

ATS shares early findings about contingent faculty

BY DEBORAH H. C. GIN

For stylistic reasons, “faculty” refers to contingent faculty throughout the article. Any specific reference to full-time regular faculty is explicitly indicated.

ATS conducted two surveys about contingent faculty last year—one to deans and the other to the faculty themselves. Several surprises emerged, so we fielded the survey a second time at the end of the year to collect from a broader sample of schools. While the larger set of data is still being analyzed, early indicators suggest initial findings were accurate.

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, we asked about pay, minimum degrees required, percent of courses taught, and plans to increase/decrease the use of part-time faculty during the next several years. In the longer survey to faculty, we gathered their perspectives on school expectations, conditions, benefits, supports, and personal vocation and preferences. Selected findings reported here are from the initial set of data, and a more fulsome treatment of the broader sample will be presented at this year’s [ATS/COA Biennial Meeting](#).

Who are the contingent faculty?

The survey used the following definition of contingent faculty: “adjunct/sessional, part-time, and post-doc



faculty, as well as full-time faculty on one- or two-year (or other limited) contracts.” The sample for the faculty survey was built from contact information that deans provided based on this definition. We assumed a predominance from the “gig” population (i.e., part-time instructors cobbling together a full load by teaching multiple courses at multiple schools) but found a complex variety of categories.

Anticipating only a small number of retired instructors, we added a retirement-status item at the last moment and were surprised that more than 20% are in or approaching retirement. Retired individuals comprise 18%, and another 3% are in a step-down process toward retirement. School size appears to be a factor here, with small (HC 1–75) and mid-sized (HC 76–150) schools being overrepresented among those employing retired faculty.

We also did not expect to find that 64% of the non-retired faculty work full-time elsewhere. Four-fifths of these work outside academic instruction—about half in

congregational or denominational settings and the rest in faith-based nonprofit, healthcare, various forms of non-graduate education, and sectors unrelated to congregations or theological education. It is unclear how much of this full-time work would be considered in alignment with respondents' original vocational imagination. Likewise, it is difficult to know how many of the clergy are invited to adjunct courses expressly *because* of their experience in congregational leadership. Perhaps schools reserve part-time posts to fill expertise gaps.

Finally, we were surprised to discover that only 39% prefer a full-time faculty appointment at any institution. Preference does climb to 49% if the appointment were with the institutions they currently serve part-time, but the proportion does not exceed half. About the same number (44%) have sought a regular full-time faculty position at their current or another institution, further supporting a picture of this workforce that is not homogenous. Indeed, while more than half do not prefer a full-time faculty appointment, there remains a sizable proportion that do prefer such a position and have continued their attempts to procure such work, including those who have been seeking for seven years or more.

How are schools employing part-time faculty?

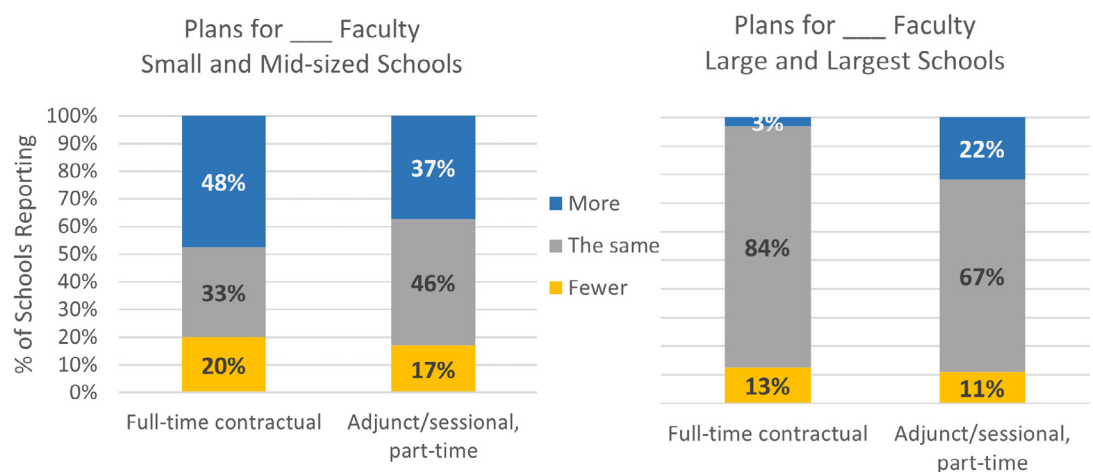
In higher education, the proportion of part-time faculty more than doubled (from 20% to 50%) during the final three decades of the last century, continuing to its high of 53% in 2014 and slowly tapering in recent years. The proportion of part-time faculty in ATS schools, however, has held remarkably steady, hovering between 25-30% during the last three decades. Last year, the use of part-time faculty broke through this ceiling, with ATS schools reporting an average of 34% part-time faculty FTE—a

significant jump from the 26% the year before (*Note: At the time of article submission, close of the Annual Report Form collection period was still a few weeks away. This figure may change when collection is complete, though likely not by much.*).

It is left to be seen whether this is the beginning of a new era of part-time faculty use in ATS schools, but understanding who these faculty are and how schools are employing them becomes even more important during a transition of faculty models.

Deans reported changes in their schools' use of these faculty and the reasons for the change. Between 2021-2022 and 2022-2023, more than 30% of schools experienced a decrease in the number of faculty, citing (1) enrollment decline, (2) budget constraints, and (3) 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 (1) the need for more remote instruction, (2) enrollment increase, and (3) curriculum needs as their top three reasons.

Looking forward, only a small number of schools plan to use fewer contingent faculty in the next several years. Regarding part-time faculty, 14% of schools overall plan to use fewer; 55%, the same number; and 30%, more. This differs by size of school (see graphs below), with small and mid-sized schools demonstrating more change (blue and yellow 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 one-third (33%) plan to use the same, while only 3% of large (HC 151–300) and largest (HC more than 300) schools plan to use more of these faculty and 84% plan to use the same.

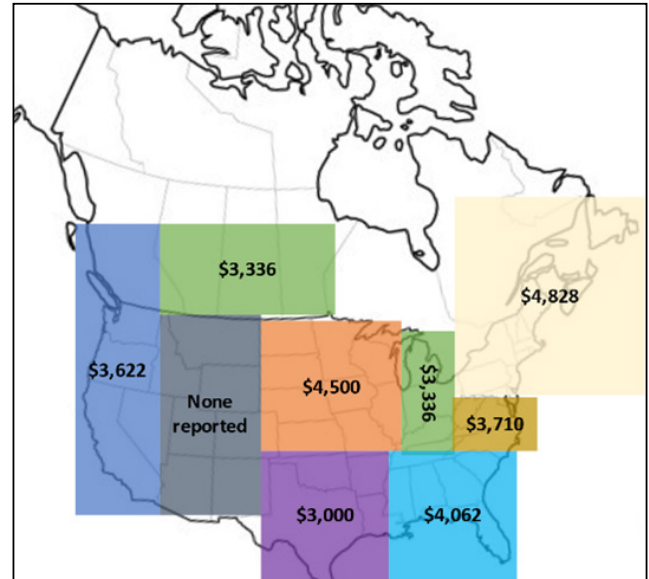
These differences are particularly salient in an educational world where online possibilities have opened. Currently, according to the dean’s survey, the average proportion of courses taught by part-time faculty is 31% for all schools. This varies little by school size, region, and embeddedness, but we see a difference in the online/onsite character of the school as shown in the graph below.

“Online schools” self-reported course delivery as either “mostly or all online” or “both but more online,” and “onsite schools” self-reported course delivery as either “mostly or all onsite” or “both but more onsite.” 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.

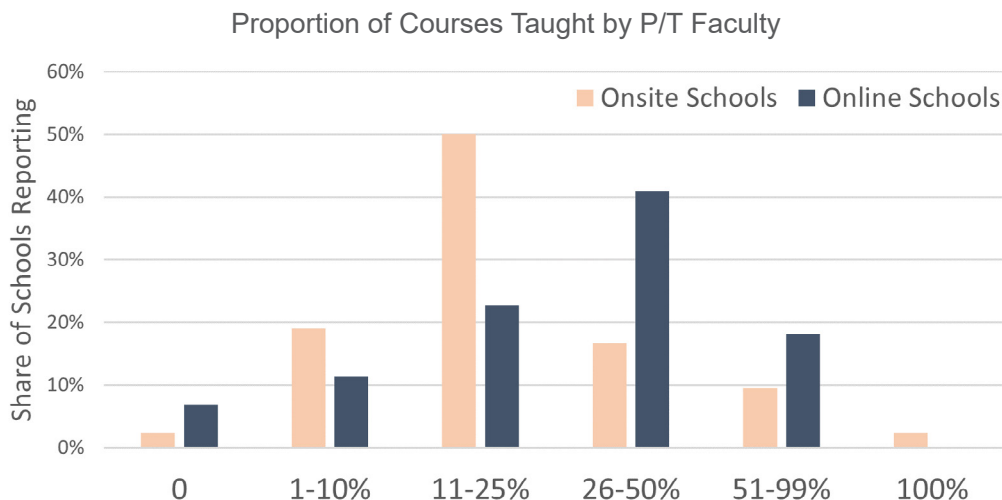
It is no coincidence that the two most reported reasons for an increase in the use of contingent faculty are the need for more remote instruction and an increase in enrollment. If online programs stay or grow, we will undoubtedly see an increase in the use of contingent faculty.

How are the faculty being compensated?

According to deans, the average pay per course is a little more than \$4,000, with a range of \$1,500 to \$11,000. Differences emerged by region. In USD, Canadian schools average \$4,775 and US schools average \$3,926. The map below depicts differences in pay across the continent.



Some stratification also exists by size and structure of the school, where largest schools and embedded schools have higher averages (approximately \$500 more per course). We plan to test possible correlations among pay (dean’s survey), satisfaction about pay (faculty survey), and financial stability (Annual Report Form data) and will present findings at the upcoming Biennial Meeting.



Concluding thoughts

The contingent faculty surveys provide a view of the landscape of this sector of the workforce in theological schools. In some ways, assumptions were confirmed. In other ways, perspectives were revised. While there is a significant portion who are looking for full-time faculty appointments, there is at least another half who are not. The population being employed by ATS schools is comprised of a broad mix of individuals—new PhDs trying to find full-time posts, congregational leaders who provide schools with experiential or formational expertise, full-time healthcare professionals, retired individuals, and “permanent” adjuncts (e.g., more than 30 years as part-time in the same institution), to name a few. Our 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.

Not reported in this brief article are how schools can support these faculty, as well as perspectives on the status and conditions they experience, which will be

presented in other venues. We are analyzing areas where precarity continues to be felt among this population, such as medical benefits and retirement savings. Our hope is that, as an industry, we can think systemically about both the changes to faculty models that schools need to move into sustainable futures and the support that individual faculty would welcome as needed benefits. A systemic approach might address, for example, the implications of a PhD graduating class that has very few places to go because schools have necessarily cut the number of new hires. Is there a more expansive vocational imagination to be explored? Can schools participate in helping graduates realize a broader dream?

Whether this model continues, or schools shift toward more full-time regular faculty carrying online loads, or entirely different models emerge—and how these impact schools’ financial health, ability to achieve their missions, and their ethical treatment of its workforce—is what we will be observing intently in coming years.



Deborah H. C. Gin is Director of Research and Faculty Development at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.