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AAUP Weighs Calling for Adjunct Faculty to Have Major Role in Shared Governance

By Peter Schmidt

Washington

The American Association of University Professors is considering whether to call for adjunct faculty members to be given a role, and a full vote, in nearly all shared-governance decisions.

The AAUP’s subcommittee on contingent faculty and governance released its preliminary recommendations for a new statement of principles concerning adjunct faculty at a lunch session here Saturday during the association’s fall conference on shared governance.

Among other ideas, the subcommittee said faculty senates and committees, and their leadership positions, generally should be open to any academic employees who do the work of faculty members, including adjuncts and librarians who participate in teaching and research. All faculty members, regardless of job status, should have a full vote in elections to such governing bodies. And because elections and offices would be open to all, the subcommittee said, that no seats on the governing bodies should be set aside for certain faculty members based on job status.

Half of the subcommittee's members are contingent faculty members, and the balance are tenured or tenure-track professors. Members of the panel said it is contemplating calling for contingent faculty members to get a vote on nearly every governance matter. They said they do not plan to recommend that contingent faculty members have a vote on the tenure and promotion of tenure-track colleagues, although they do plan to recommend that contingent faculty members be allowed to participate in the evaluation of others working on a contingent basis.
The subcommittee sought to phrase its recommendations "not as prescriptions, but as principles to be considered," said one panel member, Joe T. Berry, an independent labor educator and the author of Reclaiming the Ivory Tower, an organizing handbook for contingent faculty members. In drafting its recommendations, he said, the panel sought "not to ratify existing disparities in power" but to promote "vigorous democratic participation."

The panel, which was jointly established by the association's Committee on College and University Governance and its Committee on Contingency and the Profession, presented its preliminary recommendations here to get feedback from the audience. The crowd of nearly 200, consisting of a combination of AAUP members and outsiders, expressed enough reservations about the recommendations to suggest they are likely to meet resistance from some AAUP members.

Among the concerns was whether governance bodies open to all faculty members would be dominated by those who work on a contingent basis. Members of the audience questioned whether adjunct faculty members with little involvement in the institution, such as those who teach a single class and have full-time jobs outside academe, should have the same voting rights as tenured professors. Some expressed fear that the broad eligibility criteria being considered by the subcommittee would open the door for administrators who teach a class to intrude into faculty governance.

James Morley, a professor of clinical psychology at Ramapo College of New Jersey, said he worried that the association, by adopting such a statement of principles, would be "normalizing" colleges' growing reliance on contingent faculty. "Are we making it acceptable?" he asked.

Audience members also questioned whether it would be wise for the association to open the doors of governance bodies to graduate teaching assistants. Mr. Berry argued, however, that graduate students who are the teachers of record for courses "are doing the fundamental work of the university," and that "we are hurting ourselves" by excluding them from decisions related to matters such as curriculum.

The subcommittee, which is not on a rigid timetable for issuing its
final recommendations, urged audience members to send additional feedback. In coming up with its proposals, it has informally surveyed faculty members around the nation on the role contingent faculty play in governance at their institutions.

Mr. Berry said the panel's work has been complicated by how much colleges differ in how they treat adjunct faculty members. For example, he said, it had been difficult for the panel to come with a formal distinction between part-time and full-time faculty members, given how much colleges vary in defining the terms. "We are learning a lot about the humongous diversity of faculty governance bodies," he said.

An ambitious goal given that the regular faculty at my university do not share in the governance of the institution either.

But of course, most full-time and even tenured faculty can't be moved to care about shared governance. Most of them are happy to think of themselves as employees with chairs, deans, etc. as their bosses. Adjuncts may have their own interests, but I doubt they have any more sense of themselves as faculty than the "real faculty" do.

When such a proposal is actualized, it will only advance the simulacrum of shared governance, since there is no way that a person whose employment is contingent on giving pleasure to his supervisor (I think the locution is, "at the pleasure of" or some such to the same effect) can possibly criticize and demand changes to the policies and practices dreamt up by his supervisor, much less all those highly paid and mostly tenured supervisors. Massively shrink the administration, including all non-academic functions, including athletics, and we won't be needing so much semblance of governance; we can be quite well served with genuine shared governance.
Let us see. If contingent faculty are given the same voting power at our departmental meetings as the tenured ones, the chair will have 40% of votes on any matter in his pocket by simply wielding a budgetary whip over adjuncts. What crackhead came up with the idea?

Why must we assume that all chairs are evil and will "wield a budgetary whip over adjuncts?"

In the real world - i.e. outside academia - no one has tenure, and yet folks still manage to, for the most part, give appropriate feedback without getting fired. Believe it or not, it's kinda a pain to find and train a new employee - adjunct or otherwise. Especially in my geographical area - we're about tapped out on qualified adjuncts...we can't just randomly fire the ones we don't agree with because we don't have anyone to replace them with!

Don't get me wrong - I'm sure there are coercive leaders around who would do just that. But I'm also pretty sure that the vast majority won't.

Why must we assume that all world dictators are evil? Sorry, but you are missing the point. Any system which is contingent upon the hope that good leaders will be at the top will necessarily deteriorate into the abuse of power. As numerous historical examples prove.

I don't think I've missed your point so much as you've missed mine - perhaps because I've articulated it poorly.

Shared governance doesn't require tenure to protect you from retribution to work. Most folks don't have tenure to protect them, and, in reality, the only thing tenure can protect you from is getting fired. We all know that folks can still strive to make your life miserable, even if they can't fire you. So tenured folks aren't "safe" from retribution - they'll just have jobs, not good places to work - and most adjuncts aren't let go over simple disagreements (yes, some are, but there are other, non-tenure consequences to deter folks from just firing adjuncts).

In the rest of the institution, no one has tenure. But shared governance still works - at least at my institution - and it works better than it does in Instruction (the unit where our pros are located organizationally). We communicate politely, we express disagreement with our bosses, and we're still employed the next day/month/year.

Although it might be helpful in some cases, I don't understand why tenure is considered a necessary prerequisite for effective shared governance.
Simply offer me an evidence -- an example of an institution of higher learning without tenure, and how it works there for "shared governance" -- and I might change my mind. So far I am aware of one, Savannah College of Art and Design. And I am afraid that one hardly supports your point.

Every higher education institution in the US is an example of "shared governance" working without tenure. Most college and universities have more employees who don't have tenure than who do. And they all answer to someone - someone who could, in theory, fire them for disagreeing with them. But, in general, folks don't get fired for disagreeing with their bosses.

As for institutions that work without any tenure for instructors - I don't have a clue about that. I'm not claiming that an institution can work without tenure - just challenging your previous assertion that without tenure instructors are but pawns in some administrator's game.

Yes, exactly, just as chairs tend to do exactly what their deans expect of them, and so on. Now as for the crackhead who came up with the idea, well, this is pretty typical of AAUP's work. The idea of AAUP is just grand, don't get me wrong; but the reality is a bedlam of soulless ambitionists, vain prima donnas, and dullards who should've never made it into higher education in the first place.

This is a dumb idea and reason alone NOT to join AAUP. Contingent faculty do not have the same responsibilities as full-time faculty, and therefore should not be given the same rights.

Thank you for confirming for me my suspicion that many (most?) tenured profs are indeed a part of the 1%. Sorry, contingent faculty, you have a PhD, you teach our students, but you are not a part of the university and therefore have no right to have any say on how the university is run? Saying that we should have an equal voice does not mean it's the same voice, in fact the idea is that the concerns and perspective of the contingent faculty IS different. Seeing how in many universities we outnumber the tenured and tenure-track faculty, is this coming from a place of fear by any chance?

You're correct--Many have a lot more unfortunately
Like

Socratease2  1 year ago

You keep trucking, AAUP, all the way to mental health clinic you should check in with. Talk about grandiose, as Texas2step alluded to, shared governance as a vested institutional principle and policy decision-making mechanism is rapidly losing relevance in the US. What is the AAUP thinking, let’s get disconnected adjunct faculty and grad students to jump on our bandwagon so we have some clout with numbers? Do adjuncts and grad students have the same “union” interests as other full-time faculty. They can’t even decide how to define part-time versus full-time faculty so based on that, I will not hold my breath until the ivory tower is reclaimed.

3 people liked this.  Like

blesstayo  1 year ago

Do the adjunct faculty members have the option to pay the full union dues? If so, shouldn’t they have the privilege of full membership?

On the other hand, adjunct and part-time faculty members can be let go at the end of any semester - a disservice to the continuity of their roles in the union.

4 people liked this.  Like

Bridging Loans  1 year ago

We all know that folks can still strive to make your life miserable, even if they can’t fire you. So tenured folks aren’t “safe” from retribution - they’ll just have jobs, not good places to work - and most adjuncts aren’t let go over simple disagreements

jeanne

http://basenji-dog.net/

Like

boiler  1 year ago

I think it’s unfortunate that this issue has gotten mixed in with the broad effort to improve the lot of contingent faculty on campuses. It’s a terrible idea, one that subverts the whole notion of shared governance. Shared governance is based on the idea that professors have a longterm relationship to the institution, that they’re not just regular employees, but an independent and critical part of the fabric of the school. They are expected to have the school’s interest in mind, because their own lives and futures are bound up with the school’s success. They can exercise judgment without fear of being fired for it, and they will have to live with the consequences of the decisions they make. That’s not true for contingent faculty, and it’s certainly not true for graduate instructors. To extend shared governance to people in that situation would radically change the nature of the process, and in doing so it would remove many of the justifications for its existence. There are many things that the AAUP can and should do to push for better conditions for adjuncts, but this isn’t one of them.

6 people liked this.  Like

vceross  1 year ago

Given that standing faculty are a declining minority of most universities, the question is whether it
is in their best interests, or that of our universities, to charge them with exclusive governance. In
great part the reason that adjuncts are treated so poorly has to do with the Pontius-Pilate-like
structure of faculty governance, which turns a blind eye or even endorses the hiring of low-paid,
non-tenured, part-time instructors, with no job security or benefits, which it prefers to giving full-
time renewable contracts to these same instructors, who are perceived as a threat to tenure.
Meanwhile, tenure is fading away in the face of these sorts of denial and unwitting complicity, and
with it, the influence of faculty senates. A more robust definition of faculty, and faculty governance,
one that takes into account all who teach for the institution, and therefore have a stake in it, seems
advisable. The us/them mentality of contemporary academics needs to take a page from Franklin's
book: If we don't hang together, by Heavens we shall hang separately. The handwriting is on the
wall.