Ensuring good learning outcomes through an increasingly contingent workforce

Think the stereotypical faculty position – i.e., a full-time, tenured or tenure-track professor focused on teaching, research and service – is still the norm in higher education? It’s not. Today some 70% of faculty at U.S. institutions hold full- or part-time non-tenure-track positions. Forty-five years ago the situation was reversed, with nearly 80% of faculty holding tenured or tenure-track positions.

Key takeaways

- Increased use of contingent faculty has been driven by needs for cost savings, professional expertise, staffing flexibility and new functional roles.
- Four new workforce models have emerged: adjunct, full-time non-tenure track, medical school clinical and online/for-profit.
- Adjuncts generally lack the time to advise students outside the classroom, which can negatively affect learning outcomes.
- Several best practices can enhance contingent faculty’s effectiveness.

Drivers of change

Core reasons for the increased use of adjuncts and other contingent faculty include cost savings; the desire to bring professional expertise into the curriculum; institutional needs to fill short-term labor gaps; and the creation of new functional roles related to distance learning, continuing education, job training and massive open online courses (MOOCs).

Emerging workforce models

As institutions have changed the composition of their faculty in recent years, four new workforce models have developed:

- **Adjunct** – The adjunct model was the first new approach to emerge. Faculty who fill adjunct positions generally fall into two camps: people with non-academic professional experience (sometimes called “professors of practice”) and academics employed part time.

- **Full-time non-tenure track** – This model, which encompassed nearly 20% of faculty positions in 2013, unbundles the traditional faculty roles of teaching, research and service. Instead, positions specialize in one of these roles, with the majority focused on teaching.

- **Medical school clinical** – Faculty appointments in this model are specialized along three tracks: research, education and clinical. Each track is included in the
governance process and offers comparable salaries, benefits and status. Appointments generally range from one to five years.

- **Online/for-profit** – This model breaks positions down into specialized functional roles, including instructional design, subject matter experts, website development, course delivery, student interaction and grading. In general, very few faculty members are employed full time.

**Adjuncts’ work environment negatively impacts students**

Research indicates subpar student learning outcomes in adjunct-taught courses relative to those taught by tenure-track faculty. This difference, however, is best explained by adjuncts’ work environment, not their teaching ability. In particular, adjuncts often lack an office on campus and spend little time on-site when not teaching. Accordingly, they have limited interaction with students outside the classroom, which can impact learning, retention and graduation rates. Other concerns involve adjuncts’ lack of involvement in curriculum planning, professional development opportunities and awareness of institutional goals.

**Best practices for achieving good learning outcomes**

Given the challenges faced by adjuncts and other contingent staff, what can be done to ensure good learning outcomes? While the optimum approach will vary based on an institution’s mission, budget, location and other variables, research suggests a few best practices for leaders and administrators to follow:

- Match adjuncts to the right classes. First-year courses might not be a good fit, since many students are likely to need extra help outside the classroom.
- Convey clear expectations for learning outcomes and student experiences.
- Provide some type of office space, even if it’s shared or evening-only.
- Use technology and social media to help connect adjuncts with their students.
- Provide orientation at the start of each semester to cover policy, legal and institutional topics, as well as teaching and learning issues.
- Encourage adjuncts to participate in new faculty training programs.
- Connect adjuncts with faculty who have previously taught a given course and can provide feedback and mentorship.
- Create an adjunct-shared governance council to advise the institution on issues affecting students’ and adjuncts’ experiences.

**For more information**

To learn more about new business models in higher education, go to www.tiaa-crefinstitute.org > Audiences > Higher Education.