

# How Should Colleges Select Their Faculty?



Written by Victor Brown

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A recent article in the Wall Street Journal got me to thinking (again) about how colleges select new faculty members. [The article in question](#) described the NFL draft-style process by which colleges and universities interview prospective faculty members, in this case for the economics department.

Although I am not an economist, I did teach business courses at a liberal arts college for thirteen years, and was often amazed at the relatively fragmented way in which new faculty are identified and recruited.

The national college faculty landscape has changed dramatically in the last few decades, with tenured and tenure-track faculty now comprising just about a third of all faculty positions, down from the two-thirds that they accounted for just a few years ago.

The change, of course, has been driven by economics. Each tenured faculty member, once benefits are considered, costs colleges a six figure annual number.

“Visiting” faculty, operating on a 1-3 year contract, are paid at roughly the equivalent of a tenure-track faculty member, and these “visitors” account for about 20% of all faculty nationwide.

Adjunct faculty, who now account for a full 50% of all courses taught nationwide, work for an average of \$3,000 per course, with no benefits and no promise of employment beyond a single semester.

The faculty recruiting process that the WSJ article captures for economists is generally duplicated by other hiring disciplines. Much effort is spent on identifying candidates who are receiving degrees from the most prestigious schools, are engaged in high quality research, and make a generally good impression regarding how they will fit with the culture of the hiring department.

The academic recruiters attend conferences such as the one described by the Journal, rank the candidates they have interviewed, and invite the top several to campus for a second round.

During the campus visit, the candidate meets with the other members of the department, a few designated members from other departments (for some cross-functional assessment), and of course the Dean or Provost. Offers are extended in order of preference, moving from one candidate to the next on the list, until finally the hiring process is completed.

This is a thorough process, but it represents a lot of time and effort spent on a shrinking proportion of faculty positions. That makes me wonder how much time and effort is spent on filling the visitor positions, and - especially - the members of that semester’s adjunct faculty.

The answer, from my own experience and from what I have learned about other colleges, is.....not much.

Contingent faculty decisions are left up almost exclusively to the department chairperson, who may or may not involve other faculty members in the hiring process - and almost never any faculty from outside the hiring department. Since adjunct positions are for one semester only, schools can roll the dice on who is available, and often on extremely short notice. My first adjunct position came with a two week advance notice, and I’ve seen some hired with even less - to fill in for faculty members who get suddenly sick, to serve when student registrations force creation of an overflow section, etc.

But wait a minute! If adjuncts are now so prevalent on campus, should not more care be taken in the hiring and retention process? Although you would be hard pressed to find mention of adjunct faculty in college admissions brochures, they are in fact teaching many of the students who are paying big bucks for their education, and the quality of that education can suffer mightily if the wrong adjuncts are selected.

Beyond a more thorough vetting and hiring process for adjuncts, colleges need to think more holistically about

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their faculty in total. Research-based faculty certainly have their place, but they need to be complemented by faculty who have currency in the workforce. They need to have a demonstrated ability to instruct well, to be relevant to the market forces the students will soon encounter, to be able to engage outside speakers for added depth and emphasis on key topics, etc.

School administrators need to also think about the faculty hiring process across disciplines, since students who satisfy the core curriculum are taking courses from a number of departments. The faculty hiring decision is thus much too critical to be left to individual departmental discretion.

Some adjuncts are absolutely excellent, and any college is fortunate to have them. You would think, then, that systems would be in place to retain their services by paying a premium and involve them in the academic decision-making processes. But you would think wrong. Pay rates for all adjuncts are virtually the same, with the good ones asked back and the poor ones jettisoned - but only after spending a semester damaging the college's academic product.

If I were a college president, I would work to carefully assemble the best mix of adjuncts I could find, with the active engagement of faculty from all disciplines. I'd revise those admission brochures to advertise our effective mix of full-time and part-time faculty, emphasizing their "real-world" experience as a necessary complement to the tenured processors, not only for what they bring to the classroom, but for the assistance they can provide in career placement efforts.

As a part-time faculty member, I learned from my tenured colleagues, and I'm pretty sure they learned from me. The engagement of faculty with various backgrounds and skill sets can only serve to enhance the overall student experience. This can only be accomplished, though, if we break down those academic silos — the ones that separate departments, and the ones

that separate classes of faculty. The best way to begin is to hire well, and the rest will play out over time.

To do this well, administrators and tenured/tenure-track faculty need to commit to the process, devote the time required to developing position descriptions and recruiting the right people, and to engage in systematic performance reviews. Let the heavy lifting be done each year during the first three weeks after commencement. This is much too important to be left to scattered efforts during the busy semester. That summer break time will just have to wait.

[For more about the author, visit VictorBrown.net](http://VictorBrown.net)