such as by providing reserve materials, providing information on adding and registering for courses, copying and distributing materials (much of which I have to do myself on my dime), and determining what requirements students have to fulfill in a particular course. Part-time instructors are not deliberately kept in the dark, but I know for a fact that services for them are not well*

*funded and we are not informed of them when they exist. This can clearly affect students who take courses from these personnel.”*

The lack of access to computers and printers experienced by substantial numbers of contingent faculty detracts from their ability to provide students with the sort of current, spontaneous, authentic materials that enhance quality learning and are expected in this day and age:

Lack of access to computers and printers experienced by substantial numbers of contingent faculty detracts from their ability to provide students with the sort of current, spontaneous, authentic materials that enhance quality learning and are expected in this day and age.

*“For the private school I am teaching for, access to copying materials and computer equipment ... is a problem. ... It makes it harder to get documents, articles, etc., to share with my students. That leaves less room for spontaneity in my teaching. For example, it is helpful to bring in current materials (for example, articles published on the morning of the class) for use in class. This is often not possible without scanning equipment and copies to distribute by hand in class.”*

A number of respondents spoke to the limited access that contingent faculty have to educational resources, particularly as it relates to high tech resources:

*“At one campus, the technology never works. I teach evening classes and there is no evening coordinator to help. ... Repeatedly the computer at the teaching station [in the classroom] is locked and there is no help. The students are aware that instructors cannot do their jobs. We complain every semester and nothing is done.”*

*“I was unable to access my own class roster for the first two weeks of class. ... I think that’s self-explanatory” [in terms of negative effects on students and quality].*

*“One on-line institution allows access to course and e-book only seven days prior to start of class. I literally am only a chapter or two ahead of the class.”*

Another dimension of access to technology is access to appropriate training and related resources that will enable faculty to optimize the potential benefits of new technologies:

*“They [the institution’s administration] have no idea what online classes are about nor do they care if the students are overwhelmed. As an instructional designer and online faculty I have tried to make them see the error in their ways and to implement the easiest environment for my students to navigate—but there are no guidelines at this college. ... and there is no training. Students’ learning experiences are suffering for it.”*

And again, the “just-in-time,” last-minute model of employment does not provide the opportunity for a sufficient level of preparation:

*“I have often been called on to teach a course which requires a lot of prep like using special software and been hired the third week of August. By the time I’m good at it, I’m doing something else. Of course students would benefit from a permanent instructor.”*

**Seeking to shield the students.** In the face of these overwhelming structural obstacles, many contingent faculty do additional work to meet their students’ needs even



though they are inadequately supported (and compensated) by their campuses. In fact, a key theme in the responses to the survey's open-ended questions was the expression of an ethic of sacrifice and commitment, a conscientious effort to maintain educational quality in the face of daunting obstacles and to protect students from their adverse effects.

Part of this effort often involves actually shielding students from the factual realities of a contingent faculty member's employment situation:

*"My personal experience has had no effect on my students as most are not aware of the contingent nature of my work and I don't let it show."*

*"I don't allow my personal circumstances to impact my teaching behavior."*

And part of it involves actively shielding students from the adverse effects of teachers' contingent employment situation:

*"In the few instances in the past where access [to resources] was on short notice, I have mostly been able to shield my students from the effects."*

*"I think I am an innovative and inspiring teacher. The students are my inspiration. I do not bring personal nor employment issues into the classroom. I work hard, and my students know it. Securing a permanent position would not impact the quality of my teaching, it would impact the quality of my life."*

A desire to keep insufficient working conditions invisible to students is understandable. If students are unhappy with class resources, the faculty member is punished by poor student evaluations, which could lead to job loss. Additionally, as contingent faculty already contend with the stigma that is attached to contingency by some tenure stream faculty and administrators, they have no wish for students to adopt those same attitudes. Yet concern about the latter possibility is not just self-interested; it is also a concern *for*, not merely *about* the students, as one respondent's comments reflect:

*"I am concerned that my adjunct status and relative lack of job security conveys to students that I am not a significant member of the university faculty: a second-class citizen, if you will. I wonder if this inhibits them from forming a mentoring relationship with me, through which significant learning can occur in addition to the classroom experience."*

While intensely aware of their own "second-class" status and its potential negative effects on students, many respondents expressed a desire to protect their students from the effects of their employment situations even when doing so entailed considerable personal cost. A surprisingly large number of respondents spoke of "living in poverty" and identified terrible pay as a significant problem. Nevertheless, respondents also reported spending their own money – on copies, on personal computers, software, and more – to provide and ensure their students receive a quality educational experience:

*“I try to not let the lack of resource/material support affect my students. It does definitely have an impact on my bank account though! I often incur the cost of printing and copying syllabi, handouts, and other materials needed.”*

*“It won't, because I end up paying for them so the students aren't shortchanged.”*

*“No, access will not affect them because I use my resources.”*

**Limits to what individuals can do.** Although many individual contingent faculty work to overcome or compensate for the unprofessional working conditions, there are limits to what individuals can or should be expected to do.<sup>8</sup> In the words of one respondent:

*“Adjunct professors try hard to make their students’ experiences match or exceed what they would experience with a tenured professor. But there are obvious barriers to being able to do so. ... Though there are a few exceptional people who will always be able to overcome these barriers, none of us are supermen [sic], nor should we be asked to be.”*

At the core of many contingent faculty members’ stance in this matter is the identity of the independent professional, as well as the ideal of commitment to the public good. Thus, they speak about perfecting their teaching skills and abilities, even without support, and without connection to other faculty. These contingent faculty members do not connect their structural position to any diminishing of the quality of their professional craft in teaching a course.

Another dimension of professional culture and commitment to individual excellence regardless of structural working circumstances, is an investment in a career as a college professor. For many it is a question of honor punctuated by regret at not being able to do more, and for others it is a calculated strategy to lay the foundation for future, more permanent and protected employment. However, faculty are increasingly aware that contingent academic employment is unlikely to lead to stability or success but rather to more precariousness and possibly to burn-out, as one respondent noted:

*“I want to engage my students with state-of-the-art knowledge and teaching techniques, but it is mighty hard to do that without support or time-off to cultivate the scholarly depth.”*

Clearly, there are limits to what individual faculty can do to overcome circumstances that make it so difficult to excel in their professional work. With a telling comment on the limits of personal effort to overcome structural obstacles, one respondent explained:

*“I carry my office in a brief case to work every day. ... This affects my students. ... Not having an office is a major disincentive for staying around campus before or after class, so this affects my ability to be accessible for office hours. Lack of*

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<sup>8</sup> The question of why many contingent faculty accommodate to current working conditions is a complex one, not addressed in this report, but NFMF will be pursuing this in its ongoing work.

Limited access to pedagogical resources compromises the ability of colleges and universities to educate their students well.

*interaction with members of the department with permanent or tenured appointments at times makes my presentation of the material incongruous with the way they teach material. I am only able to infer these differences through students' comments in class or after exams when there is confusion that has resulted from this lack of coordination."*

Thus, as is the case with "just-in-time" appointments, limited access to pedagogical resources compromises the ability of colleges and universities to educate their students well, because so much of that education is done by so many contingent faculty whom the institution deprives of the basic tools and conditions of instruction. Not only does less notice of appointment mean less time for preparation, but less access to materials and resources (including the technological tools that are so central to virtually all instruction today) means less enrichment of course preparation and delivery.

## **V. Making timing and tools transparent**

Much of the policy and managerial discourse regarding the working conditions of contingent faculty can be reduced to invocations about the need for flexibility (to meet fluctuating enrollments) and about financial constraints (larger proportions of tenure-track faculty would be too costly). Yet these claims are longstanding, during dramatically better economic times and throughout decades-long, systematic, and substantial increases in the level of contingency. The result is that today more than two-thirds of the faculty workforce (not including graduate teaching assistants) works in positions of contingency.

Not only is there scarce campus or system level data to support the claims, little or no effort is being made by college administrators or policy makers to gather such data. Moreover, there is little consideration of any linkage between contingent faculty working conditions and students' learning conditions, and to student outcomes, despite considerable scholarly evidence of such effects.<sup>9</sup>

**Management's "need" for flexibility or managerial inattention?** The story that emerges from our exploratory survey is one of systematic, structured working conditions that defy common sense, undermine educational quality, and compromise the opportunity for contingent faculty members to serve students to the best of their ability. Our findings raise the question whether the current conditions of contingent work in academe are actually warranted by the oft-invoked managerial desire for flexibility. One of the key contributors to expanding numbers and percentages of part-time and contingent faculty is

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<sup>9</sup> A notable exception to this tendency is the new (2012) project out of USC headed by Adrianna Kezar: "The Changing Faculty and Student Success," whose purpose is "to examine and develop solutions to change the nature of the professoriate, the causes of the rise of non-tenure-track faculty, and the impact of this change on the teaching and learning environment." See <http://www.uscrossier.org/pullias/research/projects/changingfacultyandstudentsuccess/>

the increasing discretion of academic administrators in managing the academic workforce (Rhoades, 1998). Certainly some level of flexibility is necessary in staffing classes, given fluctuation in enrollment and occasional last-minute personnel emergencies. But when more than two-thirds of the faculty workforce is contingent and many have been "temporary" for decades, it is worth asking how much "flexibility" is actually needed.

The NFMF survey of contingent faculty members' working conditions is an on-line instrument and a low-cost investment.

The survey can be optimized for collection and analysis of data. The instrument can be adapted in at least two important ways:

- (1) to the specific circumstances and concerns at a particular college or system
- (2) to restrict the respondents to faculty of a particular campus, college/university, system, or metropolitan area (if a number of colleges or faculty groups in a metro area wanted to gather data about working conditions).

Our survey data suggest that campus administrations have too often reached beyond the demands of flexibility to a level of arbitrariness in hiring practices unrelated to fiscal prudence, reasonable flexibility, or any real educational purpose.

While economic necessity is also often touted as another reason behind hiring practices and working conditions of contingent faculty, it is clear from the survey data that the lack of support for contingent faculty could, in significant measure, be rectified at little monetary expense to an institution. It would not cost money, for instance, to ensure early access to library borrowing privileges and reserves. It would not cost money to reduce the digital divide between tenure-stream and contingent faculty and to provide the latter with better access to course management systems and software.

The cost of offering orientation to new faculty, of providing access to copying/printing and to departmental computers, would similarly be minimal. It should also be logistically possible to coordinate private office space for faculty on contingent appointments at a manageable expense. In short, many of the current structural conditions that define contingent faculty work could be changed with no or with minimal fiscal impact. Measuring the impact of their implementation would in turn provide valuable data that could then provide a systematic basis for gradually more comprehensive and forward-thinking reforms.<sup>10</sup>

Nor can the low level of access to critical instructional tools and resources for contingent faculty be explained by the need for managerial discretion. Providing contingent faculty with access to these resources would not hamper or reduce managerial discretion. The issue is not a need for managerial flexibility but rather the need to avoid structured managerial inattention to simple, common sense matters that can have profound educational consequences.

**The choice before us.** Our research project was aimed at addressing and rectifying the current situation in two ways. First, we developed an exploratory survey to collect and report new data about the back-to-school hiring practices (timing of appointments) and working conditions (availability of instructional tools) that define faculty contingency in colleges and universities across the country. This report highlights some of our findings, making the invisible visible.

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<sup>10</sup> The Program for Change, a blueprint based on existing conditions at Vancouver Community College in British Columbia, is an example of a possible guide for such long-range structural reform efforts. See [http://vccfa.ca/newsite/?page\\_id=587](http://vccfa.ca/newsite/?page_id=587)

Second, we are sharing our survey instrument, which is designed to be administered easily using on-line platforms. With this low-cost tool, faculty groups, campuses or higher education systems can generate data about, and make transparent, key features of faculty contingency that affect student learning.

The report's title poses a question, in the voice of a student looking at the class schedule trying to decide what to take and with whom, and wondering about the quality of what is being offered: 'Who is Professor "Staff," and how can this person teach so many classes?' This survey of contingent faculty begins to answer the question. The patterns in the experiences of faculty members working on contingent appointments reveal the real consequences of the timing of appointments and the limited availability of instructional resources. Our findings challenge the academic community to do better, not only for the faculty, but also for their students.

Ignorance is not bliss. Given the results of this study, there are two choices before us.

The first choice is whether to reduce our ignorance by gathering data to make transparent the hiring and employment practices of colleges and universities towards faculty on contingent appointments. The NFMF instrument is a ready remedy that can be adopted, at minimal cost.<sup>11</sup>

The second choice is whether to act on the data that emerge to improve college and universities' hiring and employment practices. Failure to redress these working conditions would send a clear message of inattention to and unconcern for the students and the larger community. There are substantial structural deficits in higher education, evident in the external allocation of state resources to colleges and universities (which have been declining in per student allocations), in the internal allocation of resources to instruction (which have been declining as a share of institutional expenditures), and in the structure of faculty employment (which has been declining in security and support). Our survey speaks to some of the symptoms and effects of these deficits. But given the initial steps that can be taken without major expense or loss of truly necessary flexibility, failure to improve working conditions at all would send a message of disdain for and disinvestment in not only faculty on contingent appointments but also for the learning conditions and the students these contingent faculty teach.

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<sup>11</sup> The New Faculty Majority Foundation (<http://www.nfmfoundation.org>) has already received some inquiries about utilizing the survey instrument. Part of the aim of this report is to promote the wider use of the instrument towards the end of better understanding and improving hiring and employment practices regarding contingent faculty to enhance students' educational experiences.

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## **Appendix A: Survey Instrument**

Download the  
survey instrument:

[www.nfmfoundation.org/NFMF-Back-to-School-Survey.html](http://www.nfmfoundation.org/NFMF-Back-to-School-Survey.html)

The New Faculty Majority Foundation Survey of contingent faculty working conditions is designed to be used, at limited cost of time and resources, to analyze the hiring practices and implications for educational quality at individual colleges or multiple colleges in metropolitan areas. This tool can be used to inform faculty, administrators, students, and the public with data that will contribute to improving students' learning conditions and educational quality by enhancing employment practices. The survey instrument is also available on-line at: <http://www.nfmfoundation.org/NFMF-Back-to-School-Survey.html>

Survey research was conducted by Dr. Esther S. Merves, NFMF Director of Research and Special Programs. NFM Foundation gratefully acknowledges the invaluable assistance of higher education researchers Andrew Donald Louder, Chelsea Waugaman, Daniel Santore, Marisa Allison, and Timothy Catlett.

Questions about the survey should be directed to Dr. Esther S. Merves, NFMF Director of Research and Special Programs at [esther.merves@newfacultymajority.info](mailto:esther.merves@newfacultymajority.info)

## **Appendix B: Survey Methodology**

In designing this study, the New Faculty Majority Foundation used what is becoming a new survey methodology in the study of contingent faculty. Our study was modeled after a survey conducted by the Coalition on the Academic Workforce (CAW) in 2010, the largest survey ever conducted of contingent faculty members' salaries.<sup>12</sup>

The method is based on an understanding of the employment conditions of contingent faculty, many of whom work at multiple institutions. It is based further on an understanding of the difficulty of getting systematic data on contingent faculty from large numbers of colleges and universities, which may either not keep data on numbers of non-tenure-track faculty and/or may vary widely as to titles for these professors. It is also based on an understanding of the long-term difficulty in getting significant numbers of contingent faculty to respond to traditional surveys. Moreover, there is no single, readily accessible database to form a proper population frame from which to sample non-tenure-track faculty (data reported by institutions to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), for example, involve multiple counts of faculty who teach at more than one college or university. And finally, remarkably, in a knowledge society that is confronting the impending retirement of large numbers of baby boomer faculty members, and that is calling for a restructuring of the academic workforce, there is no longer a national government survey of the professoriate.

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<sup>12</sup> See more about the CAW survey at <http://www.academicworkforce.org/survey.html>



Consequently, rather than trying to develop a conventional sampling frame, drawn from a defined population of institutions and faculty, NFMF adopted a variation of CAW's method of widely dispersing an on-line survey to various lists. In a small scale, limited cost, exploratory study, the NFMF utilized a convenience and snowball sampling strategy that involved sending a survey invitation to a New Faculty Majority contact list of nearly 1,500 through electronic mail, as well as sending the survey link to the following organizations for posting on their website, blog, Facebook page (or to send via email or tweet message to their constituents): the contingent academics listserv (adj-l), which is affiliated with the Coalition on Contingent Academic Labor, and which includes leaders of all the major faculty unions (NEA, AFT, and AAUP); Coalition on the Academic Workforce (CAW) listserv, which includes several disciplinary associations; Campaign for the Future of Higher Education listserv, which also includes faculty leaders from unions and other faculty groups; the California Part-time Faculty Association (CPFA); the California Faculty Association (the faculty union for the California State University System); the higher education locals in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU); and the American Association of University Professors (AAUP).

The survey included 50 questions (7 of which offered the opportunity for open-ended responses) and was available for respondents to complete online from September 13 to September 20, 2011. Five hundred responses were received. Using a convenience and snowball sampling strategy does not allow for calculation of response rate or sampling error rates. However, given the data we gathered, we can compare the characteristics of our group of respondents to the larger population of contingent faculty.

As noted in the body of the report, slightly over three-quarters of the respondents were teaching part-time. That is somewhat higher than the national distribution of non tenure-track faculty (about 69%), but it is certainly in the range. However, the NFMF survey respondents are significantly under-representative of full-time contingent faculty (11% of the respondents, compared to roughly 19% nationally). Still, the survey features not only the largest contingent of non-tenure-track faculty, but also the growth segment.

The NFMF respondents are more likely to teach in four than in two-year college settings, which also represents a departure from the distribution nationally. Slightly more than one-third (34%) of respondents teach in community colleges, though another 14% teach in both community colleges and four-year settings (52% teach at four-year institutions). Yet the value of this group of respondents is that they point to the extent to which problematic employment practices extend across institutional sectors.

Nationally, larger proportions of adjuncts are found in the humanities, social sciences, and in some professional fields than in the natural sciences. So, too, are the NFMF respondents. There were nearly two and a half times as many teaching in the humanities and arts as in the social sciences and in various professional fields (e.g., education, engineering, business). Fewer than one-fourth that number teach in math and the natural sciences.

It is not surprising given the distribution of the survey that there is a significant over-representation of non-tenure-track faculty members teaching in unionized environments. A strong majority (59%) of the respondents indicated that at least one of their appointments is governed by collectively bargained contracts. In this regard, the respondents to the NFM survey represent in an important sense a best case scenario of employment practices. Nationally, it is clear that some of the exemplar institutions, in terms of non-tenure-track faculty members' working conditions, have unionized faculty. It is also clear that promising practices for non-tenure-track faculty are more often than not found in collective bargaining settings. In short, then, it is likely that the responses to the NFMF survey represent an unrepresentatively positive characterization of employment practices experienced by non tenure-track faculty.

Thus, for all of its sampling limitations, the data capture important information about the experiences and sentiments of contingent faculty, who are seemingly invisible to many policymakers and who are understudied by scholars. Part of the aim of the NFMF survey is to draw attention to and improve on one of the most pressing dimensions of non-tenure-track faculty members' conditions of hiring and employment. In drawing attention to these issues and these faculty, part of the survey's aim is to encourage other groups to gather and utilize such data at the institutional, metropolitan area, and system level. Ultimately, though, if policymakers seek to enhance the accountability and performance of faculty work and student attainment, those efforts should be informed by data about faculty employment. It is time for the Department of Education, which is calling for so much change in higher education and in the work of its professionals, to get back in the business, through the National Center for Educational Statistics, of systematically collecting extensive data that accurately and fully address the various forms of faculty employment, including the new faculty majority of non tenure-track faculty.