

# ATS study on contingent faculty: update on the faculty model

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*ATS conducted surveys about contingent faculty in 2023, one to deans and the other to the faculty themselves. Several surprises emerged that were confirmed by a larger fielding of the survey, including who ATS schools employ and purposes for using the part-time faculty model.*

As part of the ATS Organizational and Educational Models initiative, deans were surveyed to understand how schools deploy part-time and full-time contractual faculty. Contingent faculty were also surveyed to gain a better picture of their environments.

In the survey to deans, ATS research staff asked about pay, percentage of courses taught, and plans to increase/decrease use of part-time faculty over the next several years. In addition, ATS analyzed *Annual Report Form* data that schools submit to ATS to determine whether increases in use of part-time faculty were related to enrollment and/or financial changes. In the survey to faculty, ATS gathered perspectives on school expectations, benefits, and supports, as well as on personal vocation and preferences. This article reports findings from a final analysis of the data.

## **Who are the contingent faculty?**

The survey defined contingent faculty as “adjunct/sessional, part-time, and post-doc faculty, as well as full-time faculty on one- or two-year (or other limited) contracts.” ATS assumed a large proportion would be of the “gig” population (i.e., part-time instructors cobbling together a full load by teaching multiple courses at multiple schools), but discovered a complex variety of categories.

There were several key surprises about the population. First, those in some form of retirement comprise 20% of



the contingent population (16% retired, 4% approaching retirement). School size matters here, with small (HC 1–75) and independent (versus denominationally affiliated) schools using a higher share of retired faculty.

Second, 66% of the non-retired faculty work full-time elsewhere. Four-fifths of this group work outside of the academy—about two-thirds in congregational or denominational settings and the rest in faith-based, nonprofit healthcare, various forms of non-graduate education, and sectors not related to congregations or theological education. It is unclear how much of this full-time work would be considered in alignment with the respondents’ original vocational imagination. It is also difficult to know the proportion of the clergy who are invited to adjunct because of their experience in congregational leadership, though analysis of the model seems to corroborate this purpose of employing part-time faculty (see the discussion below). The 34% not employed full-time elsewhere is overrepresented by women, Asian, Latiné, younger faculty, and those who earned their doctorates in 2020 or later or are currently in a doctoral program.

The final surprise is that only 34% prefer a full-time faculty appointment at any institution. Among those not employed full-time elsewhere, the proportion is much higher at 69%. Still, 42% have sought a regular full-time faculty

position at their current or other institution, further supporting a picture of this workforce that is not homogeneous. Indeed, while two-thirds do not currently prefer a full-time faculty appointment, a sizable proportion did seek out such a position, including those who have been seeking for seven years or more.

The Association’s understanding of part-time faculty de-

*How are schools employing part-time faculty?*

In higher education, the proportion of part-time faculty increased from 33% in 1987 to 51% in 2010 and has slowly tapered in recent years. The proportion of part-time faculty at ATS member schools, however, has held remarkably steady, hovering between 25–30% over the last three decades. Here, too, statistically significant differences emerged by size of school: largest schools (HC over 300) employ the highest proportions at 33%, while large schools (HC 151–300) employ the lowest proportions at 20%.

To test the narrative that ATS member schools employ part-time faculty to help the financial picture of the school, ATS research staff looked for whether changes in use of the faculty model is significantly related to schools’ finances, either positively or negatively. We found that none of the changes correlated significantly with two indicators of financial health, namely high number of years running a surplus or net surplus for the decade. The two factors were not found to be related. All three groups—increased, decreased, or same use of part-time faculty—had schools with deep financial concerns as well as those running surpluses for many years.

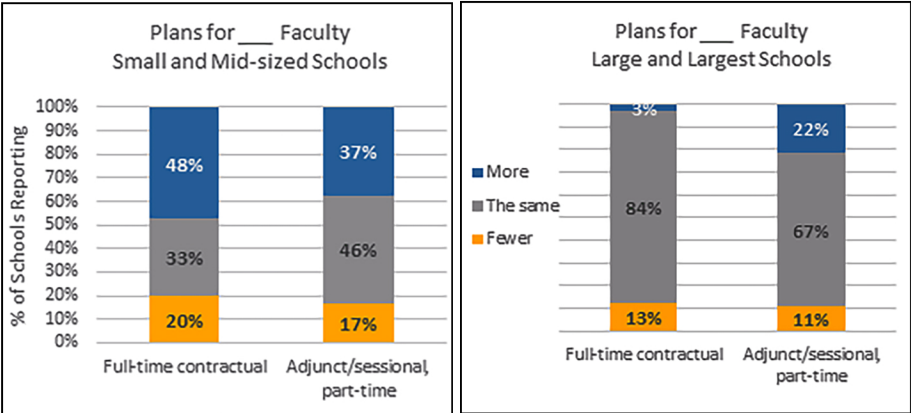
Instead, it was discovered that change in part-time faculty use is related to enrollment. Higher enrollments correlate

employment also shifted in terms of course load and type. About two-thirds (67%) of the faculty teach one to three courses a semester, and one out of ten (11%) teaches four courses. A full 83% teach required courses (27% do not), and 40% teach elective courses (60% do not). A total of 72% teach at one school, and another 22% teach at two schools. Together, this paints a more varied picture than the singular “gig” category.

to increased use of part-time faculty. Of course, correlation is not causation. Increased enrollments that created a need for more faculty (part-time and full-time) is as likely a scenario as is increased use of the part-time faculty model that led to more students.

Together, the findings suggest that, while part-time faculty may be used by some schools for financial reasons, it is likely not a model that is used by the industry in a substantial way to change the school’s financial picture in the ATS world. Rather, it may be a model that schools are using for missional reasons, such as to fill expertise gaps in the curriculum or to attend to certain populations of students.

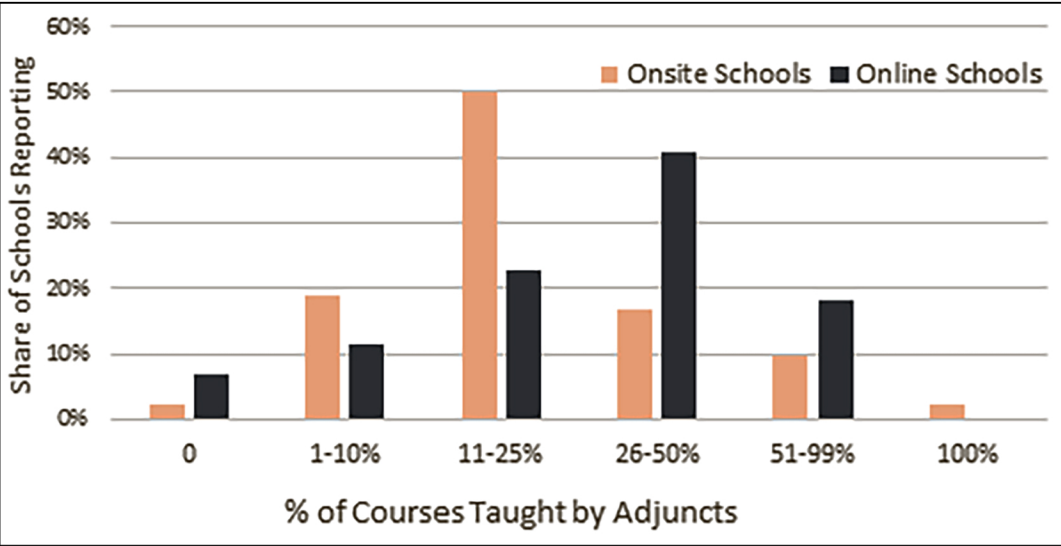
Findings from the deans’ survey appear to corroborate this. Academic deans reported changes in their schools’ use of these faculty and reasons for the change. Between 2021–22 and 2022–23, more than 30% of schools experienced a decrease in the number of faculty, citing enrollment decline, budget constraints, and increased full-time regular faculty as the top three reasons. At the same time, another 42% of schools experienced an increase in the number of faculty, citing the need for more remote instruction, enrollment increase, and curriculum needs as their top three reasons.



Looking forward, only a small percentage of schools plan to use fewer contingent faculty in the next several years. In terms of part-time faculty, 14% plan to use fewer; 55%, the same number; and 30%, more. This differs by size of school (see graph, p. 2), with small and mid- sized (HC 76-150) schools demonstrating more change (blue and orange bars) and large and largest schools intending to stay the same (gray bars). One notable difference emerged with the plans for full-time contractual faculty. Almost half (48%) of small and mid-sized schools plan to use more faculty in this category, and a third (33%) plan to use the same. Conversely, only 3% of large and largest

schools plan to use more of these faculty, and 84% plan to use the same.

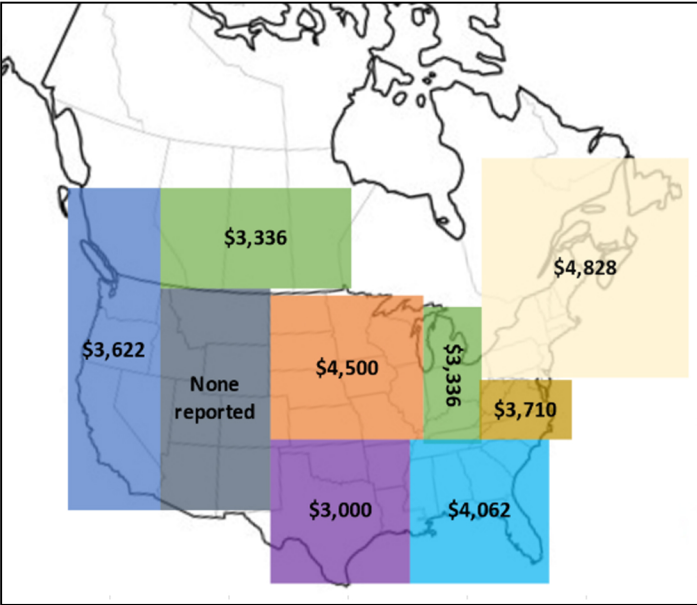
These differences are particularly salient in an educational world where online possibilities have been opened. Currently, according to the dean’s survey, the average proportion of courses taught by part-time faculty is 31% for all schools. This varies little by school size, region, and embeddedness. Differences are seen by the online/onsite character of the school. As shown in the next graph, most onsite schools reported that part-time faculty teach 11–25% of the courses, whereas most online schools reported that part-time faculty teach 25–50% of the courses.



It is no coincidence that the two most reported reasons for increase in the use of contingent faculty are the need for more remote instruction (32%) and increased enrollment (29%). If online programs stay or grow, there will undoubtedly be an increase in the use of contingent faculty, and schools are addressing these missional needs by expanded use of the part-time faculty model.

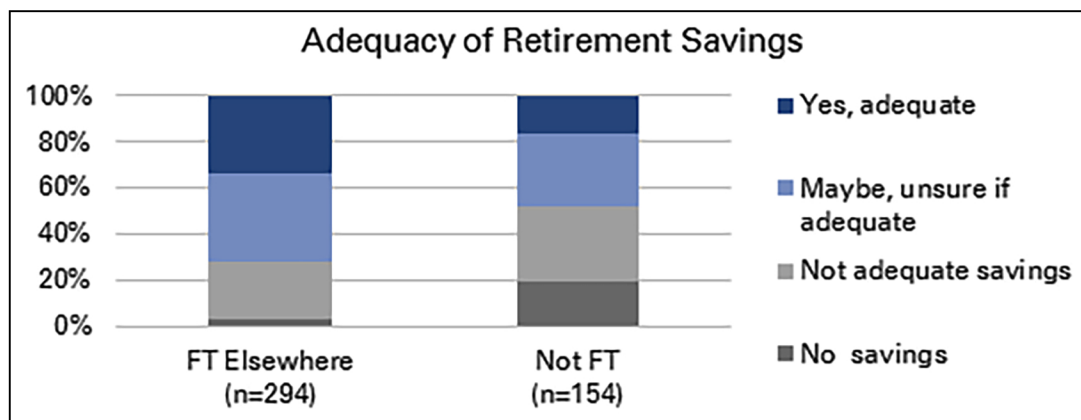
### Is compensation adequate?

Whether pay is adequate falls somewhere between “agree and disagree.” This is the same for both those who are employed full-time elsewhere and those who are not. However, similarities between the two groups end here. Responses differ in three areas between faculty who have full-time employment elsewhere and those who do not. These responses reveal where precarity remains for the approximately one-third who would be considered the “gig” population in theological education. Those from the gig population report less stability in their personal financial situations (somewhat stable, versus between somewhat and very stable for those with full-time work elsewhere). In addition, a greater proportion of gig faculty have no or only partial medical insurance (35%, versus



11% among those with full-time work elsewhere). Finally, as the figure below shows, a far greater share of this group has no or inadequate savings for retirement (51%, versus 28% among those with full-time work else-

where). So, while a large portion of contingent faculty have found ways to attend to their financial situations, key areas of economic precarity remain for a portion of this workforce.



### How can schools respond?

The contingent faculty study provides a landscape view of this sector of the workforce in theological schools. While there is a significant portion who are looking for full-time faculty appointments, more than half are not. The population being employed by ATS member schools is comprised of a broad mixture of individuals—new PhDs trying to find full-time posts, congregational leaders, full-time health-care professionals, retired individuals, and “permanent” adjuncts (e.g., more than 30 years as part-time in the same institution), to name a few. Many fill ministry and other subject-matter expertise gaps for the school; indeed, another ATS study found that more than 60% of PhD earners from ATS member schools work in congregations.

While the “gig” population (not having full-time employment elsewhere) is not as large as expected, the group demonstrates patterns that schools can attend to in their efforts to provide excellent education. The group is over-represented by women, Asian, Latiné, and younger faculty, and new PhDs. What does this mean for current students and future faculty bodies? This group also notably differs from those with full-time work elsewhere in terms of personal financial stability, having full-coverage medical insurance, and adequate retirement savings. What impacts would such economic challenges have over years?

The industry’s collective approach to engaging and

supporting this population should take into consideration the range of needs, as well as the levels of capacity and skill for the work. For example, schools might consider:

- **For those new to teaching in theological education or the school in particular:**
  - Support that orients them to the context, including human and other resources, as well as faculty development in the form of pedagogical supports;
- **For those who don’t have access to full medical coverage or mechanisms for saving for retirement:**

While not all schools have the capacity to accommodate, attention to the top three priorities desired by these faculty include:

  - Support that will keep them from exponentially falling behind their full-time regular faculty counterparts, be it financial or status-related or both;
  - Regular salary increases, professional development funds, and priority consideration for regular faculty openings;
  - Consideration for participating in the school's health insurance plan (ranked 5th priority), having faculty rank (6th), and participating in the school's retirement plan (9th). A quarter of the schools whose deans provided ranks of their contingent faculty were found to have types of promotion systems and stratified titles

(e.g., “senior” or “visiting assistant/associate”), which would presumably advance the faculty when they do land a full-time regular post;

- **For all contingent faculty, particularly those who are part-time:**

-- Support that connects them to the larger community. This might include students (e.g., regular and supported options to participate in graduation) as well as full-time regular colleagues (e.g., co-publishing or co-editing volumes, recognition in future tenure, or promoting portfolios for publishing work) and the larger faculty body (e.g., participation in forms of faculty governance for those who are interested).

ATS newly found that changes in part-time faculty use are not related to the financial picture of the organization, but rather to increased enrollments. That this model is more likely being used to attend to missional challenges is also evident with the higher proportions of courses being taught by part-time faculty in self-described online schools, as well as with schools’ plans to increase use of the model, especially among small and mid-sized schools.

ATS will follow whether this model continues to be used or if schools shift toward more full-time, regular faculty carrying online loads, or if entirely different models emerge—and how these models impact schools’ financial health, ability to achieve their missions, and their ethical treatment of its workforce.

*Also see the [Colloquy Online](#) article on the initial findings. To encourage participation in this ATS research project, we offered a drawing for an iPad. We are pleased to announce that the winner of the drawing is - Constance Price from St. Augustine's Seminary at the University of Toronto. Congratulations, Constance! We appreciate the involvement of all participants and thank you for your valuable contributions to our research.*



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