

Chapter 17

Department Chair Perspectives About Contingent Faculty in Higher Education: Leadership Theory

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examined the increasing reliance on contingent faculty in U.S. higher education as an administrative problem ripe for continued investigation. The specific purpose of this inquiry was to gain a better understanding of the impact of employing contingent faculty from the viewpoint of a departmental chair of a medium-sized Midwestern research university who routinely hired many contingent faculty. Within the context of these interviews, the chair discussed various aspects of his leadership style, his experiences and responsibilities in the job, his organizational philosophies, his departmental vision and his concerns related to the changing landscape of higher education. As Bolman and Deal's (2003) four-frames model suggests, effective leaders draw from all four frames to make the best decisions and to come to the most productive solutions. The results of this examination revealed this leader's propensity for leading with the human resource frame and then blending in the remaining frames when thinking and acting on issues related to contingent faculty.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing reliance on contingent faculty in U.S. higher education is an administrative problem that is ripe for continued investigation. Over 75% of new faculty appointments are off the tenure track, and more than half of all college courses are taught by contingent faculty (AAUP, 2013). While the intent of the Affordable Care Act (2010) was to provide healthcare at a reasonable cost to all Americans, it

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has also, at least temporarily, instigated institutions of higher education to look for all possible ways to keep more employees under a part-time status rather than a full-time status therefore reducing the institution's overall cost for healthcare benefits. The resulting impact on large numbers of contingent faculty affiliated with U.S. institutions of higher education has been a reduction in the number of courses assigned to their load and therefore a reduction in pay in order to stay under the 30-hour/week federal definition of full-time work. The divide between tenure-track faculty and contingent faculty has widened, with even greater inequities in working and living conditions, creating an increasingly unjust academic caste system (McHenry & Sharkey, 2014). The implications of this largely invisible and frequently itinerant instructional workforce reach widely – to students, parents, college administrators, taxpayers, and all concerned with promoting high-quality learning. Yet, like all administrative problems within higher education, there may be opportunities to discover new pathways for innovative solutions. A re-examination of contingent faculty working conditions, the complex diversity among these individuals and their needs, and their varying motivations and levels of commitment all add to fleshing out the context of this administrative challenge. Many contingent faculty experience some measure of return on investment for the sharing of their expertise, talents, time and energies with students. Contingent faculty who continue to teach semester after semester and year after year, frequently for meager wages, obviously attribute substantial non-monetary value to the personal satisfaction they derive from teaching, to the fulfillment experienced from working with students and being in the academic environment, and to providing a needed service to society. The sheer magnitude of the contract faculty workforce in U.S. higher education has vast implications for policymakers in making better-informed decisions regarding the development of institutions of higher education in a time of rapid change, dwindling state funding, and global competition.

Purpose

The purpose of this inquiry was to gain a better understanding of the functions, costs and benefits, and the rationale behind employing large numbers of contingent faculty from an administrator's viewpoint, namely a departmental chair of a medium-sized Midwestern research university whose department routinely hired many contingent faculty. This administrator was also questioned extensively concerning his leadership style, his experiences as a departmental chair, his responsibilities and duties, his organizational philosophies, his vision for his department as well as his concerns related to the changing landscape of higher education. Throughout this in-depth interviewing process, the aim was to gain more nuanced insights into the larger institutional issues related to contingent faculty (macro) by delving into a particular context (micro) and analyzing the interpretations, perceptions, and understandings held by an administrator.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE: THE ORGANIZATIONAL FRAMES MODEL

Bolman and Deal (2013) proposed a four-frame comprehensive model of organizational thought, which brings together insights from organizational research and leadership practices to produce a useful framework for understanding how organizational cultures work. The rationale for using Bolman and Deal's four frames for our study, rather than another leadership theory, was to capitalize on how a department chair thought about and acted on the issues related to the use of contingent faculty.

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