

The Delphi Project Database of

Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Example Practices

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The Increasingly Strong Involvement of Term Faculty in Faculty Governance and Administration at American University

Websites: <http://american.edu> <http://www.american.edu/facultysenate/>
<http://www.american.edu/provost/academicaffairs/faculty-manual-toc.cfm>

✓ Policy Revisions ✓ Participation in Decision Making ✓ Governance

Non-tenure-track (or “term”) faculty at American University have had an increasingly strong presence in faculty governance and administration over the past several years, much of it initiated by term faculty themselves. These opportunities and obligations have resulted from self-advocacy by term faculty and from changes in university policies, as well as from the growing awareness on the part of tenure-track faculty and administration of the essential roles that term faculty play. As in many institutions, term faculty make up about one third of the total faculty; their heavier teaching load allows tenure-track faculty to teach fewer courses and devote more time to research. And the provost has repeatedly characterized term positions as “career” positions.

Faculty Manual Revision

In 2009, American University undertook a major revision of its faculty manual. A draft of the manual was circulated among faculty, and the term faculty were surprised to see that the section on term-faculty policies remained unchanged. This “section” was only a few paragraphs long (in a 70-plus page document); term faculty’s “invisibility” in the university was codified by the dearth of policies regulating their employment. The manual-revision committee held a town hall for term faculty to offer suggestions and feedback. This town hall had the largest attendance of any of the feedback meetings, and a lively, pointed discussion ensued, covering such topics as academic freedom, the possibility of promotion, opportunities for research and professional development, and even the general label for term faculty, which at that time was “temporary faculty” The tenure-track faculty revising the manual took the suggestions of the term faculty and continued to work informally with a smaller group of term faculty, most of whom were writing-program faculty who had forged professional connections with the manual committee chair, a math professor, and who therefore felt comfortable enough to approach the chair and the committee with specific suggestions. In the final draft, the section on term faculty had grown to incorporate professional obligations (which emphasize teaching), faculty ranks, and reappointment and promotion criteria. For example, the manual now specifies that term faculty will customarily teach six courses per academic year, and it protects term faculty by requiring that an exception “is valid only when all parties involved have agreed to it in writing.” The ranks have two tracks: a “professorial-lecturer” track with the ranks of instructor, professorial lecturer, senior professorial lecturer, and Hurst senior professorial

lecturer; and an “assistant-professor” track with the ranks of assistant professor, associate professor, and professor. Promotion in the professorial-lecturer track depends on teaching and service, and promotion in the assistant-professor track depends on teaching, service, and scholarship.

Term Faculty Committees

The fact that ranks, policies, and procedures for term faculty now existed, where none had before, created confusion and inconsistency across the university; academic units that had been accustomed to treating term-faculty personnel matters informally were uncertain how to implement the new faculty-manual policies. In 2011, the faculty senate created an ad-hoc committee on term-faculty policies to develop recommendations for implementing the faculty manual changes. This committee was chaired and co-chaired by term faculty and comprised term faculty, tenure-track faculty, administrators, and human-resources staff. Their recommendations included changes to benefits for those taking leave, more detailed instructions for term-faculty files for action, more specific promotion criteria to help units develop their own criteria, suggestions for increased participation in unit governance (particularly in term-faculty personnel decisions), and better institutional support for term-faculty professional development. These recommendations were accepted by the faculty senate and the provost.

The term-faculty members of this committee believed that there was still work to be done, however, and they requested that the faculty senate continue the committee. In its next incarnation, the committee comprised only term faculty. They worked to fine tune some of the new faculty manual policies, argue for salary increases, and push for more term faculty to be on multi-year, instead of one-year, contracts. They were successful, in varying degrees, in bringing these proposals to the faculty senate and the administration, and the committee has continued its work, currently focusing on advocating for salary increases.

Concurrently, a term-faculty taskforce was established by the dean in the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) to undertake much of the same kinds of work; CAS has a large cohort of term faculty, and the dean has long been attuned to term-faculty issues. (This taskforce communicated with the university-level committee but did not work closely with them.) The taskforce gathered demographic and peer-institution research, held discussions with faculty, and distributed an online anonymous survey. This survey had a 78% completion rate, and it gathered more demographic data, such as length of contract and degree held, but it also asked about term faculty’s motivations for working at American and their concerns. Chief among those concerns were salary compensation and contract length; governance and inclusion ranked at the bottom of the list of concerns (the taskforce didn’t determine whether inclusion ranked low because term faculty already felt included or because they had other, more pressing concerns). As a result of their research, the taskforce was able to use the data it had collected to recommend salary increases, more multi-year contracts, and more consistent evaluation of faculty across departments.

Involvement in Governance

In some academic units, term faculty had long been involved with governance, attending and voting in department meetings, serving on department committees, etc.; in other units, though,

term faculty were excluded from any participation in governance or departmental decision making. While inconsistencies remain, as term faculty have stayed longer at the university, earned promotions, and influenced university policies, they've gained a greater voice in their own academic units. In addition, increasing emphasis on scholarly productivity for tenure-track faculty has led a number of units to assign administrative tasks (e.g., program director) to term faculty—further enhancing term-faculty presence (but also, at times, creating burdens on term faculty who already have heavier teaching loads). And in the changed university climate, more term faculty have advocated for meaningful involvement in departmental governance.

At the broader institutional level, the work on the various term-faculty committees provided valuable instruction in the workings of the university—particularly the central role of the faculty senate. Term faculty were able to serve on the senate, and some did, almost all as unit representatives. But term faculty found it difficult to get elected to at-large senate seats, with their broader representation, because they were, historically, less familiar to the faculty as a whole than the tenure-track faculty were. So a small group of term faculty argued to the chair of the senate that there should be a dedicated at-large term-faculty seat; the senate approved the change, and in 2011, the first at-large term-faculty senator was elected.

In 2013, however, an even more significant change in participation in governance occurred: the term-faculty senator was elected to be the next vice chair—and future chair, in fall 2014—of the faculty senate. The chair at the time spoke to the senators to anticipate any objections, but notably, none arose, and the senate's vote was unanimous.

While it's difficult to quantify the results of these changes, it appears that the term faculty see the increased acknowledgement of their "faculty" status as leading to further opportunities for self-advocacy. Both term-faculty committees remain active, and the members exhibit little hesitancy in strongly and publicly expressing their opinions. A number of term faculty ran for seats in last spring's faculty elections, including for university-level senate committees and for unit-level representation and committees. Smaller, informal groups within departments have begun advocating for more transparency in evaluation, reappointment, and merit raises.

The energy around term-faculty issues and advocacy has two sides to it. On the one hand, it likely indicates a greater sense of academic freedom, investment in the university, and a willingness to work within the university processes available to faculty. On the other hand, it also likely indicates recognition that there is still work to be done to improve term-faculty working conditions and status, and term faculty have repeatedly indicated that the material conditions of their employment, such as job security and pay, matter as much or more to them than less-tangible recognition. Nevertheless, while concerns remain, there is a heightened sense of the possibility of continued improvement through term-faculty self-advocacy, too.

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