

The Plight of Part-Time Instructors: Two Similar Experiences

Considerable work is presently being focused on the study of General Education, and one of the fundamental principles identified by the Review Committee is faculty commitment. I believe any discussion of faculty commitment in the teaching of General Education must examine the existing hiring and retention policies governing the use of part-time faculty. Originally, part-time instructors were hired as a buffer to accommodate fluctuating enrollments. However, what started out as a temporary solution has developed into an ongoing personnel nightmare. What we have now is a significant portion of the University's salary lines going to pay the meager salaries of a number of faculty with temporary status but full-time teaching responsibilities.

There are approximately 500 faculty at Western. Of those, at least 20% have part-time or fixed-term status. In my own department, there are 24 non-tenure track faculty out of a total of 44. Their appointments range from Visiting Assistant Professors to Visiting Instructors (with Ph.D.'s or ABD status), Visiting Lecturers (with M.A.'s), to Teaching Assistants. Most are employed on yearly contracts tied to a 1997-1998 TPR document which states that after three years their employment will be terminated. This revolving door policy has done little to build continuity or community within the Freshman English program, perhaps the most vital General Education program on campus. Faculty commitment cannot be an issue when the majority of those teaching General Education courses must spend time searching elsewhere for a position with a future and benefits. Most importantly, the success of our much publicized integrated computer instruction in Freshman Composition seems bleak when each year faculty must be trained and oriented in the use of the electronic classrooms. Since technology is changing the way we teach, shouldn't we examine how much we value those doing the teaching, even the part-timers? Furthermore, it is time to be honest with ourselves about the quality of the teaching and commitment of those hired at the "last minute," as many part-timers are. If we are indeed committed to "raising the bar" and bringing Western into the twenty-first century technologically, we cannot afford to continue relying on "visiting" faculty to staff General Education.

Several of us across campus have managed to keep our "temporary" jobs by playing "musical visiting positions." One faculty member in the English Department has endured "visiting" status for thirty years. We realize that the University's reliance on this small cadre of experienced and dedicated part-timers is expedient and cost effective. But, at the same time, it is has become demoralizing and exploitative. Fortunately, our dedication to the teaching profession and to Western's students keeps us from tearing up our yearly contracts or adopting the bold tactics of our fellow part-timers at the United Parcel Service. With university costs increasing and "cutback" becoming an administrative mantra, abandoning the use of part-time faculty and

creating a two-tiered but equally valued faculty to meet the growing needs of our students and projected enrollments seems worthy of consideration.

I realize my view of how Western operates is limited, but in all honesty, after ten years of teaching and service, I cannot reconcile my commitment with having no job security, health benefits, retirement, or any hope for advancement. Likewise, I cannot help but wonder where our General Education program will be academically and technologically if we continue on the course of considering faculty expendable. Any development of faculty commitment must first consider the value the institution places on those doing the teaching. How we treat our least empowered faculty speaks loudly of Western's commitment to teaching.

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Imagine that based upon your expertise in your field you have been recruited to teach on the faculty of a prestigious university. Imagine that after nine years' service you have gained superior evaluations from your department head, excellent evaluations from your students, been awarded grants for study abroad, and are the author of a best selling work. But during these nine years of faithful service you have seen everyone on campus from the chancellors to the grass cutters get a pay raise every year. You have seen tuition double and major construction projects completed, yet your salary has remained the same without so much as a cost of living increase. Imagine that you may not speak out against these conditions without fear of capricious dismissal.

A paranoid fantasy? Hardly. These are the present working conditions for those who teach here part-time. While full time faculty earn benefits and wages below the national average in most departments, some whose contracts require them to teach as much as 10 hours per week, both semesters, are paid less than \$5,300 a year. Any institution which doubles its prices for services (tuition) yet refuses to increase the wages for those responsible for providing those services cannot escape ethical scrutiny for long.

It is time to face up to this institutional pattern of exploitation. We have been ignored as if our very existence were an embarrassment to the tenured faculty and the administration. But the service of the part-time faculty is needed now and will be vital to the success of the university in the future. Yet those who provide these essential services have no job security, no bargaining power, and are permitted no role in university governance. The vital link between instructors and control of the curriculum they teach is absent, as part-time instructors have no representation.

It is well past time that the university acknowledge its responsibilities to all its faculty regarding governance and compensation. Every year the legislature appropriates funds to raise faculty salaries, but these funds have been denied those who have no organized voice to question why. Having someone serve as a "visiting lecturer" for ten years is ludicrous, a violation of AAUP guidelines, and a contradiction in terms.

How long will these highly skilled educators lacking a terminal degree remain an exploited underclass at WCU? What is needed is a system of rewards that recognizes performance and

years of service. What is wrong with the idea of a tiered hierarchy for promotion of part-time faculty? Harvard has a system whereby an instructor could advance to the rank of junior lecturer and later to senior lecturer, adjunct assistant, associate, and full professor. Ranking non-tenured faculty would serve this university well. It would promote higher standards, give all the teaching staff incentive to perform at their best, and greatly improve morale. This university has much to gain by treating its part-time faculty fairly as valued members of its community of scholars. It has much more to lose by continuing in its present course. The unfair practices currently engaged serve no one well.

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