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In Faculty Hiring, Temporary Less Often Means Part-Time

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By Peter Schmidt

Colleges have become increasingly dependent on full-time non-tenure-track instructors in recent years, a trend that, at most types of higher-education institutions, has helped cause the ranks of part-time faculty members to ebb after decades of rapid growth, according to a new synthesis of federal data.

Doctoral institutions, the study found, are the only ones at which overall growth in the number of part-time faculty members has continued unabated alongside a similar rise in positions for full-timers off the tenure track. One result is that the share of doctoral institutions' faculty members employed on a contingent basis rose by nearly five percentage points over the period covered by the study, 2005 to 2013.

Although the share of doctoral universities' faculties who are tenured or on the tenure track remains larger than at other colleges, the gap between them and other types of institutions has narrowed.

Baccalaureate institutions experienced a comparatively small two-percentage-point drop in the share of their faculty members who are tenure-track or tenured. Such professors' share of faculties held steady at master's-degree universities and associate-degree colleges.

"Our largest and most prestigious universities," the study found, "are the ones that are most culpable in the employment trends that are upending the tenure system and spreading low-wage labor as a routine means of educating undergraduates."

‘A Worrisome Predictor’

Across all colleges and universities, a report on the study's findings says, the fraction of faculty members who have received tenure essentially held steady. The proportion who are untenured but on the tenure track declined, however, from 11.3 percent to 9.9 percent, a development that the report calls "a worrisome predictor of future declines in the fraction of all faculty who hold tenure."

"The tenure system thus seems likely to continue to weaken," says the report, "Faculty and Graduate Student Employment at U.S. Colleges and Universities, 2013."

Steven J. Shulman, a professor of economics at Colorado State University at Fort Collins and research director at its Center for the Study of Academic Labor, conducted the study by examining faculty-employment data at more than 2,600 regionally accredited, nonmedical colleges provided to the U.S. Education Department's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System in 2013. He compared that information to similar data gathered by the Education Department in 2005 and analyzed by the American Association of University Professors in a report issued the following year.

Mr. Shulman cautioned that, in its figures for individual colleges, his report, like the AAUP report before it, suffers from some flaws and inconsistencies in the data that institutions have reported to the federal government. Some major research universities, for example, have improbably said they have no part-time faculty members or no full-time instructors who are off the tenure track. Nevertheless, he said, he is confident that the misreporting by a few institutions has not substantially skewed his overall findings for certain institution types.

Kiernan R. Mathews, who tracks faculty-employment trends as a director of the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education, at Harvard University, said a 2011 revision in how the federal government counts full- and part-time faculty members might also have slightly skewed the new report's figures. The broader trends noted by Mr. Shulman, however, date back to even before 2005.

Benefits of Hiring Full-Timers

Adrianna Kezar, who studies contingent academic labor as a professor of higher education at the University of Southern California and director of the Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success, said a shift from part-time to full-time contingent instructors would be in keeping with the advice she gives colleges interested in improving student success.

"I can go on and on about all of the positive things about full-time employment" of faculty members, she said. She argues, for example, that, compared with part-timers, full-timers tend to be more readily available to assist students outside of class, and tend to work on longer-term contracts, helping to ensure consistency in the curriculum. Doctoral institutions may have more leeway to hire part-time instructors, she said, because students in postgraduate courses do not need as much academic support.

Although part-time instructors are paid substantially less than full-timers are, Ms. Kezar said, there are hidden costs attached to their high turnover rates and the need to recruit and train a new crop of them every academic term.

"What I am definitely hearing now is an interest in consolidating teaching into more full-time, non-tenure-track positions," said Mr. Mathews, who works with more than 200 colleges' academic administrators as director of the Harvard-based collaborative. Using full-time instructors "gives some stability to the students and the faculty" and helps increase the share of faculty members in academic departments who are able to handle noninstructional tasks related to public service and shared governance.

Among baccalaureate institutions that are employing more full-time and fewer part-time non-tenure-track instructors is Clayton State University, in Georgia. It reported having 153 part-time and 56 full-time instructors in 2005 and 64 part-time and 65 full-time instructors in 2013.

Thomas Hynes, Clayton State's president, on Tuesday said administrators there had made a concerted effort to consolidate multiple part-time positions into fewer full-

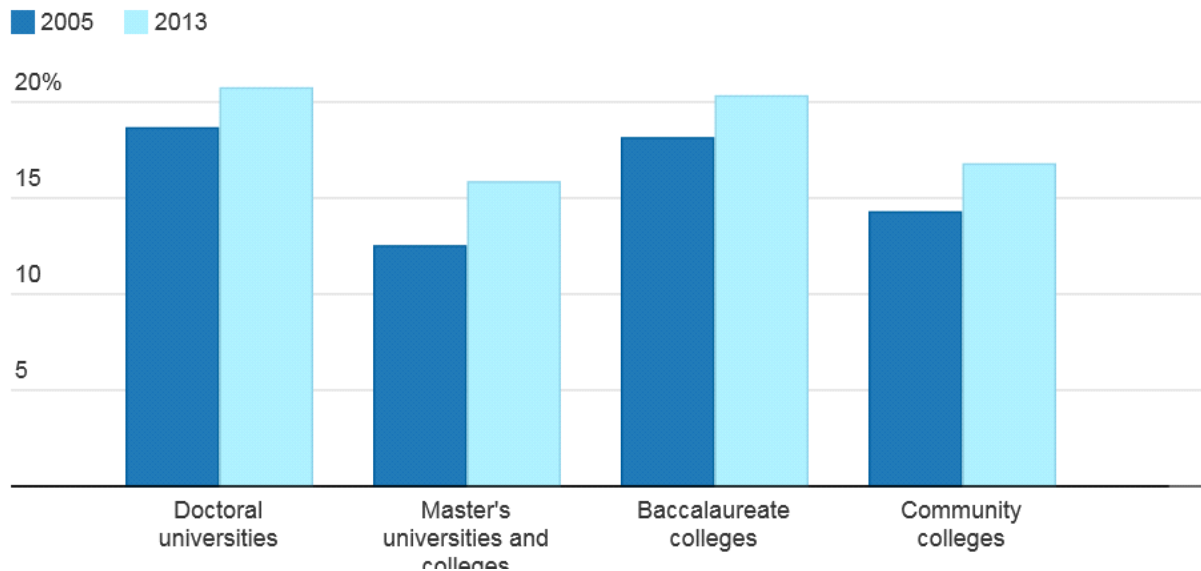
time ones based partly on a "philosophical belief that full-time faculty were more likely to be devoted to our institution and our students."

The last economic downturn, Mr. Hynes said, also left administrators there worried about increased competition with other Atlanta-area colleges over qualified part-time instructors who could help handle rising enrollments. Offering full-time jobs gave Clayton State an edge in the local labor market.

Peter Schmidt writes about affirmative action, academic labor, and issues related to academic freedom. Contact him at peter.schmidt@chronicle.com.

More Non-Tenure-Track Full-Timers

Between 2005 and 2013, institutions of all types hired a larger share of full-time faculty members who are off the tenure track.



Where Is the Use of Part-Time Faculty Members Growing?

Between 2005 and 2013, the share of part-time faculty members rose only at doctoral institutions.

