



Statement on Termination of Multi-year Contracts for Contingent Faculty October 12, 2020

National Context

The last five decades have witnessed a drastic decline in stable faculty employment and guarantees of academic freedom in U.S. colleges and universities. In 1975, approximately 75% of all instructional appointments in higher education were to tenure-eligible positions and the rest were contingent. Today, that ratio is reversed. A majority of academic appointments in the U.S. are now not merely ineligible for tenure but also part-time. Most faculty members who hold non tenure-track appointments are employed on short-term contracts; few are eligible to apply for professional development funds or promotion to a higher rank; most receive meager compensation (on average about \$3,500 per course); less than half are eligible for employer-provided health care; and, according to a recent study, 40% struggle to cover basic household expenses.

As more academic work has assumed the form of cheap and dispensable labor, the quality of higher education has suffered. This is not because faculty on contingent appointments are less talented or dedicated, but because they are excluded from full membership in academic communities. As multiple studies demonstrate, those who do not know whether their appointments will be renewed cannot (and should not be expected to) develop the in-depth and lasting relationships with students that are essential to high quality education.

Whitman's Response

Up until now, Whitman College has rejected the downward spiral plaguing colleges and universities nationally. The College should be commended for policies it adopted in recent years to ameliorate the situation of faculty on contingent appointment. In 2007, a committee composed of tenure-eligible and contingent faculty issued a report that encouraged the College to acknowledge the "important and necessary role" played by non tenure-track faculty members "in undergraduate education at Whitman," including the "many contributions made by these faculty that are above and beyond their contractual obligations."

Citing AAUP policy, the 2007 report urged the College to convert long-term contingent positions to tenure-track status. Absent that, "to reduce a source of uncertainty faced by a valuable component of the Whitman community," it recommended that full as well as part-time contingent faculty, when "consistently-needed," be offered multi-year contracts. Once the budgetary crisis caused by the 2007-09 recession was resolved, following consultation with the Committee of Division Chairs, Provost Tim Kaufman-Osborn endorsed this recommendation and began its implementation. The faculty elected to render these instructors eligible for promotion through designated ranks, service on non-elected committees, and voting in faculty meetings. These reforms as well as others have been consolidated by our current provost, Alzada Tipton, and her work on this front was very much appreciated. We should also not forget that much of the impetus for their adoption emerged from the Whitman faculty.



Given these national and local contexts, we believe that the College's decision to abandon established practice by eliminating multi-year contracts for qualified and essential contingent faculty, including athletic coaches, is short-sighted at best. This decision fails to do justice to the many contributions these colleagues make to the College. Before long, it will undermine our shared commitment to educational excellence that comes with stability in favor of the dubious value of workforce flexibility. For these reasons, as well as those cited in the letter and departmental statements recently sent to President Murray by the faculty and division chairs, we call on the College to reinstate multi-year contracts for our non tenure-track colleagues.