

Teaching-Track Faculty at US National Universities

BY Tisha L.N. Emerson and Gail M. Hoyt*

* Emerson: East Carolina University, Brewster A428 10th Street, Greenville, NC 27858 (email: emerson23@ecu.edu). Hoyt: University of Kentucky, 245S B&E, Lexington, KY 40506 (email: ghoyt@uky.edu). We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of RAs Kamryn Daily, Abigail Marvin, and Elyssa Berney, and helpful comments from Melanie Fox and Simon Halliday.

Teaching-track faculty constitute a growing share of faculty in US economics departments (Scott and Siegfried, 2013; Siegfried and Braunstein 2023).¹ Yet much remains unknown about teaching-track faculty and how they compare to teaching-track faculty in other countries. This paper, with the other papers in this session, report the findings from a mixed methods methodology study of teaching-track faculty in the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada. Our approach combines a qualitative analysis of one-on-one interviews with quantitative analysis of survey responses. See Arico et al. (2024) for a detailed methodology discussion.

Hilmer and Hilmer (2020) perform the only substantial study of US teaching-track faculty, comparing traditional academic and teaching-track faculty at 30 public Ph.D.-granting

economics departments. Their sample, while instructive, is limited and the nature of their data prevents them from addressing teaching-track faculty perceptions. We contribute to our understanding of US teaching-track faculty by sampling a larger selection of departments and employing data collection methods that investigate teaching-track faculty perceptions. Consequently, we better understand teaching-track positions and faculty who provide an increasing share of economics instruction as we face pressure to grow and diversify economic course enrollments.

For the survey, US teaching-track faculty were identified through searches of economics department online directories drawing institutions from the US News & World Report 2022 Best National Universities.² We collected email addresses for all faculty with titles suggesting they serve in a teaching-track role including variations on teaching professor, clinical professor, and lecturer. A total of 935 faculty were identified at 110 public and 95 private universities. We sent email solicitations

¹ For the most recent available matched sample, economics doctoral granting programs reported the portion of non-tenure track full-time faculty comprising their department as increasing from 5.3 to 9.0% between the academic years 2002-2003 and 2012-2013. Bachelor's degree granting institutions experienced a smaller increase from 6.4 to 7.1% during the same period. For the full sample of reporting

institutions in the 2022-2023 academic year, doctoral and bachelor degree granting economics departments reported the fraction of their faculty that were non-tenure track, full-time at 14.5 and 7.1%.

² US liberal arts colleges were not sampled, but data collection on this set of schools is underway.

and 215 completed the survey for a response rate of 22.9 percent. Our final sample size, when omitting part-time employees, was 192.

The US sample was majority male and white, though more gender diverse than academic economists in the United States more generally. Our sample was 53.7 percent male and 43.8 percent female while the share of female economics faculty in the academy was only 27 percent in 2020 (CSWEP, 2021). Racially, the sample was 78.1 percent white, 10.4 percent Asian, 3.1 percent black, and 3.7 percent Middle Eastern. Ethnically, 5.2 percent of respondents identified as Hispanic or Latinx. Recent data from the AEA on faculty race and ethnicity indicate that full-time college faculty are 14 percent Asian, 2 percent black, and 5 percent Hispanic (CSMGEP, 2020). The majority, 87 percent, hold a PhD in economics.

Most respondents were at R1 (78.7 percent) or R2 (13 percent) institutions and nearly 60 percent were at public institutions. On average, respondents were at their current institutions for just over 10 years and were on the teaching-track for just under 14 years. Faculty spanned the full range of career stages with 16.2 percent in early, 37.5 percent in mid-, and 46.3 percent in late career.³ Respondents reported an

average of 26.3 percent of their department faculty were on teaching-track. See Table 1 for summary statistics for the US sample.

Table 1: Key Survey Summary Statistics

Variable	Mean	(SD)
% dept. faculty teaching-track	26.3	(1.4)
Years at current institution	10.3	(8.2)
Years in teaching-track position	13.8	(8.3)
% of time allocated to		
Teaching	63.3	(18.4)
Pedagogical research	4.5	(6.0)
General economic research	7.4	(12.1)
Service	11.4	(7.6)
Administrative/managerial	10.1	(15.3)
% weight for promotion		
Teaching	66.3	(22.5)
Pedagogical research	3.4	(6.3)
General economic research	4.5	(9.0)
Service	12.0	(10.6)
Administrative/managerial	8.0	(14.7)
Number students taught/year	653.1	(587.0)
Largest class size taught	231.0	(202.4)
Smallest class size taught	40.3	(44.8)
Weekly work hours	45.6	(11.4)
Annual Salary	\$111,879.20	(\$31,848.53)

Source: Author calculations

The average annual salary reported was \$111,879, though compensation varied considerably from a low of \$60,000 to a high of \$200,000. Using the 2013 average salary reported by Hilmer and Hilmer (2020) for a sample of teaching-track faculty at public, Ph.D.-granting economics departments and adjusting for inflation, the average salary in our sample is 8.6 percent higher.⁴ The difference in salary may stem from a variety of sources. Demand for teaching-track faculty in the

³ We define early, mid-, and late career as those with 5 or fewer years, 6-12 years, and 13 or more years of experience, roughly mirroring the timeframes for research-track positions.

⁴ The average 2013 salary reported by Hilmer and Hilmer (2020) was \$76,862.37. Adjusting for inflation, the Hilmer and Hilmer mean salary is \$102,994.93 in 2023 dollars.

United States may have increased, but it is also possible that the salary differences reflect different samples. Our sample includes private institutions which likely offer higher salaries than public institutions. Additionally, our sample may be more heavily weighted towards more experienced teaching-track faculty. The Hilmer and Hilmer sample has an average of 11.5 years since the last degree, while our sample mean is 14 years of experience.

The qualitative analysis of interviews from 70 teaching-track faculty in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom suggests many similarities across the countries, but also some striking differences. Most notable are the relatively low rates of tenure – or even the possibility of tenure – in the United States as compared to Canada and the United Kingdom where tenure/tenure-track rates are much higher (see Arico et al., 2023 for details). And, compared to those in the United Kingdom, US teaching-track faculty are expected to (and do) focus more heavily on teaching than research, scholarship, or administration. In this paper, we focus on these facets of the US experience.

Seventeen of our 192 teaching-track survey respondents reported having earned tenure (8.8 percent) and six were on tenure track (3.1 percent). The remaining respondents, 88.1 percent, reported that they were not in tenure track positions but instead were annually

reviewed, on a fixed term contract, and/or on a multi-year contract. Contract lengths tended to range in length from 1 to 5 years, with 1-, 3-, and 5-year contracts being most common. Of those on fixed term contracts, 46 respondents had a 5-year contract, which is 23.8 percent of all respondents and 27.1 percent of those on fixed term contracts. Thus, while tenure/tenure track for teaching-track positions were less common in the United States, longer term contracts offered some sense of job security. According to one US respondent, “You know, so as long as you're doing a good job teaching and fulfilling a need, we don't let them go.” Another states, “Given the emphasis at a lot of institutions on increasing enrollment, I don't think you could do that in a cost-effective way with tenure track faculty ... I teach 3000 students a year ... the number of faculty members it would take to have each of them only teaching a class of 100 people would just be enormous.” And while tenure was available to only about 12 percent of the US sample, 86 percent of US respondents said that they had been promoted or were eligible for promotion in their current positions, indicative of some degree of upward mobility for the majority of US teaching-track faculty.

The survey includes a series of Likert scale questions regarding perceptions of job security, position fragility, and mobility. See Table 2.

Table 2: Faculty Perceptions (percentages)

Statement	Strongly Agree or Agree	Neutral	Strongly Disagree or Disagree
When departmental leadership changes, I worry about the impact of my position.	51.6	17.7	30.7
Teaching-focused positions are less respected than research-focused positions in my department.	77.1	15.6	7.3
As a teaching-focused faculty member, the requirements for renewal of contract or tenure promotion are clear.	53.7	17.2	29.2
Student evaluations are heavily weighted in assessing my performance.	73.8	18.3	7.9
I have job security in my current position.	61.3	24.6	14.1
I feel overwhelmed by the number of students I am expected to teach.	17.8	31.9	50.3
If I left my job today, I could find another job similar or better than my current job.	27.6	32.3	40.1
I am valued by my administration.	69.5	15.3	15.3
I am valued by my department colleagues.	79.0	14.2	6.8
Overall, I am satisfied with my job.	79.2	16.2	4.2

Source: Author calculations

Sixty-one percent of respondents agree or strongly agree that they have job security in their current position while only 14 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. Relatively high rates of perceived job security notwithstanding, 52 percent of respondents agree or strongly agree that they worry about the impact on their position when there is a change in departmental leadership. And while

54 percent agree or strongly agree that the requirements for renewal of their contract or tenure promotion are clear, a sizeable portion (about 30 percent) disagree or strongly disagree about the clarity of requirements. Respondents also indicated low levels of confidence in their ability to find a similar or better position with 40 percent disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that they could find another job that is similar or better. Only 28 percent agreed or strongly agreed they could do so. While one interpretation of these reports is that respondents feel they have limited mobility, others are possible. Instead, respondents may believe their current position is a good fit and a similar or better one may not exist.

The preceding quotes also reflect the reality that teaching is the primary focus for US teaching-track faculty. Respondents report allocating 63.3 percent of their work time to teaching. They spent 11.9 percent of their time on research (pedagogical or economic field specific) and 21.5 percent on service or administration. Time allocation aligned well with the weights for these tasks in promotion decisions with 66.3 percent weight on teaching, 7.8 percent on research, and 20 percent on administration. Student evaluations featured prominently in assessing teaching performance with 74 percent of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that student evaluations were

heavily weighted in assessing their performance. Reliance on teaching evaluations is concerning given that teaching-track faculty teach large portions of the core required courses where good course evaluations might be more difficult to obtain (Huston, 2006). Courses reported being taught with the greatest frequency were micro principles, macro principles, intermediate micro, and introductory statistics at 39, 31, 26, and 21 percent. The average teaching time devoted to first- and second-year courses was 59 percent.

Teaching-track faculty tend to teach a significant number of students with an average of 653 total students per year and totals ranging from 30 to 3200. Individual class sizes could be quite large, ranging from 16 to 1000, with an average of 231 students. Not all classes were large, however, with smallest class enrollments ranging from 5 to 338 and an average of 40 students. Despite the large number of students faculty reported teaching, they tended to feel comfortable with those numbers. Only 18 percent of faculty indicated 'always' or 'often' feeling overwhelmed by the number of students they are expected to teach. Meanwhile, half indicated that they 'never' or 'seldom' felt overwhelmed. Interviewees expressed varying sentiments regarding their teaching loads, for example, "I did a back of the envelope calculation, and I am a revenue generator." and

"Our focus is ... on teaching, dealing with students primarily in the undergrad program, but also in our growing master's programs."

Overall, the picture that emerges of the US teaching-track is a bit of a mixed bag. Very few US teaching-track faculty have tenure or the opportunity to earn it which may suggest low job security, but the majority report they feel they have job security, many have multiple-year contracts, and most have the opportunity for some type of promotion. Job security is further reinforced by the critical role teaching-track faculty play in offering classes to large numbers of students in a cost-effective manner. One interviewee sums it up, "... if you're in the United States, if you're good and comfortable at teaching a class of 500, you can get a job anywhere." That said, 77 percent of US respondents indicate a belief that teaching-track positions are less respected than traditional academic positions. This perception is also seemingly in contrast with the 69 percent who indicate some level of agreement with the statement "I am valued by my administration" and 79 percent indicating agreement with the statement "I am valued by my department." Nearly 80 percent agree or strongly agree that they are satisfied with their job. Considering the US economics teaching-track market, tradeoffs may explain seemingly contradictory reports. Teaching-track faculty

may report being satisfied because they selected into these positions, accepting non-tenure track positions, less job security, and heavy teaching loads for other positive attributes of the job such as less publication pressure, more flexibility, and pursuing interest in teaching. It is yet unclear whether the US market is in an equilibrium or adjusting to one.

Going forward we plan to expand our sample to include teaching-track faculty at liberal arts institutions. Doing so will provide a more complete view of US teaching-track faculty and result in a sample more consistent with and comparable to the Universal Academic Questionnaire sample. We also intend to compare responses for subsamples by career stage, gender, and institution type.

REFERENCES

Arico, Fabio, Alvin Birdi, Avi Cohen, Caroline Elliott, Tisha Emerson, Gail Hoyt, Cloda Jenkins, Ashley Lait, Jennifer Murdock, and Christian Spielmann. 2024. "The Status of Teaching-track Positions in Economics: An International Comparison" *American Economic Review Papers and Proceedings*, forthcoming.

CSMGEP, 2020 - "Report on the Committee on the Status of Minority Groups in the Economics Profession (CSMGEP)."

<https://www.aeaweb.org/content/file?id=13728>, accessed September 15, 2023.

CSWEP, 2021 - "The 2020 Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics Profession."

<https://www.aeaweb.org/content/file?id=13968>, accessed September 15, 2023.

Hilmer, Christiana and Michael J. Hilmer. 2020. "On the labor market for full-time non-tenure-track lecturers in economics." *Economics of Education Review*, 1-8.

Huston, Therese. 2006. "Race and Gender Bias in Higher Education: Could Faculty Course Evaluations Impede Further Progress Toward Parity?" *Seattle Journal of Social Justice*, 4(2), 591-611.

Scott, Charles E. and John J. Siegfried. 2013. "American Economic Association Universal Academic Questionnaire Summary Statistics." *American Economic Review: Papers and Proceedings*, 103(3), 678-682.

Siegfried, John J. and Elizabeth Braunstein. 2023. "American Economic Association 2022–2023 Universal Academic Questionnaire Summary Statistics." *AEA Papers and Proceedings*, 113, 688-691.

