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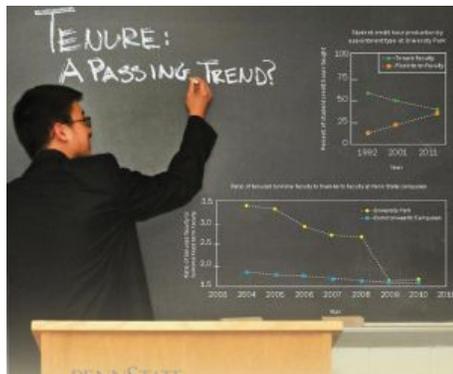
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Percentage of tenured faculty on the decline at Penn State

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Lauren Ingeno

A decline in the number of tenured professors at universities nationwide has faculty members' and administrators' heads spinning with questions about what higher education will look like in the near future. But so far, there are few, if any, answers.

According to a 2012 article in the Chronicle of Higher Education, the percentage of tenured and tenure-track faculty at all colleges is about 30 percent — compared to 60 percent three decades ago.

Penn State does not have as large of an imbalance between its numbers of fixed-term and tenured faculty members, but it is not immune to the trend.

In 1992, 87 percent of faculty members at all Penn State campuses had tenure or were on the tenure-track. By 2010, this number dropped to 62 percent, a

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2012 Intra-University Relations' informational report shows.

At University Park, the percentage of student credit hours being taught by tenured faculty members decreased from 59 percent in 1992 to 42 percent in 2011, according to data provided by the Office of Planning and Institutional Assessment. Consequently, student credit hours being taught by full-time fixed-term faculty members increased from 11 percent in 1992 to 39 percent in 2011.

Is the trend negative? Could it be positive? Or is it simply a realistic reflection of the changing role of higher education in an unsteady economy?

It depends on whom you talk to.

"Some people may take the position that it's cool to have more contract [fixed-term] faculty, while some may think it's the worst thing on Earth," said law professor Larry Backer, also chair of the University Faculty Senate.

The trend has been a hot topic for years, and there has been much literature written debating the pros and cons of an academic world with less tenure.

Backer said the senate tends to look at the issue every so often, produces a report and "then it's gone." He said it is finally time "to have an open discussion" and "to make choices" about how the university will address these changes — whether that means limiting the number of fixed-term faculty hired or figuring out how to increase the "value" and "dignity" of those faculty members.

There are two other major trends contributing to the "changing business model of education" said John Cheslock, who is the director of Penn State's Center for the Study of Higher Education.

First, universities nationwide are losing funding and hitting the "tuition ceiling," so administrators may be hiring more fixed-term faculty members to save money. And two, higher education classes are increasingly being taught online.

"If you change the way education is delivered, you change the way it is staffed," Cheslock said.

But a move away from tenure could be a result of more than just economic pressures, Backer said.

For instance, the changing job market demands that a class could be relevant one year and irrelevant the next. In this case, it may make more sense to hire a fixed-term faculty member who has experience in his or her field for a few semesters, rather than hiring a tenured professor for the long term. A "flexible" faculty could be ideal for the constantly changing nature of higher education and student demands, Backer said.

The main criticisms of less tenure are that students could have a less fulfilling academic experience, and that without tenure, faculty members may have less academic freedom.

Michael Berubé, the director of Penn State's Institute for the Arts and Humanities, said faculty without tenure, who can "be fired at any time," are "going to be very reluctant to challenge their students academically — lest one bad series of evaluations gets them booted from the job."

Backer echoed the sentiment, saying that contract faculty may "find it harder with confidence" to have a "more open and honest relationship" with administrators about academic issues, and that their academic freedom is "easier to abuse."

However, Berubé noted, contract faculty at Penn State are treated "reasonably well" when compared to some other universities, as most full-time, fixed-term faculty members at the university "have multi-year contracts, health benefits, decent wages and the opportunity to participate in departmental governance."

Still, other critics note that students are at a disadvantage if they are not being taught by instructors conducting research.

"We are a major research university, and I think one of the best reasons for a student to come to Penn State is to have access to world class research faculty. And these teachers don't have access to those students if they don't have them in class," said Christopher Long, associate dean for Undergraduate Studies and a professor of philosophy at Penn State.

On the opposite side of the debate, some argue that if faculty members have tenure, they may have too much security and could become more focused on their research rather than on their students, Cheslock said.

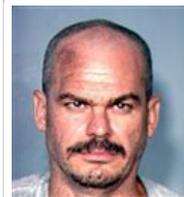
Long said he believes the "best teaching is informed by excellent research." Despite this, he said there is not a direct correlation between whether a faculty member has tenure and the quality of teaching.

Julia Schrank, a student senator on the faculty senate, said most students are more likely to care about an instructor's teaching rather than on his or her university title.

"The trend [of declining tenure] doesn't cross students' minds until it affects their learning," Schrank (junior-French and Spanish) said.

Another part of the equation is that at an institution as massive as Penn State — which is made up of twelve colleges and more than 150 academic departments solely at University Park — faculty composition varies immensely from one area of the university to the next.

"Penn State's philosophy has always been to give a lot of discretion to its colleges," Backer said. "It's just a basic



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governance idea that we've had for a long time."

For this reason, the decline of tenure faculty is a virtually nonexistent issue within some academic departments.

In the civil engineering department, for instance, there are only three fixed-term faculty members, said Department Head Peggy Johnson.

"Our department is one of the top 20 for civil engineering at the undergraduate and graduate level, and if we start cutting back on the number of tenure-line faculty, we'll drop on the level because we won't be able to conduct enough research," Johnson said. "We try so very hard to be very careful about who we put in the classroom."

But unlike in the College of Engineering, a huge chunk of the general education classes fall within the College of the Liberal Arts. Since all Penn State students must take at least one class within Liberal Arts, the college has a total of 287 faculty fixed-term members and 335 tenure or tenure-track faculty members, Long said.

Despite the need for a large faculty, Long said the college has made a conscious effort to hire more tenure and tenure-line faculty members.

"We've done that strategically to become more competitive," Long said. "During the recession as people were freezing hires, [the college] was hiring."

Though administrators are making efforts to slow the trend of decreasing tenure faculty, Backer said it is one that will not be reversed. He said he hopes critics at Penn State will face the reality and begin to have honest conversations about the issue.

"There is no point in talking about getting back to this Utopia of everyone being a tenured faculty member," Backer said. "At the same time, tenured faculty are an important resource and a unique value to education. And you don't want to market your way into their extinction."

An earlier version of the headline on this article stated incorrect information about trends regarding tenured faculty at Penn State. Although the percentage of tenured and tenure-line professors has been on the decline in relation to the percentage of fixed-term faculty, there is no data to show that the actual "amount" of tenure professors is less at Penn State than in previous years. The above headline reflects the correct information. The Daily Collegian apologizes for this error.

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