

Reframing the Role of Academic Professional Track (APT) Faculty

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Abstract

The role of non-tenure track faculty members in the present-day urban public university is critical but often not well-recognized. Though this is a result of a historical scenario, in recent times, institutions have been working towards the furtherance of non-tenure track faculties. The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) held a workshop in the Summer of 2024. The workshop's goal was to encourage participating institutions to include non-tenure track STEM faculty in both institutional policy decision-making processes and the professional development initiatives that can empower them to meaningfully contribute to the change processes stemming from those decisions. Our own institution, UT Arlington, sent a team of faculty members to this institute to examine the role of our Academic Professional Track (APT) faculty members, our term for non-tenure track faculty. The 4-day workshop was a great success and as a result, a year-long plan is formulated to focus on APT faculty with a teaching mission to create institutional and far-reaching effects. The plan will be accomplished by working groups, which will be formed to develop projects and examine identified issues. It should be noted that these activities will be coordinated at an administrative level by a newly named Assistant Vice Provost for Faculty Success who is herself an APT faculty member. There are plans and developments already underway at our institution, which would give an opportunity for other institutions, especially in the ASEE-GSW region, to value and merit this highly significant group of faculty members at their institutions.

Introduction

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In recent decades, STEM department chairpersons have relied increasingly on Academic Professional Track (APT) faculty to teach courses. As recently as 30 years ago, nearly all instruction in STEM classrooms and labs came from tenure-track or tenured faculty; today, however, students are more likely to be taught by APT faculty¹. APT faculty population exponentially increased from 3 percent in 1969 to 19 percent of total faculty in 2007². It is worth mentioning that two-thirds of the post-secondary education faculty is now made up of APT faculty³. As a case study, the APT faculty population compared to TT faculty over the past 10 years at the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA) is shown in Table 1. It can be observed that, on average, 65% of the total faculty is comprised of APT faculty at UTA.

Table 1. TT and APT faculty population at UTA

| Fiscal Year | TT | APT | Fiscal Year | TT | APT |
|-------------|-----|-------|-------------|-----|-------|
| 2016 | 592 | 916 | 2021 | 666 | 1,284 |
| 2017 | 592 | 939 | 2022 | 662 | 1,318 |
| 2018 | 601 | 1,000 | 2023 | 663 | 1,320 |
| 2019 | 604 | 1,083 | 2024 | 670 | 1,324 |
| 2020 | 615 | 1,247 | 2025 | 687 | 1,361 |

It is understood that the role of APT faculty members in the present-day urban public university is critical but often not well-recognized. They are often labeled as “invisible faculty”³. For instance, owing to the contractual nature of employment for APT, unlike tenure-track (TT) faculty, APT faculty face difficulty staying at the same institution for a longer period⁴. Also, the APT faculty have just recently begun to have straightforward and detailed policies on promotion. Though this lack of consistent policies is a result of a historical scenario, institutions have been working towards the development and trajectories of APT faculties. Institutional researchers are taking the lead in portraying this major population by identifying, documenting, and creating meaningful policies and practices². Numerous research studies have been conducted on this domain to better understand the state of APT faculty in STEM education. As a part of the funded research studies, professional development institutes and workshops are held nationwide that incorporate the active involvement of APT faculty.

AAC&U Workshop 2024

The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) is a global membership organization dedicated to advancing the democratic purposes of higher education. AAC&U held a workshop on ‘Reframing Institutional Transformation to Include Non-Tenure Track STEM Faculty’ in the Summer of 2024. The workshop's goal was to encourage participating institutions to include APT STEM faculty in both institutional policy decision-making processes and professional development initiatives. Our own institution, UT Arlington, sent a team of faculty members to this institute, and the 4-day workshop was a great success. A few of the action items discussed during the workshop with a focus on APT faculty are, but not limited to: (1) educating APT faculty about already available resources and creating new resources such as funding for professional organizations and participation in FDL (2) creating opportunities for professional development for APT faculty, and (3) developing a culture of celebration for APT faculty. As a result of the workshop, a year-long plan is

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formulated to focus on APT faculty with a teaching mission to create institutional and far-reaching effects.

Summary and Conclusions

In summary, the workshop highlighted initiatives aimed at advancement and furtherance of the APT faculty. The plans will be accomplished by working groups, which will be formed to develop projects and examine identified issues. It should be noted that these activities will be coordinated at an administrative level by a newly named Assistant Vice Provost for Faculty Success, who is also an APT faculty member. The outcomes of the undertaken initiatives and upcoming scheduled tasks would give an opportunity for other institutions, especially in the ASEE-GSW region, to value and merit this highly significant group of faculty members at their institutions.

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