

FACULTY

Universities Take Steps to Improve Working Conditions for Adjuncts

By *Nell Gluckman* | APRIL 05, 2017

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Pennsylvania State U.

Mary Miles, a senior lecturer in English at Penn State's main campus, has taught there for 15 years, but she says she still fields questions from students about whether she is a "real professor."

For years, Pennsylvania State University's faculty had watched the percentage of untenured professors in their ranks inch upward. Then, about four years ago, that group was finally in the majority. It was a wake-up call.

"When you hit the point where you're majority fixed-term faculty, you've got some explaining to do," said Michael Bérubé, a literature professor who is chair of the University Faculty Senate's committee on faculty affairs. "Either you come up with conversion to tenure or you come up with a good way of stabilizing and improving their working conditions and treating them like the professionals they are."

The Faculty Senate went with the latter. For two years it has been working on efforts to improve the work-lives of non-tenured faculty, who are called fixed-term faculty at Penn State. In its latest action, the senate voted last month to recommend that the

administration standardize titles for faculty who are not on the tenure track and, in most cases, include the word "professor" in their titles.

The change is meant both to provide consistency across Penn State's 24 campuses and many colleges, and to acknowledge the importance of the role fixed-term teachers and researchers play.

Penn State's attempt to turn jobs off the tenure track into a viable career path is more comprehensive than most such efforts, but it has plenty of forebears. A growing number of institutions are responding to swelling adjunct ranks by attacking the stuff adjuncts most commonly complain about — wondering whether they'll have a job year to year, feeling disrespected, and being unable to get a promotion.

Last year Penn State overhauled its process for promoting faculty off the tenure track. The university is in the process of forming committees made up of non-tenure-track faculty that will review their peers and recommend them for promotion. The system also added a third employment tier for adjunct faculty so they can be promoted twice during their careers at Penn State.

A unit head, whether it's a dean, a department head, or some other administrator, must also approve the promotions. The promotion process this system is meant to replace varies between departments, but typically promotions are granted by a unit head without the advice of a committee of peers.

"It's all about making the role of a non-tenure-track faculty a career path as opposed to something you get stuck doing," said Mary Miles, a senior lecturer in the English department at Penn State's main campus in State College, who serves as chair of the liberal-arts caucus of faculty senators and worked to get the uniform titles approved by the senate.

Ms. Miles said having the word "professor" in her title will make her position sound more integral to the university, where she has taught for 15 years. She has grown tired of answering questions from students about whether she is a "real professor."

"I understand that the professors have cleared more rigorous hurdles," she said. "It seems that in salaries, it's reflected there. So why should it also be reflected in my email signature?"

Under the new title system recommended by the Faculty Senate, faculty members with large teaching loads and terminal degrees could be promoted from assistant teaching professor to associate teaching professor to teaching professor. Teaching faculty without terminal degrees could progress from lecturer to assistant teaching professor to associate professor. The titles are similar for research and clinical faculty members.

The title recommendations have yet to be approved by Eric J. Barron, the university's president, but Blannie E. Bowen, vice provost for academic affairs, said Mr. Barron is likely to sign off on the changes.

Constructing a New System

Mr. Bérubé said forming the promotion committees was the core of the project at Penn State. Unifying titles was more of an aesthetic matter, he said, but it was no less important.

"That was the structure," he said. "Now we gotta do the drywall."

At first he was open to giving non-tenure-track faculty the same titles as their tenure-track colleagues. But he and other faculty members worried that obscuring the difference between the two types of jobs would make it difficult to keep track of the ratio of tenure-track to non-tenure-track faculty, which the Faculty Senate didn't want to widen.

The Faculty Senate has also been careful to stress that new titles should not bring with them added responsibilities. "Fixed-term faculty whose positions involve high teaching loads, for example, should not be expected to develop research agendas simply because their title becomes 'teaching professor,'" the senate's recommendation says.

Each promotion should come with a salary increase beyond the merit raises faculty already receive, the report says. Raises for tenure-track faculty are about 8 percent, Mr. Bowen said, but non-tenure-track faculty raises vary.

Maria Maisto, president of New Faculty Majority, a national coalition for adjunct and contingent faculty members, said a number of universities are trying to improve non-tenure-track faculty positions, but Penn State is ahead of the curve.

"It's never just about the compensation," Ms. Maisto said. "It's never just about the title. It's about recognition of the professionalism of the job and the importance of the job to the core mission of the institution."

Multiyear Contracts

Penn State is not alone in attempting to bring adjuncts' titles in line with their contributions. The University of Maryland has adopted uniform terms for its contingent faculty, as did the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences at Northwestern University.

The Weinberg College's goal was similar to that at Penn State: to foster a culture of respect for contingent faculty. The college also lengthened adjunct-faculty contracts to up to five years, which Mónica Russel y Rodríguez, associate dean of the college's teaching-track and visiting faculty and a senior lecturer in anthropology, said was an important part of the effort.

"I feel very strongly that we lose out when we give faculty very short contracts," she said. "We're not encouraging them to be invested in the institution."

James A. Strauss, a senior lecturer of biology at Penn State who is the Faculty Senate chair and a fixed-term faculty member, said a senate committee is preparing a report on multiyear contracts for fixed-term faculty. At the moment, the length of such contracts varies across the university system.

"I think it makes our total operation that much more professional," Mr. Strauss said. "From a student perspective, you know who's going to be there teaching."

Mr. Bowen declined to comment on the multiyear contracts. But he argued that the ability to earn two promotions that come with a salary increase — a practice the university has already adopted — is "much better than saying we'll give you a longer contract."

Another way to give nontenured faculty more job security is to create a way for them to switch into the tenure track. That's what West Chester University of Pennsylvania, whose faculty have collective-bargaining rights, has done. A provision in their contract allows long-serving, full-time faculty to apply for tenure. The first group of candidates will submit their applications in the fall, according to Seth Kahn, an English professor who has written about labor unions and contingent faculty.

Mr. Kahn pointed to other large universities — among the institutions most reliant on adjunct labor — that are moving in the direction of more accommodating policies for non-tenure-track faculty members.

At the University of Delaware, for example, non-tenure-track faculty can qualify for a series of multiyear contracts. The length of the contracts faculty members are eligible for increases with years served. Each new contract for a faculty member is awarded after a peer review.

Adjunctification has been described as a crisis, so the policy changes at institutions like Penn State might seem incremental. But Ms. Maisto said they still have value as a way to begin to address the working conditions of faculty who won't be getting tenure.

"In general, things are going in the right direction," she said.

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