

Are some faculty members really serfs?

February 14 2012, By Sean Nealon

Full-time non-tenure track faculty at colleges and universities lack a professional identity and a sense of self worth, according to interviews with these faculty members that formed the basis of a [recently published paper](#) co-authored by a University of California, Riverside professor.

John S. Levin, a professor in the Graduate School of Education at UC Riverside, argues that, for this condition to change, full-time non-tenure track faculty, comprised of teachers, researchers, and administrators – who lack permanent employment protection and an acknowledged role in institutional governance that tenured faculty enjoy – need to be better compensated and have greater institutional authority.

“Right now, they have become like serfs – a labor force for tenure-track faculty,” said Levin, who is the Bank of America Professor of Education Leadership. “That needs to change. Institutions need to take responsibility for these employees.”

Levin published the paper, “The Hybrid and Dualistic Identity of Full-Time Non-Tenure-Track Faculty” in the journal *American Behavioral Scientist* with Genevieve G. Shaker, an administrator in the School of Liberal Arts at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis.

In the last several decades, colleges and universities have increasingly relied on part-time and full-time non-tenure-track faculty. They provide increased flexibility and cost savings. Other contributors to this rise include: a public unease with tenure, declining government funding for higher education and an abundance of Ph.D. recipients.

In the United States, about 70 percent of academics now work off the tenure track, and more than a quarter of these faculty members are full-time. Full-time non-tenure-track faculty members constitute 60 percent of new full-time faculty hires.

Levin predicts these uncertain conditions and identities foreshadow growing complications in U.S. higher education. For example, today the reliance on part-time and full-time non-tenure-track faculty is most pronounced at community colleges and state colleges. He believes the same trend could start having a larger impact at elite universities.

While much academic research has focused on such topics as the demographics and earnings of full-time non-tenure-track faculty, little research has focused on how these faculty members feel about their situation.

That's what Levin and Shaker set out to do.

They interviewed 18 full-time non-tenure-track faculty members for up to three hours. All were affiliated with English departments at three public research universities. They focused on English departments because they have expressed a longstanding interest in the roles, responsibilities, and rights of non-tenure-track faculty.

The researchers found that full-time non-tenure-track faculty (FTNT) describe themselves as foreigners, detached observers and members of a counterculture. As teachers, they express satisfaction. But, as faculty members they articulate restricted self-determination and self-esteem.

“Generally, they are divided selves, chameleon-like: They both accept and reject aspects of their professional roles and status, they live in the present but also in a future that is projected as better than the present, and they have to adjust to be appropriately FTNT,” the authors write.

The group has some trappings of professional university faculty, especially high levels of education and training, but there are voids, such as identification in their field nationally and internationally and the ability to pursue intellectual curiosities.

The authors conclude full-time non-tenure-track faculty members are more of an occupational class than a professional body.

The authors also argue that is up to both the institutions and full-time non-tenure-track faculty to change the situation.

Institutions need to provide greater authority for full-time non-tenure-track faculty in curriculum and instruction decisions; make them part of departmental decision making; provide research support and professional development; create less of a status differentiation between those who primarily teach and those who primarily conduct research; and be more creative in naming these positions as it relates to salary, job security and appointment policies.

Full-time non-tenure-track [faculty members](#) need to: participate in service, administration, and governance at the university; fill disciplinary niches, such as becoming experts in teaching online; and become involved with existing associations for faculty or non-tenure-track faculty or establishing new campus-based associations to support the interests of full-time non-tenure-track faculty.

Provided by University of California, Riverside

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