

Convert Lines or Convert People?: The Polarizing Debate Over How to Restore Faculty Tenure

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On January 12, 2017, faculty unions representing community and technical college faculty across Washington state got their allies in the Washington state legislature to introduce [HB 1168](#), a law that would compel the state's community and technical colleges to ensure that seventy percent of their faculty will be on the tenure track by 2023.

HB 1168 would vastly improve the pay and working conditions for community college faculty throughout the state, and could serve as a model for faculty everywhere to lobby their state legislatures to reverse the [decline of tenure for college faculty](#) at community colleges across the country. According to [analysts in the state legislature](#), the bill would get the state to commit to increase the percentage of tenure track and full-time lecturer faculty by 16 percent in just six years, with the expectation that full-time faculty would make up 70 percent of all instructors on every campus in Washington state. Part-time lecturers make up 46 percent of all community college faculty in the state, but earn 38 percent less than their full-time colleagues for teaching the same number of courses. So reducing the ranks of part-time faculty would increase faculty job stability and increase faculty salaries. According to state legislative analysts, converting part-time faculty lines to full-time lines would cost the state an additional \$26,100 per position. Such an investment would require a massive political mobilization by faculty to convince the legislature to fund, one that [even faculty represented by labor unions have been so far unable to pull off successfully](#).

But not all community college faculty are united behind the ambitious plan. In a public letter on January 23rd to the legislators who sponsored the bill, Keith Hoeller called the bill "The Adjunct Annihilation Act." Hoeller, who is co-founder of the Washington Part-Time Faculty Association and Editor of [Equality for Contingent Faculty: Overcoming the Two-Tier System](#), criticized the bill because it supposedly "seeks to solve the adjunct faculty crisis by getting rid of adjunct professors and replacing them with full-time tenure-track faculty." He also argued that "national research has shown that those who teach off the tenure-track are

better teachers.” Instead of converting faculty lines from part-time to full-time, he concluded, “If you want to spend this kind of money on college faculty, I urge you to spend it to improve the poverty-level salaries of adjuncts, who average less than \$20K a year for teaching half-time.”

The Great Class Divide Between College Instructors

The contours of the debate between faculty over HB 1168 are remarkably similar to debates taking place between tenure track and non-tenure track faculty in academic departments and schools across the country. Though the decline of tenure is almost universally decried, faculty are often split— sometimes passionately so— over how to respond to the decline of tenure.

Generally speaking, tenure track faculty tend to see the decline of tenure as a form of de-professionalization. This emphasis on professional decline is based in the arguments that 1) contingent faculty do not have true academic freedom; 2) they depend upon patronage more than peer review for reappointment; and 3) they carry too high a teaching load when they teach full-time to reasonably provide their students with the quality of education that they deserve.

As Jennifer Ruth and Michael Berube put this argument in their book, *The Humanities, Higher Education, and Academic Freedom: Three Necessary Arguments*, “faculty need the protections of tenure to participate actively in shared governance, and relatedly, when faculty without academic freedom participate in governance, it tends to accelerate the erosion of tenure.” This is because, they argue, “hiring legions of faculty off the tenure track leads to the creation of fiefdoms and patronage systems.” (p. 87) Therefore, reversing the decline of tenure requires re-professionalization, and re-professionalization requires the restoration of tenure: appointments that are long-term, formal and competitive, and have reasonable limits on teaching workloads.

Non-tenure track faculty tend to see the decline of tenure less as a form of de-professionalization, and more as a form of hyper-exploitation. They are critical of tenure track colleagues who get paid twice as much money to teach fewer courses per term. They experience “shared governance” as the process through which tenure track instructors allocate each other the smallest courses at the most desirable times of day to teach, leaving the early morning and late afternoon introductory courses for adjunct faculty who can’t vote in faculty meetings and who can be fired for expressing dissatisfaction with the course allocation process. Adjunct faculty are also deeply resentful of the innumerable slights they must endure to perform their jobs— from lower pay to being unable to vote in faculty

meetings to having shared or no offices to being evaluated and reappointed without any written criteria.

For all these reasons, many non-tenure track faculty tend to view tenure track faculty efforts to reform higher education with suspicion and resentment. Even though HB 1168 specifically states that “The plan must include converting part-time faculty positions to full-time positions, creating more opportunities for part-time faculty, and converting classes or assignments left vacant by attrition”, an advocate like Hoeller could not believe that the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, or any schools or departments would ever create a plan to increase tenure density that would not “annihilate” adjunct faculty in the end. And even though the faculty unions that push for HB 1168 represent thousands of non-tenure track faculty, Hoeller, like some other adjunct faculty, is skeptical that tenure track faculty won’t throw their union brothers and sisters under the bus.

Increasing tenure density will do little to address the hyper-exploitation of those who remain part-time lecturers. In addition, most part-time lecturers can’t compete equitably for full-time or tenure track faculty positions that are created to replace their part-time lines. [Fewer than half of all lecturers in the U.S. have doctoral degrees](#), which are prerequisites for most full-time and nearly all tenure track faculty jobs in academic programs. Even lecturers with doctoral degrees will struggle to compete for tenure track lines that require research productivity, because eking out a living as a lecturer requires devoting all of one’s time to teaching.

Adjuncts therefore tend to advocate for the conversion of all people who are teaching off the tenure track, not the conversion of faculty lines. They frame the conversion of people as a way to provide better pay and more job stability to longtime instructors, without regard to whether those instructors have PhDs or obtained their positions through an open search.

The class conflict between tenure track and non-tenure track faculty highlights how the structure of work produces distinct forms of class consciousness. Tenure track faculty see the processes they went through to get their jobs as normal rather than exceptional, and view converting adjuncts to tenure track lines without open searches or PhDs or research requirements as an attack on their profession’s standards. Tenure track faculty are especially sensitive to what they perceive to be attempts at de-professionalization because they are under growing pressure from administrators to monetize the curriculum (increase class size, increase teaching loads, increase the speed at which students complete their degrees, etc.) in ways that do not support or value faculty research.

Non-tenure track faculty experience exploitation as widespread and normalized by the tenure system, and tend to be critical of the assumption that experienced adjunct faculty are somehow unqualified to teach college courses despite years of solid student evaluations and regular reappointments. They argue that open searches and research requirements for new faculty lines would not re-professionalize higher education so much as provide the latest and greatest insult to adjunct faculty's years of underpaid teaching and unpaid service and mentorship.

For partisans of the conversion of lines vs conversion of people debate, the key is for one side to win. But it's hard to see how the victory of one party is possible without the support of the other side, given that victory requires developing a force powerful enough to resist the systematic under-funding of instruction at both public and private universities across the country.

In the face of this simmering and sometimes open class conflict between faculty over how to respond to the decline of tenure, some reformers have developed unconventional solutions to help faculty find common cause by reframing the discussion. In future blog posts, I will give a brief overview of some of these proposals to balance concerns over professionalism with concerns about fairness— from Alt-Ac to faculty labor unions to the creation of a “teaching tenure track.”

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