

Why GAO Did This Study

Contingent faculty play a large role in postsecondary education but may not have the same job protections as tenured or tenure-track faculty. In 2015, GAO reported that contingent workers—those in temporary, contract, or other non-standard employment arrangements—earn less, are less likely to have work-provided benefits, and are more likely to experience job instability than standard workers. GAO was asked to examine issues related to contingent faculty.

This report examines (1) what is known about the makeup and utilization of the postsecondary instructional workforce; (2) the roles different types of faculty fill at selected institutions and the factors administrators consider when determining faculty makeup; (3) what is known about how economic circumstances compare across different faculty types; and (4) what contingent faculty members report as advantages and disadvantages of their work.

GAO analyzed data from nationally representative sources and from public institutions in three states—Georgia, North Dakota, and Ohio. GAO selected these states based primarily on data availability. GAO interviewed administrators from 9 postsecondary institutions in these states and one large for-profit institution. GAO selected institutions based on factors such as institution size and percent of contingent faculty. GAO also conducted 21 discussion groups with contingent faculty.

The Department of Education did not have comments on this report. The National Science Foundation provided technical comments, which we incorporated, as appropriate.

View [GAO-18-49](#). For more information, contact Cindy Brown Barnes at (202) 512-7215 or brownbarnesc@gao.gov.

CONTINGENT WORKFORCE

Size, Characteristics, Compensation, and Work Experiences of Adjunct and Other Non-Tenure-Track Faculty

What GAO Found

According to 2015 Department of Education data, contingent faculty—those employed outside of the tenure track—made up about 70 percent of postsecondary instructional positions nationwide, though this varied by type of institution. In addition, data from three selected states show that contingent faculty teach about 45 to 54 percent of all courses at 4-year public institutions, and higher proportions at 2-year public institutions. In terms of job stability, some full-time contingent positions with annual or longer contracts may be relatively stable while part-time positions with short-term contracts may be among the least stable, though it is unknown whether faculty in these positions have other employment. In contrast, tenure-track positions are often viewed as having a high degree of job security that is somewhat unique to postsecondary education.

Administrators GAO interviewed at selected postsecondary institutions said full-time contingent faculty generally carry heavy teaching loads, and some also take on additional responsibilities, such as conducting research or advising students. However, administrators stated that part-time contingent faculty generally focus solely on teaching. As shown in the figure below, administrators also described factors they consider in determining their institution's faculty makeup.

Factors Administrators Cited That May Affect Their Decisions about Faculty Makeup

 Financial	 Institutional	 Faculty needs	 Student needs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Budget uncertainty Compensation costs for different faculty types Legal or grant program requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enrollment changes The supply of qualified candidates The need for subject specialists Balancing priorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professional and life circumstances Prioritizing the needs of existing full-time faculty Faculty preferences and career goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Various learning opportunities from different faculty types Contributions of full-time faculty to school community

Source: GAO analysis of interviews with administrators from selected postsecondary institutions. | GAO-18-49

GAO examined recent data from North Dakota and Ohio public institutions and found that, among faculty who primarily teach—which excludes individuals such as administrators or researchers—part-time and full-time contingent faculty were paid about 75 percent and 40 percent less per course, respectively, compared to full-time tenure-track faculty. This comparison includes earnings for all of their responsibilities, including teaching and any other duties. However, when estimating faculty earnings for teaching duties only, pay disparities decreased to about 60 percent and 10 percent less per course for these contingent faculty, respectively. In addition, state and national data also showed that relatively few part-time contingent faculty received work-provided health or retirement benefits.

In discussion groups with GAO, contingent faculty cited advantages such as the flexibility to balance professional and personal responsibilities, skill development, or working with students, and described disadvantages that included uncertainty due to short-term contracts, untimely contract renewals, and pay—including a lack of compensation for some of their work. Other concerns they cited included limited career advancement opportunities, not having a voice in institutional decision-making, and not having certain types of institutional support.