

How Penn State Improved Conditions for Adjuncts

By Alina Tugend OCTOBER 30, 2019 PREMIUM



Tracie Van Auken for The Chronicle

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When Mohamad Ansari became chair of the Faculty Senate for the Pennsylvania State University system, in 2015, one of the major issues he was determined to consider was the plight of full-time faculty members on fixed contracts.

That was not a minor concern: A majority of the almost 9,000 faculty members in the university, which is geographically dispersed among [24 campuses](#) across the state, are not on the tenure track.

"It was not just," said Ansari, an associate professor of mathematics on the Berks campus who has taught in the system for 37 years.

Now all the Penn State campuses offer fixed-term, full-time faculty members a three-tiered promotion ladder that largely mirrors the tenure track, and titles that include the word "professor." In September the university was named a winner — with Santa Monica College — of the Delphi Award for its work to support non-tenure-track faculty members. The award is given by the [Pullias Center for Higher Education](#) at the University of Southern California.

The changes resulted from a long and sometimes bitter process that is still underway. But they represent a big stride forward, said Joshua Wede, an associate teaching professor in psychology. He has been at University Park, the largest campus in the system, for 10 years on a year-to-year fixed contract.

"This has made me more satisfied with my job and even strengthened the sense of community," said Wede.

Although some important issues remain unsolved, such as the length of contracts and the needs of part-time adjuncts, "Penn State is the epitome of an institution that's looking systematically at how to engage contingent faculty in campus life, how to support them in supporting students, and how to ensure they have the basic necessities," said Adrianna Kezar, director of the Pullias Center. Such changes are good not just for the faculty but also [for students](#), she said.

As the share of faculty members nationwide who are off the tenure track has reached [73 percent](#), Penn State is not alone in its efforts. More colleges are likely to follow suit in response to [pressure from adjuncts](#) to improve working conditions. Here's how change happened at Penn State.



Nabil Mark for The Chronicle

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A Structured Restructuring

Four years ago, it wasn't clear that the reforms underway at Penn State would come to fruition, let alone win an award.

"We figured there was no way we could do this all at once," said Nicholas Rowland, a professor of sociology on the Altoona campus and the current chair of the Faculty Senate, which includes both tenured and nontenured full-time faculty members. "So we decided that what we needed to do is roll it out in a very structured way."

First on the list was to establish a new promotion system, he said. Nontenured faculty members had only two tiers: They were called lecturer (or instructor) or researcher, and could be promoted to add "senior" in front of that title.

The Faculty Senate also had to decide what review and promotion committees for nontenured faculty members would look like.

"We had to create something out of nothing," said Michael Bérubé, a professor of literature at University Park and the immediate past chair of the Faculty Senate. "I thought at first you could have a review committee on every campus, but that wasn't remotely practical. We have five large campuses, with 3,000 to 5,000 students and hundreds of faculty members. And then the smaller campuses are under 1,000 students and with only a couple of dozen faculty, so it didn't make sense for them to have their own review committee."

The final decision: Each of the 12 colleges on Penn State's University Park campus would have a review committee, as would the five largest campuses. The remaining smaller campuses would have one overall committee.

The next step was to determine who would sit on the committees, a decision that turned out to be complicated. The system had evolved in an uneven way. On some campuses, fixed-term faculty members were allowed to vote for who could serve on promotion and tenure committees for tenured faculty members; on other campuses, that was not permitted.

"It was a completely incoherent system," Bérubé said.

So the Faculty Senate's faculty-affairs committee decided to bar fixed-term faculty members from voting on the composition of promotion and tenure committees; at the same time, only full-time, non-tenure-track faculty members could serve on the new fixed-term review committees.

The reasoning, Rowland said, was that tenure-track and fixed-term faculty members have different obligations and are judged on different criteria, and therefore should be reviewed by their peers.

Both sides raised objections. Some tenure-track professors resented being barred from the committees reviewing nontenured faculty members, and some fixed-term faculty members vociferously protested that their vote was being taken away, saying that would limit their participation in shared governance.

Bérubé wrote an [article](#) for the American Association of University Professors' *Academe* about the changes at Penn State, and angry comments on it

attested to the strong feelings people had about the vote changes. One commentator likened the new system to Jim Crow.

In the end, though, the separate tenure-track and nontenured committees were approved.

"It may sound counterintuitive, but it's respecting the rights of fixed-term faculty — allowing them to govern themselves," Rowland said.

Strong Feelings About Titles

Another major undertaking was titles. Under the [new, three-tiered promotion structure](#), most fixed-term faculty members can rise from assistant to associate to full teaching (or research or clinical) professor.

"To me, the review and promotion committees were the foundation of the building, and the titling stuff was the drywall, but surprise, surprise, a lot of people in academia feel very strongly about these titles," Bérubé said. "We had people totally opposed to nontenured faculty having professorial titles, although they were in the minority and they lost that one."

An unexpected issue popped up late in the process: Some colleges wanted their non-tenure-track professors to have the exact same titles as tenured professors, without the words "teaching" or "research" inserted.

"Initially, I was sympathetic to that," said Bérubé, "but then I realized what these colleges were doing. They were trying to disguise the number of non-tenure-line faculty they had."

The Faculty Senate voted that option down.

Part of that debate was how much a terminal degree — depending on the discipline, a Ph.D. or a master's — should count.

"Some people didn't think it should count at all; others were dead-set against those with a master's being called professor," Bérubé said. In the end, it was decided those non-tenure-track, full-time faculty members without a terminal degree would start as lecturers or researchers, then get promoted up the ladder. Those with such a degree would start as assistant teaching, research, or clinical professors.

Promotions will generally come with a 5- to 8-percent raise, Bérubé said. The average raise over the past decade for tenured professors has been 2 percent, he added.

In the first wave of promotions, in the 2017-18 academic year, Bérubé said, 187 fixed-term faculty members received promotions, with 150 of them offered multiyear contracts, most for at least three years. Since then, [203 more have been promoted](#). Differences in data collection before 2017-18 make it difficult to compare with previous years, he said.

Risks of Sitting Still

Maria Maisto, president of the New Faculty Majority, which advocates for nontenured faculty members, sat on the selection committee for the Delphi Award. She said the fact that the fixed-term faculty members had a say in the process was very important, but "it was also great to see leadership from tenure-lined faculty to advocate on behalf of the profession."

Other universities are moving along the same path as Penn State for a variety of reasons. Some want to avoid unionization, as unionization in academe has picked up, said Kezar, of the Pullias Center. Others fear their reputations will suffer if adjunct faculty members resort to shaming them through the news and social media.

"Some have the moral fiber and take this on, but a lot of campuses are starting to realize there's going to be a lot of potential negatives if they don't move in this direction," Kezar said. Those involved in the Penn State process noted that the administration had largely supported the efforts, which made them much easier to carry out.

Nonetheless, the process is far from over. Still to be settled are questions about promotion, nonrenewal of contracts, and part-time adjuncts.

Although the Faculty Senate voted in 2017 to tie promotions to contract length — with an associate teaching professor to be considered for a three-year contract and a full teaching professor for a five-year contract — Eric J. Barron, president of Penn State, responded in a [letter](#) last year that restrictions on temporary funding, which supports most fixed-term faculty members, did not allow for a contract of more than three years.

In order to grant five-year contracts, the administration would have to address the budget lines that pay fixed-term faculty members. Rowland said he hoped that would happen in the near future.

The Faculty Senate is also in the process of considering whether to recommend the formation of an appeals process for fixed-term faculty members who want to contest the nonrenewal of contracts, he added.

And nothing has changed for part-time adjuncts, who make up about 21 percent of the faculty. They work without benefits and are paid per class. Rowland said he hoped the Faculty Senate would "gain traction" on the issue in the near future.

Even so, Maisto, of the New Faculty Majority, said efforts like those at Penn State show that people are "really thinking and working on this issue." That, she said, gives her hope.