A NTTF REACTION TO TIME MAGAZINE

Natalie Barnes

The recent TIME article on the plight of public school teachers brought to light many serious issues. One quote hit quite close to home. “It’s also humbling when you’re in a grocery store and people who are well intentioned find out somehow that you’re a teacher and suddenly they start talking about how little you get paid.” A statement that clearly demonstrates that what’s happening in public education is no secret. As a member of the non-tenure track faculty (NTTF) ranks I can attest that we NTTFs often suffer from opposite assumptions. Too many in the general public think that being housed in the ivory tower means we not only have a secure job with benefits, but make a living salary.

If only. Yes, there are NTTFs within the system who do make a living salary. So the clarification here is that this discourse is most specific to those colleges or departments in which the status quo is of a lesser state. Most colleagues referenced here are housed in those ominous “lesser” colleges or departments. Those that serve tens of thousands of students looking to complete the all-important general education core curriculum. A service essential to the heart of the land grant university system to “advance the frontiers of knowledge, provide cultural, as well as intellectual leadership, and continue to support that post-Industrial Revolution notion which is as relevant today as it was then: a commitment to providing access to higher education for more than the upper crust.”

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1 Reilly, Kate (September 13, 2018) 13 Stories of Life on a Teacher’s Salary. Time. At http://time.com/longform/teacher-pay-salary-stories/
There are three distinct areas of concern to many of us in that lesser state: competitive salaries and job security; respect and acknowledgement for the job we do; and building a retirement that actually lets us retire after a full career.

**Competitive salaries.** NTTFs echo the sentiment of teachers profiled in the TIME article, “What we’re hoping for is competitive salaries.” Amen to that.

My teaching load was 80% when I quit the Poudre School District a decade ago to work full-time for CSU. I took more than a $10,000 salary cut and went from part-time to full-time. Not complaining, it was my choice…but it is also an important fact about those opposite assumptions outlined above.

One long-term NTTF colleague who has been at CSU for more than 25 years has a long history of what one might rightfully term creative employment. In order to fuel a passion for teaching, his one or two CSU classes would be part of an overall workload of up to 12-15 classes a year, sometimes at three different schools during a semester. Still unable to make a living salary, his workload was supplemented with weekend and grave-yard shifts at a local box store in order make ends meet.

While this sounds extreme, it is not really uncommon among NTTFs. Another colleague reported he once taught seven classes at four different colleges in the *same* semester. These highly educated individuals teach because it is their vocation, sometimes overloading themselves because there are no guarantees for future employment and they’re concerned to turn anything down.

**Respect and acknowledgement for the job we do.** I love my job, the students, the people I work with, and the department in which I am housed. But the fact of the matter is when I started teaching for CSU part-time in 2003 I had no official orientation. According to a report from a national NTTF organization, 94% of adjuncts receive no campus or department orientation. I taught a night class that started after the office closed and didn’t have a key to the copy room. I became well acquainted with Kinkos. Copies for my class that were paid for out of my own pocket. Again not a unique experience as NTTF are often expected to do the same job as TTF with a different level of support.

One ongoing goal of the university is retention, and I often hear the administration stress the importance of building community, particularly with our freshmen students. There is much strategizing about this issue for many departments during pre-semester retreats. I know firsthand how important these meetings are in building community among faculty and staff. Sadly many times these gatherings feature few, if any, NTTF – because their contracts haven’t yet started and they don’t get paid to be there. I’ve heard from at least two colleagues who would have welcomed inclusion, but didn’t want to pay for childcare to attend a meeting for which they were not paid. This simple omission is a subtle way of telling us that despite our contributions, we are indeed not seen as an essential part of the department, college, and university community. If the university is truly concerned about strategies to develop community for freshman students, perhaps purposeful, paid inclusion of the NTTFs who teach a large percentage of that particular population might be a good way to solicit contributions to the retention/community building conversations.

**A retirement plan that actually allows long-term NTTFs to actually retire.** When I came to CSU I was told by HR I could not continue my participation in PERA. At that time the rep said it was simply not an option. In speaking with other NTTFs I’ve gotten conflicting information. I even went to a drop-in meeting with HR reps who counseled me with the assumption that I was PERA. I’d identified myself as NTT, but even with that knowledge he still gave me the wrong information. So, the status of NTTFs, even our basic classifications, continues to be a point of confusion among those who should certainly know.

According to my last retirement investment statement my account has roughly an $8,000 balance. After more than 15 years at CSU. But I’m one of the lucky ones. My spouse also has a retirement account. And despite the fact that teaching is a noble profession that contributes much to society, his job was clearly deemed more important because his account will comfortably take care of us both. Another colleague reported that saving 8%
for his 401 over the course of three decades at the NTTF salary rate paid by the CLA frankly isn’t enough on which to retire. This long term NTTF feels we are “both patriots and slaves to a civil system,” and the reality is he won’t be retiring as planned... “can’t, so that is how it went.” This from a NTTF who faces his classroom every day with enthusiasm for the content and a genuine affection and concern for students. A faculty member whose work over just the last year generated more than $1,463,400.00 in tuition (813 students x 3 credits each x $600 rounded down, in-state tuition). Nearly 30 years dedicated service, all those tuition dollars generated, and he can’t afford to retire.

Yes, change seems to be in the air. After years (and years) of toil, the university Committee on Non-Tenure Track Faculty has made steps forward. But the reality is that here at CSU change on this matter occurs a glacial pace. NTTFs embrace the CSU Principles of Community. We practice inclusion, we demonstrate integrity, we respect the dignity of all, we are committed to service…but many of us are unsure that the institution for which we work truly embraces the idea of social justice. The right to be treated with “fairness and equity” in a system with “policies and procedures that promote justice in all respects.”

I used to joke that I wanted to work long enough to see equity for NTTF. At my current age I would settle for simply living long enough to see a real, tangible commitment by ALL levels of the university system to embrace and work towards equity for all.

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EMERGING ISSUE: IS THE CENTRAL ADMINISTRATION COMMITTED TO IMPROVING WORKING CONDITIONS FOR NTTF?

On April 3, 2018, Faculty Council approved important proposals relating to NTTF that were subsequently ratified by the Board of Governors and are going into effect during the 2018-2019 academic year. These changes were intended to improve the professional treatment of NTTF at CSU by making modest improvements to job security, providing pathways for promotion and support for professional development, and specifying departmental voting rights (a detailed summary of these changes can be found on the Non-Tenure Track Faculty website).

The implementation of these new policies is contingent on the actions of individual departments, which, in turn, depend on support provided by the central administration. Much of the opposition to these changes has come from department chairs who are understandably concerned about how they will balance the (relatively low) level of commitment to NTTF that the new policy requires with fluctuating enrollment demands. Many departments are worried about guaranteeing classes to NTTF who teach courses with unpredictable enrollments because if classes do not fill, they will still have to foot the bill. One way around this is to honor the letter, but
not the spirit of the new policy: for instance, offering adjunct faculty less than 50% employment during their third semester at CSU in order to avoid appointing them as continuing faculty. This kind of “flexibility” in hiring thus allows departments – and the university as a whole – to save money at the expense of individual NTTF who cannot count on having a regular and predictable income.

The solution to this type of dilemma is not to pit departmental “needs” against the fair and professional treatment of NTTF. It is to focus on the source of the dilemma, which is the way in which enrollment growth and the hiring of both NTTF and TTF have been handled by the CSU administration. In the short term, the administration can address the problems by: 1) creating an ongoing budgetary mechanism for ensuring that sudden shortfalls in enrollment do not negatively affect individual NTTF or the departments in which they work; 2) communicating this clearly and in writing to unit heads and other concerned parties; and 3) documenting and making public 2017 and 2019 data about the number, type, salary, etc. of NTTF in each unit so that department heads can be held accountable. In the longer-term, of course, CSU needs to consider if continued enrollment growth can be squared with the equitable and professional treatment of all faculty. One way to accomplish this would be to stabilize the number of NTTF, raise the salaries and job security of these faculty members; and increase the number of tenure track lines.

MORE ACADEMIC FREEDOM AT CU?

Steve Mumme

As some readers may have noticed, the University of Colorado’s Board of Regents last month, with much fanfare, unveiled its latest redo of the Regents’ Law Article 5, Part D: Principles of Academic Freedom. The new rules notably made an effort to better distinguish the academic freedom of students and the academic freedom of faculty, offering unequivocal support for faculty “freedom to inquire, discover, publish and teach truth as the faculty member sees it, subject to no control or authority save the control and authority of the rational methods by which truth is established.” This is all to the good and the new rule was justly praised by conservatives and liberals alike (Kafer, 2018). Whether the new rules will quell conservative pundits’ persistent clamor decrying the liberal slant of the professoriate beneath the Flatirons remains to be seen.

In Fort Collins, a little north of the People’s Republic of Boulder, there is bound to be murmuring that CSU should also revisit its language on academic freedom enshrined in the Manual’s Section E.8. This writer is not prepared to opine much on the subject beyond a couple of observations. First, as written, Section E.8 is consistent with the AAUP’s time honored statement and views on academic freedom. Further tinkering might well introduce considerations that would do as much harm as good. Moreover, Section E.8 is reinforced by the Manual’s preface, which establishes academic freedom as a contractual obligation. CU’s Regents’ Law, by comparison, commits the university to the Constitution’s 1st Amendment but makes no explicit reference to academic freedom. Second, one obvious difference between the two universities’ statements is that CU’s statement explicitly observes that “the appointment, reappointment, promotion, and tenure of faculty members should be based primarily of the individual’s ability in teaching, research/creative work, and leadership and service and should not be influenced by such extrinsic considerations as political, social, or religious views, or views concerning departmental or university operation or administration.” Such language specific to the role of academic freedom in faculty recruitment and advancement might be worth considering.
Beyond these observations, it is notable that neither the CU nor the CSU statements are arguably sufficient in protecting the extramural utterances of faculty. While both statements acknowledge the Faculty’s 1st Amendment rights—the CSU statement is somewhat more direct in this aspect—just how far this extends to incendiary faculty speech on social media that attracts public criticism remains untested. Just saying. In the meantime, I encourage CSU faculty to have a look at these two universities’ statements on academic freedom and ask whether they are sufficient to our times.

CSU’s Academic Freedom Statement:  https://facultycouncil.colostate.edu/faculty-manual-section-e/#E.10

CU’s Academic Freedom Statement:  https://www.cu.edu/regents/laws-and-policies/regent-laws/article-5-faculty

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