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Decline of the Tenure Track Raises Concerns

By [ALAN FINDER](#)

DEARBORN, Mich. — Professors with tenure or who are on a tenure track are now a distinct minority on the country's campuses, as the ranks of part-time instructors and professors hired on a contract have swelled, according to federal figures analyzed by the American Association of University Professors.

Elaine Zendlovitz, a former retail store manager who began teaching college courses six years ago, is representative of the change. Technically, Ms. Zendlovitz is a part-time Spanish professor, although, in fact, she teaches nearly all the time.

Her days begin at the [University of Michigan](#), Dearborn, with introductory classes. Some days end at 10 p.m. at Oakland Community College, in the suburbs north of Detroit, as she teaches six courses at four institutions.

"I think we part-timers can be everything a full-timer can be," Ms. Zendlovitz said during a break in a 10-hour teaching day. But she acknowledged: "It's harder to spend time with students. I don't have the prep time, and I know how to prepare a fabulous class."

The shift from a tenured faculty results from financial pressures, administrators' desire for more flexibility in hiring, firing and changing course offerings, and the growth of community colleges and regional public universities focused on teaching basics and preparing students for jobs.

It has become so extreme, however, that some universities are pulling back, concerned about the effect on educational quality. [Rutgers University](#) agreed in a labor settlement in August to add 100 tenure or tenure-track positions. Across the country, faculty unions are organizing part-timers. And the [American Federation of Teachers](#) is pushing legislation in 11 states to mandate that 75 percent of classes be taught by tenured or tenure-track teachers.

Three decades ago, adjuncts — both part-timers and full-timers not on a tenure track — represented only 43 percent of professors, according to the professors association, which has studied data reported to the federal Education Department. Currently, the association says, they account for nearly 70 percent of professors at colleges and universities, both public and private.

John W. Curtis, the union's director of research and public policy, said that while the number of tenured and tenure-track professors has increased by about 25 percent over the past 30 years, they have been swamped by the growth in adjunct faculty. Over all, the number of people teaching at colleges and universities has doubled since 1975.

University officials agree that the use of nontraditional faculty is soaring. But some contest the professors association's calculation, saying that definitions of part-time and full-time professors vary, and that it is not

possible to determine how many courses, on average, each category of professor actually teaches.

Many state university presidents say tight budgets have made it inevitable that they turn to adjuncts to save money.

"We have to contend with increasing public demands for accountability, increased financial scrutiny and declining state support," said Charles F. Harrington, provost of the [University of North Carolina](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/20/education/20adjunct.html?_r=1&o...), Pembroke. "One of the easiest, most convenient ways of dealing with these pressures is using part-time faculty," he said, though he cautioned that colleges that rely too heavily on such faculty "are playing a really dangerous game."

Mark B. Rosenberg, chancellor of the State University System of Florida, said that part-timers can provide real-world experience to students and fill gaps in nursing, math, accounting and other disciplines with a shortage of qualified faculty. He also said the shift could come with costs.

Adjuncts are less likely to have doctoral degrees, educators say. They also have less time to meet with students, and research suggests that students who take many courses with them are somewhat less likely to graduate.

"Really, we are offering less educational quality to the students who need it most," said Ronald G. Ehrenberg, director of the Cornell Higher Education Research Institute, noting that the soaring number of adjunct faculty is most pronounced in community colleges and the less select public universities. The elite universities, both public and private, have the fewest adjuncts.

"It's not that some of these adjuncts aren't great teachers," Dr. Ehrenberg said. "Many don't have the support that the tenure-track faculty have, in terms of offices, secretarial help and time. Their teaching loads are higher, and they have less time to focus on students."

Dr. Ehrenberg and a colleague analyzed 15 years of national data and found that graduation rates declined when public universities hired large numbers of contingent faculty.

Several studies of individual universities have determined that freshmen taught by many part-timers were more likely to drop out.

"Having an adjunct in a course is not necessarily bad for you, but having too many adjuncts might be," said Eric P. Bettinger, an economics professor at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland.

Students say they can often tell when a professor is part-time. Mike Brennan, a sophomore at the University of Michigan, Dearborn, said the courses taught by adjuncts tend to be more basic and the exams less challenging. "They have so many classes that they give tests that are easier to grade," Mr. Brennan said.

Carly Matkovich, a senior at the university, said she had bonded more with her part-time teachers, in part because they have more practical experience. But it is usually hard to find time to talk with them outside class. "They're never around," Ms. Matkovich said. "It does make me feel kind of cheated."

At some departments the proportion of faculty who are tenured is startlingly low. The psychology department at Florida International University in Miami has 2,400 undergraduate majors but only 19 tenured or tenure-track professors who teach, according to a department self-assessment. It is possible for a

psychology major to graduate without taking a course with a full-time faculty member.

“We’re at a point where it is extreme,” said Suzanna Rose, a psychology professor who said she stepped down as department head in August, primarily because she could not hire as many tenure-track professors as she thought the department needed. “I’m just very concerned about the quality.”

Ronald Berkman, the provost at Florida International, disputed her numbers, saying the psychology department has 23 professors who are tenured or tenure track and 5 full-time teachers on contracts. The department is conducting a search for three more tenure-track professors, Dr. Berkman said.

“Which is not to say that they don’t need more, which they do,” he said.

Tenure, a practice carried from Germany to the United States, was designed to guarantee academic freedom to professors by protecting them against dismissal. Some argue that it also protects incompetent or lazy teachers and sometimes leaves universities saddled with professors in disciplines that have lost currency.

The lack of tenure can leave adjuncts vulnerable. In a number of cases, professors outside the tenure track have been dropped after run-ins with administrators over everything from grading to opinion articles in newspapers.

Several unions have been organizing adjunct faculty in recent years. In Michigan, the American Federation of Teachers has successfully organized full-time, nontenure-track professors at Eastern Michigan University, as well as part-time and full-time adjuncts at the University of Michigan campuses in Ann Arbor, Dearborn and Flint.

“They are so exploited, the only difficulty in organizing adjuncts is finding them,” said David Hecker, president of the teachers federation.

Keith Hoeller, who has been teaching philosophy for 17 years as a part-timer in Seattle, described it this way: “It’s a caste system, and we are the untouchables of academia.”

Aletia Droba taught for 10 years as a part-time philosophy professor in the Detroit area. She said she was paid as little as \$1,400 a course at community colleges and as much as \$2,400 a class at universities.

Some semesters, Ms. Droba said, she taught as many as seven courses at four colleges, including across the border in Canada. This fall, she landed a full-time, non-tenure track job. She will teach five courses in the fall and spring combined — less than the number she often taught in a single semester as a part-timer.

Ms. Droba will not miss the constant driving that a part-timer does, shuttling among universities. “My students used to ask me how come I knew so much about current affairs,” she said. “And I’d say, ‘I listen to NPR all day.’ ”

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